Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1. The Concept of Dharma

This is a study of the brāhmaṇical discourse on dharma, with special reference to the Great Indian Epic – the Mahābhārata. The term dharma is untranslatable, as it is an all-encompassing ideology, which embraces both ritual and moral behaviour, whose neglect would have had bad social and personal consequences. Dharma is derived from the root dhr - meaning to uphold, to support, to nourish, to maintain, or to bear. It has been variously translated as ‘duty’, ‘religion’, ‘justice’, ‘law’, ‘ethics’, ‘religious merit’, ‘principle’, ‘right’, etc.\(^1\)

The word dharma appears to be used in the sense of upholder or supporter in the Rgveda.\(^2\) In other passages the meaning seems to be ‘fixed’ principles of the rules of conduct.\(^3\) In most cases the meaning of dharma is religious ordinance or rites.\(^4\) In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, it is stated that there are three branches of dharma. One is constituted by sacrifice, study and charity (i.e. the stage of the householder); the second is constituted by austerities (i.e. the stage of the hermit); the third is a brahmacarī dwelling in the house of the teacher.\(^5\) It is clear from the above passage that the word dharma here stands for the special duties of the āśramas.

Jaimini defines dharma as a desirable goal or result that is indicated by Vedic passages.\(^6\) According to Āpastamba, dharma is that which, when done, is praised by āryas (respectable people) who are conversant with tradition (Vedic), and adharma is that which is censured by such people.\(^7\) According to Manu, dharma is that which is practised by the learned who lead a moral life, who are free from hatred and prejudices, and which is accepted by their conscience.\(^8\) Medhātithi, commenting on Manu, says that the expounders of smṛtis dilate upon dharma as five-fold, e.g. varṇadharma (duties according to varṇa), āśramadharma (dharma according to the stage of life),

\(^1\) P.V. Kane, History of Dharmasūtras, Vol.1, Part, p.1, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1990, p.1. Meanings of the Sanskrit terms, here and hereafter, were worked out during the course of personal discussions with Dr. Satosh Kumar Shukla.
\(^3\) R. V. 4.53.3; 5.63.7.; 6.70.1; 7.89.5 cited in P.V. Kane, History, Vol.1, Part1, p.2.
\(^4\) R. V., 4.53-3; 5.63; 6.70.1; 7.89.5 cited in P.V. Kane, History, Vol.1, Part1, p.2.
\(^5\) Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 2.23. cited in P.V. Kane, History, Vol.1, Part1, p.3.
\(^6\) Cited in P.V. Kane, History, Vol.1, Part1, p.5.
\(^7\) ApDh. 1.7.20.
\(^8\) Manu. 2.1.
vanajāramadharma (dharma according to both), naimittikadharma, (ritualistic duties to be performed on specific occasions e.g. prayaścita), and guṇadharma (duties according to one’s role in society e.g. rājadharma). 9 Mitākṣara on Yājñavalkyaasyaṃṛti adds a sixth category, sadhāranadharma (universal duties such as ahimsā). 10 Bhagavan Das provides us with a comprehensive definition of dharma thus:

That scheme of code of laws which bind together human beings in the bonds of mutual rights-and-duties, of causes and consequences of actions arising out of their temperamental characters, in relation to each other and thus maintain society, is human law, mānava-dharma. Yet again, the code of life based on the Vedas, the due observance of which leads to happiness here and hereafter is dharma. Briefly Dharma is characteristic property, scientifically; duty, morally and legally; religion with all its proper implications, psychologically and spiritually; and righteousness and law generally, but Duty above all. 11 Kane’s opinion is somewhat similar. After an exhaustive reading of the Dharmaśāstras, he puts it thus:

The discussion establishes how the word dharma passed through several transitions of meaning and how ultimately its most prominent significance came to be the privileges, duties, and obligations of a man, his standard of conduct as a member of one of the varṇas, as a person in a particular stage of life. 12

Thus, in the Vedic age, the notion of dharma was crucial to the concept of sacrifice as man nourished gods through sacrificial offerings so that they might have the strength to defeat the demons and uphold the laws. In those days, the law of sacrifice was the law of universe. Later, the concept extended beyond sacrifice to the moral world, and to the realm of conduct. Dharma stood for any action that conformed to the cosmic order and permitted the individual to realise his or her own allotted destiny. Any action contrary to dharma brought its own automatic punishment, as Manu writes that when violated dharma destroys, but when preserved dharma preserves. 13 Dharma must never be violated, lest violated dharma destroys the violator. The law-givers lay down, in the strictures, that it is one’s duty to conform to the moral precepts. Dharma, in the realm of individual action, refers both to what one does and what one ought to do. Moreover, one’s action defined by the circumstances is also one’s dharma.

Thus, the concept is both descriptive and prescriptive. It deals with both the real and the ideal. Beyond doubt, it is one of the most complex subjects to conceptualise as it defies a single definition. The Mahābhārata recognises that the course of dharma is

---

10 Cited in P.V. Kane, History, Vol.1, Part 1, p.4, Arthaśāstra of Kautilya prescribes ahimsā, satya, anatta, amrta and kṣmaṇa, for all men. Arthaśāstra, 1.3.13, p.4.
12 P.V. Kane, History, Vol.1, Part 1, p.3.
13 Manu, 8.15.
It is reiterated that the secret of dharma is hidden in a dark cave and the only safe guide is to follow the practices of the great people. Bhīṣma, after explaining the difficulties of defining the term, talks about some rules by which dharma may partly be known. He maintains:

\[\text{Dharma} \text{ was ordained for the advancement and growth of all creatures; therefore, that which leads to advancement and growth is dharma. Dharma was ordained for restricting creatures from injuring one another; therefore that which prevents injuring is called dharma. Dharma is called so because it upholds all creatures; therefore that is dharma which is capable of upholding all creatures. However, dharma can uphold all only when each one follows his/her respective duties...}^{14}\]

Elsewhere, Bhīṣma begins his discourse on dharma by explaining the duties of brāhmaṇas and kṣatriyas.\(^{15}\) In the Bhāgavad-Gītā, the chief concern of Krṣṇa was to make Arjuna understand his kṣātradharma. Thus, dharma may mean moral law, spiritual order, sacred law, salvation, ethic, totality of socio-ethical and spiritual harmony, righteousness universal order, magico-religious cycle, moral, idealistic and spiritual force.\(^{16}\) It may simply be defined as that by which one should live. From the above it is clear that numerous topics have been comprehended under the term dharma. However, our study will focus on acāra, i.e. laws, rules, regulation etc. and vyavahāra, i.e. practices in the context of duty.

### 1.2. Survey of Literature

Dharma as a topic has never suffered from lack of attention. Similarly, the Mahābhārata is perhaps one of the most studied texts in Sanskrit. So, there is no dearth of literature either on dharma or on the Great Indian Epic. It is necessary to take cognisance of the existing corpus of secondary literature on both dharma and the Mahābhārata.

An important work on dharma is The Concept of Duty in South Asia, edited by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty and J. Duncun M. Derrett.\(^{17}\) In one essay, Arnold Kunst argues that from the RgVeda onwards dharma refers to a monistic or unitary concept. The various meanings attributed to it by the commentators may suggest that the concept is highly flexible but in fact this amounts to no more than an attempt to clarify the function of dharma within a specific context, be it literary, philosophical or

---

\(^{14}\) Mbh. 12.110.8-12.

\(^{15}\) Mbh., 12.55.15-17.


mythological. According to him, various categories of dharma overlap so closely that distinctions are almost meaningless. Despite its diverse interpretations, Kunst argues, dharma retained its essential continuity.

Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, on the other hand, points to various categories of dharma, such as svadharma and sanātanadharma. She suggests that in the epic-Puranic myths, svadharma always prevails over sanātanadharma. For instance, the demons are expected to behave demonically. For them evil is its own reward. A demon who tries to be ‘good’ violates his svadharma, paving the way for his own ruin as well as disrupting the cosmic order.

J.D.M. Derrett relates duty to hierarchy of people belonging to different strata of society. They were expected to behave differently. He brings to our notice how conflict arises when legal duty contradicts the socially prescribed behaviour or when moral duty falls short of law’s demands. He concludes, “Dharma is always transcendental, super substantial, occult, divine rather than created. It is predicted and enunciated rather than promulgated.”

Without disputing the importance of the work, we detect contradicting arguments. Kunst finds the concept of dharma as monistic and unitary. But he contradicts himself when he acknowledges that in psychological terms dharma allows man the relative freedom to act in accordance with his desire prompted by his mental and emotional equipments. However, he does not elaborate this idea. Wendy O’Flaherty attends to the multiplicity of dharma, but she does not go beyond svadharma and sanātanadharma.

Saral Jhingran, in Aspects of Hindu Morality, argues that the concept of morality was socio-centric in the Dharmaśāstras and in the epics. According to Jhingran, the emphasis of law-givers has been on those details of duties of the individual, which directly contributed to the stability, and harmonious preservation of the social order. These texts do not discuss the rights of man. If ever the law-givers mention the rights of some social groups, they do so as duties of some other group towards this group. For

---

21 Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty and J.D.M. Derrett (eds.), The Concept of Duty, p.27.
23 Saral Jhingran, Aspects, p.74.
instance, the rights of the people are discussed not as their rights but as duties of the king towards his subjects. Jhingran says that morality is relative to yuga (time) and deśa (space), so that dharma of one age and place is non-applicable to another age and place. Secondly, the duties of a person are also strictly relative to his varṇa and āśrama. It is also relative to one’s gender. Thus women of all varṇas are treated as a class apart, their duties and moral responsibilities being very different from those of the menfolk.

Jhingran discusses the social needs, which necessitated the emergence of dharma and endowed it with supreme regulating power. He, however, neither probes into the concept against its historical backdrop; nor does discuss whether the social impinges upon the political.

Another notable work on dharma is Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata edited by Bimal Krishna Matilal. It offers an insight into the moral dilemmas that human situations entail, the paradoxes which are difficult to solve. Matilal quotes from the epic to show that the truth of dharma cannot be completely known by us. He writes that almost everyone in the Mahābhārata experiences moral dilemmas except Kṛṣṇa, Duryodhana and Karṇa. They did not face any crisis because Duryodhana was blinded by his greed and hatred, and Karṇa by his complete devotion to Duryodhana. Kṛṣṇa was above all codes as he was a super-man, the god-incarnate. Comparing this depiction of dharma in the Mahābhārata with that of the Rāmāyaṇa, Matilal points out that the nature of dharma idealised by Rāma was very rigid. It seldom made any adjustment. But Kṛṣṇa looked at the conflicting demands of a particular situation and also beyond it.

By focussing on the paradoxes and dilemmas, Matilal and other contributors of this volume conclude that the society was not guided by a single set of norms. The power to impose norms collectively did exist but there was also room for the individual to interpret his dharma in the light of his own experiences and suffer its consequences. The book remains confined to theoretical discussion and does not look into the social background, which created the moral dilemmas.

In his monograph The Book of Yudhisthir, Buddhadeva Bose discusses dharma, adharma and svadharma in relation to one another. He explains that svadharma means dharma stipulated by varnāśrama, and adharma lies in forsaking one’s dharma. Whatever work a person has chosen or given – whether it is hereditary or acquired,
whether a man has grown up with it or has earned it at the dictate of taste - whatever work he is fit for or benefits him and gives him livelihood, that is his svadharma.\textsuperscript{28} He argues that varṇāśrama is no primary truth for Kṛṣṇa in the Bhāgavad Gītā, as he never praises a brāhmaṇa nor abuses a śūdra, though he does stress that there are differences between man and man. In order to support his argument, Bose cites Kṛṣṇa and Manu.\textsuperscript{29} Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that better is one’s svadharma though imperfectly done than paradharma carried out perfectly; better is death in the fulfilment of one’s own duty for to follow another dharma is perilous.\textsuperscript{30} Manu’s statement, despite similarity of words, represents a very different emphasis. Manu says that even partial fulfilment of svadharma is better than total fulfilment of paradharma because by living according to paradharma one falls below one’s varṇa status.\textsuperscript{31}

D.D. Kosambi says that a determined person can read practically anything into the Gītā, without denying the existence of a class system.\textsuperscript{32} The Gītā furnished the one scriptural source, which could be used without violence for greater acceptance of brahmanical ideology, to draw inspiration and justification for social actions in some way disagreeable to a branch of the ruling class upon whose mercy the brāhmaṇas depended at the moment.\textsuperscript{33} While admitting that attitude towards varṇa duties was not very rigid, Vivekanand Jha emphasises that the Bhāgavad-Gītā fully recognises the limits of individualism, specially if it is devoid of social conscience. It is assumed that members of the four varṇas by and large conform to their svadharmas and the Gītā affirms that individual members of different varṇas should seek their spiritual welfare through disinterestedly discharging their respective varṇa duties in mutual co-operation and for common weal.\textsuperscript{34} Some passages from the Bhāgavad Gītā will help to illustrate this:

I, according to the divisions of quality and work, created the caturvarṇa order
B.G. 4.13.
They attain the highest goals who take refuge in me, even though they are lowly born, women, vaiśyas, and śūdras. B.G. 9.32.

\textsuperscript{28} Buddhadeva Bose, \textit{The Book}, pp.79-80.
\textsuperscript{29} Buddhadeva Bose, \textit{The Book}, pp.81-83.
\textsuperscript{30} B.G. 3.35.
\textsuperscript{31} Manu. 10.97.
\textsuperscript{33} D D Kosambi, “Social and Economic ...”, p.15.
While speaking about dharma, the concern of the authors of the Bhāgavad-Gītā appears to serve diverse social needs by attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable and emphasize the importance of varṇāśrama dharma.

Bose compares Rāma with Yudhiṣṭhira as the upholder of dharma. He finds Rāma far above common man, unique in achievement in the fulfilment of dharma. He argues that Rāma is remote from human beings and somewhat suffocating. Conversely, Yudhiṣṭhira accepts his earthly limitations and there are no extreme features in his nature. Dharma abides in his soul, but he does not blindly abide by dharma. He stands on that ground where doubts remain even after study of all śāstras, and there is no certainty even after a thousand counsels. Nevertheless, one may find even Yudhiṣṭhira equally remote from human beings. His profound knowledge often blocks the execution of actions. He remains an avid learner throughout his life. Bose’s interpretations, though literary, help us understand different dimensions of dharma.

While Bose focuses on a single protagonist Yudhiṣṭhira, Iravati Karve studies the Mahābhārata through some of its prominent characters such as Bhīṣma, Kuntī, Gandhari, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura, Yudhiṣṭhira, Karna, Draupadi etc. She not only narrates the events from the epic but also makes an effort to empathize with the characters to understand their behavioural pattern. For instance, she finds Draupadi’s question, in the court (whether or not Yudhiṣṭhira had a right to stake her after having lost himself), not only meaningless, but also terrible. Karve argues that no matter what answer was given, Draupadi’s position was desperate. She also makes an attempt to judge the events in the Mahābhārata, in the context of time and place. She points out that other than the kṣatriyas and the brāhmaṇas, not much is known about the vaiśyas and the śūdras. She says that the ideal of a woman’s loyalty to her husband differed slightly from that of the later times, as is reflected in the custom of niyoga. The picture of social order is definitely male-dominated, varṇa-oriented and patriarchal. The political system was completely supportive of the social system. The gods of the Mahābhārata are Vedic, classical and Puranic. Temples are not mentioned and Bhakti as a cult had not yet begun.

35 Buddhadeva Bose, The Book, p.94.
38 Iravati Karve, Yuganta, p.99.
39 Iravati Karve, Yuganta, pp. 183-217.
V.S. Sukthankar in his book, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, categorizes the story of the Great Indian Epic under three headings – mundane, ethical and metaphysical. At the mundane plane, the chief actors of the *Mahabharata* are distinctly and consistently characterized. The Pāṇḍavas, with the single exception of Bhīma, are represented as just, moderate and generous. Even Bhīma is not ungenerous, though somewhat hot-tempered and burdened with an unshakable confidence in his Herculean strength. The Kauravas, on the other hand, are described as envious, arrogant and indignant. All the characters are drawn with a steady hand and a firm conviction.

Sukthankar says that it would be a mistake to lay all the stress on the mundane or material aspect of the epic. For, it is speaking to us, almost uninterruptedly, in a very audible undertone, of some entirely different matters. Among other things it is symbolic of idealistic conflict between antagonistic principles, the ceaseless opposition between Good and Evil, between Justice and Injustice, between *Dharma* and *Adharma*. Indeed, the epic transcends even the ethical plane. Good and evil are conceived not as irreconcilable opposites, but rather as complementary to each other. The two opposites combine to form a whole, which synthesizes and integrates them into a single transcendental unity. The portrayal of the character of Kṛṣṇa and the doctrine of the *Bhāgavad-Gītā* brings the story to the metaphysical plane.

According to Sukthankar, the chaos as perceived by modern critics in the *Mahabharata* is but a reflection of the state of their own mind and not in the work at all. The *Mahabharata Revisited*, edited by R.N. Dandekar, is a collection of articles of varying interest. A.N. Jani in his article traces the organic growth of the epic. He maintains that the epic seems to have been originally written to expostulate the kings and princes seeking prosperity by depicting the dire consequences of a fratricidal war. The nucleus of the epic was supplemented with numerous myths and legends, by *śūtas*, the brahmana priests, the court-priests (*purohitas*) and the ascetics. Jani cites the opinions of various authorities who have made an attempt to date the epic. G.C. Pande reiterates

---

41 V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning*, p.44.

Gauri Lad argues that the *Mahabharata* has undergone a long process of evolution, a millennium or more, with three or four distinct phases of growth. She tries to establish the date with the help of archaeological evidences. While doing so, she remains aware of the fact that none of the sites reflect the epic setting and none are likely to. She admits that with continuous additions and accretions and a dynamic evolutionary capacity, the epic has set itself free from the bondage of time and space. Gauri Lad, “*Mahābhārata*: The Dynamics of Epic Evolution”, *Indica*, Vol.25, No.2, Sept. 1988, pp. 93-106.
the general belief that the socio-cultural milieu of the epic reflects several historical ages. According to him, the socio-cultural milieu of the epic may be said to span the period from c. 800 B.C. to c. 200 A.D. It comprised within itself diverse kinds of traditions such as bardic, priestly and ascetic. Pande argues that the *Mahābhārata* reflects the critical representation of bygone heroic age from the point of 'subsequent age of enlightenment'. Pande says that it reflects the contradictions of an age of transition when an old aristocratic and ruling order was yielding place to a new order in which lawlessness, tyranny, social miscegenation, religious skepticism, and heterodoxy were emerging as significant features. The traditional *varṇa* system was becoming unwiable in practice, and attempts were being made to define and question the social order.48

K. Krishna Moorthy modifies Pande's arguments. According to Moorthy, the caste system was very much there, but without the evils of later times. One's temperament, aptitude and vocation decided one's *varṇa*, but all *varṇas* were equally revered as organic limbs of a whole society.49 One may agree with Moorthy that all the four *varṇas* were considered important to run the social order but some *varṇas* were certainly more privileged than others. At no point of time, the two lower *varṇas* could claim equal status with their two upper ones. Moreover, by and large heredity did decide one's occupation as well as *varṇa* status in the social hierarchy, though occasionally temperament, aptitude and vocation were perhaps recognized. Mukund Madhava Sharma's article is focussed on the state. The author quotes various passages from the didactic sections of the epic to prove that the welfare-state was the ideal state according to the epic. Certain passages do refer to elements of a welfare state, but it would be anachronistic to call the state described in the epic a welfare state. Sharma himself is aware of the problem as he says that the term welfare-state is a relatively modern technical term.50 Moreover, one cannot reach such a conclusion merely on the basis of the normative parts.

A.S. Altekar suggests that if there was an absence of equal opportunity to all, the blame lies not on the state but on the society. It is possible to argue that the state should

---

have carried on active propaganda against the restrictions which denied equality, but that was hardly possible in an age that believed that the restrictions were based upon divine and semi-divine sanctions. Peace, order, security and justice were regarded as the fundamental aims of the state. Justice, however, was seen in hierarchy and not in equality. When the state became a champion of varṇas and āśramas it confounded dharma with the existing iniquitous social order. It idealised the actual as well as actualized the ideal. One wonders if such a state can be called a welfare-state at all, whether anachronistic or not.

*Essays on the Mahābhārata*, edited by Arvind Sharma, is mainly a collection of essays on the epic in its various recensions. Madhava M. Despande writes on the epic context of the Bhāgavad-Gītā. He finds that the Bhāgavad-Gītā, as it is available to us, is deeply embedded in the story of the Mahābhārata. He argues that the Bhāgavad-Gītā represents a progression of the Mahābhārata narrative rather than an intrusion. Braj M. Sinha, in his essay suggests that there is an attempt to synthesize dāṇḍanītī categories of the Arthaśāstra and dharma categories of the Dharmaśāstras in the Mahābhārata. According to him, the synthesis is precisely an attempt to infuse in the structure of statecraft the element of ethics that can only be characterized as universal. The ethics of rājadharma is seen in the Mahābhārata as the fundamental ethical principle in which all ethical categories of particularistic dharma are grounded. Bimal Krisna Matilal, addresses various questionable, embarrassing and shocking actions and suggestions of Kṛṣṇa while explaining Kṛṣṇa’s role as upholder of dharma. Matilal concludes that Kṛṣṇa is a moral agent. He interprets Kṛṣṇa’s questionable actions and speculates that it may be that Kṛṣṇa created new paradigms for showing limitations of a generally accepted moral code of truth telling and promise-keeping. Some times situational constraints and the risk of the loss of greater good might influence a rational agent to transgress certain valued principles.

In his book, *A History of Indian Political Ideas*, U.N. Ghoshal has also made the same point. He says that the ideas of the epic – dāṇḍanītī being the means of ensuring

social stability and the king being the wielder of *dāṅga* – are evidently based upon the old *Arthaśāstra–smṛti* conception of the paramount function of *dāṅga* in relation to community. So far as the nature and ethics of *rājadharma* is concerned, it has been one of the most discussed topics in Indian polity. For instance J.Duncun M. Derrett elucidates that the presuppositions of *rājadharma* were not of fundamental rights, of rule of law, of equality before law, of security of life, liberty and property, or anything of that kind. They were that the king should rule his subjects (including of course the brāhmaṇas) in such a manner as to give general satisfaction. This meant, in particular, not disturbing the delicate balance of competing jealous groups, castes, and regions within his kingdom. J.C. Heesterman considers the statement ‘the king is the maker of his age’, a stereotype, for the king is never a free agent but part of a web of intersecting relationships that hem in on all sides. Heesterman says that the mutual dependence of the king and people, of course, does not alter the fact that the king is tied up in a closely meshed web. This is a far cry from the idea of the powerful king “who makes his own age”.

Alf Hiltebeitel writes that within the battle, while remaining “indifferent” and “aloof”, Kṛṣṇa guided the Pāṇḍavas to a victory which nonetheless left them flawed and ashamed. Hiltebeitel says that we learn from Vāsudeva and Vyāsa, why these sins were necessary and how these could be absolved. Kṛṣṇa admits that such formidable foes as Duryodhana could not have been slain in fair fight. Therefore, stratagems were contrived by Kṛṣṇa to justify that enemies of superior number may be slain by means of falsehood. This path was formerly followed by the good and may be trodden by all. Thus, virtue sometimes takes the form of vice. Hiltebeitel maintains that the moral defects by which Yudhiṣṭhira achieves the death of the four Kuru marshals are committed within a great sacrifice of battle, one which he has “performed badly”. The atonement which frees him from sin is achieved by the “king of rites”, the *Āśvamedha*, supervised by the avatāra of the god who himself embodies the expiatory function of the sacrifice.

We may compare the treatment of *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* with that of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The Concept of Dharma in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, a monograph by

---

Benjamin Khan, illustrates dharma in its various ramifications. According to Khan, Valmiki's understanding of dharma is neither fixed nor eternal. Instead, Valmiki recognizes that change is the law of nature. Therefore, he interprets his law of dharma as dynamic and relative, subject to time and place, subject to the needs of men, for the best services of mankind, a principle which creates "human values" and not some "abstract values". To Valmiki, the law of dharma is meant to serve the man and not vice-versa. Various contradictions within the epic can be reconciled only on the ground that there is no absolute standard of moral judgment. However, to us dharma appears to be a rigid code of conduct in the Rāmāyana as one transgressing one's dharma is almost always severely punished, even though sometimes the rule of dharma is transgressed to legitimize what may appear to be the adharmic actions of the protagonist Rāma.

Thus, the large corpus of secondary literature, important as it is, does not address all the aspects involved in the making of dharma and at times contradict each other. We will try to focus on some of the untouched themes. Although we have drawn from the same corpus of material previously utilized by scholars, the themes discussed in each chapter are different.

1.3. Dharma in its Context

Time and again it is reiterated in the brahmanical texts that dharma rests on the Vedas. But strictly speaking, the Vedas contain no positive injunction that could be used as dharma, as it was understood later. One may wonder why the Dharmaśāstras should be dependent on the Śruti, instead of standing on their own, as in fact they do. J.C. Heesterman has an answer:

The answer is a simple one: The inescapable need for ultimate authority. In order to fulfill its task of giving guidelines for society it has to take into account the exigencies of normal life as well as the various, often conflicting customs and usages of many and varied communities, ranging from tribals to sophisticated urbanites and from socially active men to solitary hermits. Dharma cannot simply limit itself to solemn sacrifice as the Śruti with its sovereign disregard for reality can do. Dharma has to function in the middle of the rough and tumble society. But for the same reason dharma cannot do without a source of authority that transcends man and his society and provides an unchangeable reference point. This transcendent function seems to be cut out for the Vedas, in the strict sense, the Śruti, exactly because it is unconcerned with and untouched by the vagaries of human life and society.62

---

62 J.C. Heesterman, "Veda and Dharma", Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty and J.D.M. Derrett (eds.) The Concept of Duty, p.84.
So, the *Vedas* remain isolated in their transcendent grandeur, for the Vedic sacrifices exclude *dharma* – in the sense of code of conduct. However, Vedic term *ṛṭa* and *dharma* do share a common ground in the notion of a ritually ordered cosmos that excludes all crises. *Dharma* i.e. *varnāśramadharma* – as it later came to be known – had no place in a tribal, pastoral, semi-nomadic and largely egalitarian RgVedic society. Spoils of war and cattle constituted the bases of economy. Even in the later Vedic times when society was agricultural and sedentary, there was not enough surplus to induce large-scale trade, towns and state. The kin institutions were still strong, though gradual disintegration of the tribal society into occupational groups could be witnessed. Peasants were producing enough to maintain their chiefs with frequent tributes. The chiefs grew at the expense of tribal peasantry. The priests, who supported their patrons (chiefs), were handsomely rewarded. A striking feature of the later Vedic society was the dominance of priests who were divided into sixteen classes headed by the brāhmaṇas. Sacrifices became important and rituals grew complex. Sacrifices involved carefully pronounced formulæ, *dāna-dakṣīṇa* to priests, and animal sacrifices. The brāhmaṇas claimed a monopoly of priestly knowledge and expertise. Thus, in the later Vedic age the egalitarian tribal society was clearly divided into four distinct *varṇas* – each performing a different task.  

R.S. Sharma argues that the new forces of production released sufficient surplus for the rise of class-based and state-based society in which the religious and governing wings of the ruling class could collect taxes, tributes and tithes. This benefited not only princes and warriors but also priests and monks. The brāhmaṇical ideologues gave legal and religious stamp to the emerging system. They devised and elaborated a social mechanism through which princes and priests, to the exclusion of peasants and labourers, could enjoy the fruits of economic expansion in the age of Buddha. This unique social structure came to be known as the *varṇa* system. Those who were concerned with the distribution and appropriation of the social surplus were categorized as higher *varṇas* and those who were engaged in primary production as lower *varṇas*. As peasants, herders, and traders the vāiśyas became the principle tax-payers, and as slaves and hired labourers, the śūdras became the primary suppliers of labour.  

Romila Thapar adds that the articulation of economic status followed on the emergence of two changes, the peasant economy and the rise of towns and commerce. Both these changes in the mid

---


first millennium B.C. helped in weakening the lineage system and consequently the importance of ritual status in societies dominated by brāhmaṇical values as well as the static power of the ruling clans in *ganasāṅgha* system. 65

The rise of new forces of production determined the social outlook of emerging heterodox sects and social teaching of both the heterodox sects and brahmanism. The prevalent practice of cattle sacrifice in *yajñā* among the followers of the Vedic faith and as a continuation of the hunting stage among the non-Vedic tribals did not fit in with the need for preserving cattle for agriculture. The early Pāli texts adopt an anti-sacrificial stance and clearly stress the evil consequences of cattle slaughter. Cattle are to be preserved because they confer food, beauty and happiness on the people and they are also responsible for the growth of agriculture. 66

Elsewhere, Sharma links *varṇa* with the rise of the state power. He says that from the fifth century B.C., *varṇa* not only played a vital part in the emergence of state power, but also largely conditioned its growth at various stages, shaped its organs and moulded its laws. 67 In almost all brāhmaṇical works from the *Dharmaśāstras* onwards, the most emphasised function of the head of the state is the maintenance of the social order based on the *varṇas*. The Āṇtiparva of the *Mahābhārata* clearly states that the duties pertaining to one's *varṇa* rest upon the *kṣātradharma*. 68 Manu declares that the kingdom can prosper only so long as the purity of *varṇas* is maintained. 69 Sharma says that the *Dharmaśāstras* 'insistence on royal responsibility to uphold *varṇa* order is corroborated by epigraphic evidence, which, although conventional in some cases, throws light on the actual position. 70 Indeed, Romila Thapar explains, the emergence of state can be seen in the need for maintaining *varṇa* hierarchy. Predictably the emphasis in the Buddhist explanation of the emergence of state is different. When people began to hoard and appropriate each other's products, social deterioration set in. Then people decided to select one among them, the most qualified, to sit in judgement over them and have the right to censure and banish those who deserved to be so treated. In return for this, they agreed to give him a share of their rice. He was given the title *khattiya* because he was said to be the lord of the fields and was called *rāja* as he charmed everyone. 71 Thapar

---

68 *Mbh*, 12.64.1-2.
69 *Manu*, 10.61.
70 For details see R.S. Sharma, *Political Ideas*, pp.159-178.
71 Romila Thapar, *From Lineage*, p.120.
adds that in the transition from lineage to monarchical states, varṇa as a theory assisting this process gradually became evident over time. The brāhmaṇa legitimised the new political roles in the monarchical state and provided those in high office with religious sanctions and appropriate genealogical connections. In return for this the brāhmaṇa not only retained the highest ritual status but also had an access to prime economic resources through grants of land and other wealth.\textsuperscript{72}

Thus, the brāhmaṇical theories, explaining the origin of the government, emphasise that the main aim was to prevent the fission of society, and indicate that a segmenting off was no longer the solution to the problems of tension within a society. Tension arose because of individual demands on property and persons. So, a need was felt for an authority, who could maintain law and order by upholding social laws. The Dharmāśāstras provided the king with daṇḍa, which enabled the king to enforce varṇa ideology.\textsuperscript{73} Buddhism also recognised social inequality. But it stressed the need to help the needy.\textsuperscript{74} Both the brāhmaṇical ideology and Buddhist ideology supported the state system but they expected different types of return from the state. Romila Thapar points out that the Buddhist support for the new order did not arise merely out of the wish to associate with authority. The egalitarian society of the saṅgha was possible only when the state system came into being and monastic institutions could be maintained. Thapar says that the relationship between the saṅgha and the state was dual. Society moved from a pristine, egalitarian, varṇaless body to a stratified varṇa society. The saṅgha excluded stratified varṇa society and tried to recapture the pristine, egalitarian society.\textsuperscript{75} Moreover, the groups such as peasants and traders, who required peace and stability for the purpose of production, also endorsed the Buddhists' insistence on ahīṃsā. B.D. Chattopadhyaya is of the opinion that at one level the process of state formation between the third-fourth and the sixth-tenth centuries A.D. resolved one outstanding issue; monarchy became the norm of polity. This vindicated the brāhmaṇical conviction that the absence of monarchy can only result in social instability and chaos. Chattopadhyaya further says, that the significance of this resolution was not limited to the political sphere, for even before the fourth century A.D. there was no opposition between

\textsuperscript{72}Romila Thapar, From Lineage, p.167.
\textsuperscript{73}Romila Thapar, From Lineage, pp.116-154.
\textsuperscript{74}Romila Thapar, From Lineage, p.151.
\textsuperscript{75}Romila Thapar, From Lineage, p.150-151.
heterodoxy and kingship. What it signified, more importantly, was the ultimate affirmation of the brahmanical view of the varṇa order in the political context.\footnote{B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998, p.19.}

The king was supposed to be a kṣatriya. His kṣatriyahood was crucial during the transition from chiefdom to state. However, once the state was established, political power became more and more open to all. If enterprising individuals from the lower social groups rose to power, the brahmanical ideologues eventually assimilated them within the kṣatriya varṇa by recasting the old genealogical legend, or by fabricating new ones. The objective was to cause least dislocation in the existing social system.\footnote{For details see, R.S. Sharma, *Political Ideas*, p.163.}

According to R.S. Sharma, the Purānic prophecy that most of the kings in the kaliyuga would be Śūdras, probably refers either to the Buddhist and other heretic rulers or to such rulers of foreign stock who failed to conform strictly to the brahmanical pattern of life.\footnote{R.S. Sharma, *Political Ideas*, p.162.}

One such dynasty was the Mauryas who tended to favour the heterodox religious systems, although they never attacked brahmanism. The Mauryan emperor Asoka did preach *Dhamma*, but his philosophy of *Dhamma* was in not connected with the maintenance of the varṇa-hierarchy.\footnote{For details see, Romila Thapar, *A History of India*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1990, pp.70-91.}

In addition to the loss of state patronage, brahmanism had to face another challenge – the emergence of heterodox religions. The new religions such as Buddhism and Jainism rejected animal sacrifice and favoured *yajñas* that did not involve sacrifice. Buddha pointedly and specifically attacked Vedic sacrifices in which animals were killed. This message was context-sensitive; and peasants, who were benefited by it, were automatically drawn towards these religions. Moreover, Buddhism and Jainism, unlike brahmanism, gave due consideration to traders and moneylenders. In certain respects the behaviour pattern of an ideal trader was recommended in the Buddhist teachings as a model for a monk. The urban setting in this age gave rise to certain features of town life, which did not find favour with the brahmanical outlook conditioned by a simple agricultural society. The rules and teachings, meant for the lay followers of Buddhism, took full account of the new changes and ideologically strengthened them.\footnote{For details see R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture*, pp.117-131.}

R.S. Sharma argues that whatever might have been the ultimate objective of Buddhism, ordinary people, whose support really mattered for the popularity of the religion, were attracted to it because of its positive response to the challenge caused by the altered material
conditions due to the use of iron, plough agriculture, beginning of money economy, and the rise of towns in eastern U.P. and Bihar.\(^1\)

Thus, the new religions gained popularity at the cost of brāhmaṇism. The vaiśyas, who were the main tax-payers and yet suffered low ritual status, supported the heterodox sects, which recognised the right to salvation for all. *Varna* as a ritual status had primacy when *yajñā* and *grhya* rituals were of central importance. When they ceased to play a central role, the significance of *varṇa*-hierarchy was automatically affected. It is no wonder, under such circumstances the brāhmaṇas felt that the entire social order was crumbling. The crisis was considered severe and the brāhmaṇas felt that it required an effective measure to meet it. The ideology of *dharma* appeared to be one such instrument to ward off the apprehended chaos. The immensity and intensity of the chaos, as perceived by the brāhmaṇa ideologues, can be seen in their obsessive fear of the *kaliyuga*.

### 1.4. The Kaliyuga

From the *Dharmaśāstras*, the *Mahābhārata* and the Buddhist texts, it is clear that they all believe in the existence of an ideally perfect community in the remote past followed by gradual degeneration and decline. Kane maintains that the origin of the theory of progressive deterioration in morals can be found even in the *Ṛgveda*.\(^2\) However, the *Ṛgveda* does not contain the names of all the four well-known *yugas* such as the *ktā*, *tretā*, *dvāpara* and *kali*. Kane says that the theory of *yugas* had begun to take shape in the fourth or third century B.C. and it had been fully developed by the first centuries of the Christian era.\(^3\)

The four *yugas* differ in their characteristics. The *ktāyuga* is so called because *dharma* is unblemished during this age. Everyone remains devoted to his assigned duties. But with each successive *yuga*, *dharma* gets steadily eroded, and in the *kaliyuga* it is literally on its last foot; in the *kali* age only one quarter of *dharma* remains while *adharma* occupies three-quarters of social space.\(^4\) Complete disorder prevails in this age, which is marked by assertion of dominance by the lower order and by

\(^1\) For details see R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture*, p.131.
\(^2\) P.V. Kane, *History*, Vol.3, p.886. Kane cites the famous dialogue of Yama and Yamī. The former exclaims in one place that those ages are yet to come when sisters would do what is not sister like *Ṛ.V.* 10.10.10.
\(^4\) *Mbh.* 3.190; *Mam.* 8.16.
insubordination of women. Moreover, tapas is deemed as the highest dharma in the kṛta, philosophic knowledge in tretā, sacrifice in dvāpara and charity in the kali.\(^{85}\)

P.V. Kane summarises the characteristics of the kaliyuga, based on various brāhmaṇical texts, as follows:

Varṇaśāṅkara, refusal of vaiśyas to pay taxes and perform sacrifices, oppression of people with taxes, widespread theft, robbery and adultery of women, insecurity of family and property, growing importance of wealth over ritual status, dominance of mlecha (śūdras and foreigners), natural calamities and general decline of traditional and moral values etc.\(^{86}\)

The Dharmaśāstras mention every conceivable crime, which would be committed in the kaliyuga. The graphic description of the kaliyuga in the Mahābhārata is no less frightening. Mārkaṇḍeya tells Yudhisṭhira:

In the kaliyuga, virtue being mixed with three parts of sin lives by side of men. In other words virtue is said to wait upon men with only fourth part remaining. The lowest order of men will gain a higher social position and the highest order would, without doubt, descend to the level of the lowest. The brāhmaṇas will not practise Vedas and will no longer perform sacrifices. They will indulge themselves in mean and low activities. The śūdras will expound the scriptures, and the brāhmaṇas will wait upon them and listen to them, and settle their course of duty accepting such interpretations as their guides. The courses of things will look contrary. And, at the end of the yuga, the śūdras will cease to wait upon and serve the brāhmaṇas. The earth will soon be full of mlechas, and the brāhmaṇas will run in all directions for fear of the burden of taxes. When the end of the yuga comes, son will slay parents and women, living uncontrolled, will slay their husbands and sons. Girls will choose their lords themselves. Women will always be sharp and pitiless and fond of weeping and they will never abide by the commands of their husbands. The inhabited regions of the earth will be afflicted with dearth and famine. And the highways will be filled with lustful men and women of evil repute. Overwhelmed with covetousness, men will kill brāhmaṇas, appropriate and enjoy the possessions of their victims. The brāhmaṇas will wander over the earth without any protection, oppressed by śūdras and afflicted with fear.\(^{87}\)

It is a picture of a world turned upside down from the brāhmaṇical point of view. It is no longer an automatically regulated kṛtayuga. Although it would be ahistorical to locate kaliyuga in actual historical settings, historians have been forced to take notice of it because of the excessive importance attached to the absence of dharma (social order) during the kaliyuga by the brāhmaṇical texts. B.N.S. Yadava points out that the description of the decline of virtue varies from brāhmaṇical to Jaina and Buddhist sources in accordance with the perspective of each on social change. The Jaina text Vividhatirthakalpa of Jinaprabha Śuri (fourteenth century) says that the age of decadence

\(^{85}\) Mbh 12.232. 27-28, Manu. 1.85-86.

\(^{86}\) P.V. Kane, A History, Vol.3, p. See also B.N.S. Yadava "The Account of the Kali Age and the Social Transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages", The Indian Historical Review, Vol.5, July 78-79, pp.31-63.

\(^{87}\) Mbh 3.190. passim.

18
would witness the phenomenon of kings behaving like the rod of Yama, the villages would turn into cremation-grounds, and the peasants would be reduced to the status of slaves.\textsuperscript{88} “The Buddhist text – \textit{Mahāsupina Jātaka} – records this age as the period of transition marked by the decline of Buddhism and the kings resorting to crushing their subjects like sugarcane is in a mill... taxing them even to last farthing.”\textsuperscript{89}

Yadava argues, these accounts suggest that in the course of time, which the brāhmaṇas, the Buddhists and the Jainas portray as the age of degeneration, some important changes were taking place within the society. A sizeable section of the śūdras were rising in social and economic status after getting associated with agriculture, mostly as petty dependent peasants, and a section of the vaiśyas were descending to their level. He says further that the trend in social transformation appears to have acquired an added significance in the circumstances which are sometimes pointedly referred to as characterised by the decline of trade and urban life, shortage of money, the phenomenon of the growing agrarian character of society, relatively closed units of local economy, and the emergence of a sizeable ruling landed aristocracy, leading to fragmentation of political authority.\textsuperscript{90}

R.S. Sharma situates the \textit{kaliyuga} in the transition from the classical to feudal society:

Apparently the \textit{kali} precipitated the pace of transition from the classical \textit{varṇa} model to the modified \textit{varṇa} model of a feudal type. Those who practised \textit{varṇasainkara} wanted the exchange places in the existing social order; they never conceived of a system in which social classes could be dispensed with. They attacked property and privilege, but they never thought of a society in which these two would disappear. Similarly, those who tried to restore the old classical \textit{varṇa} stabilised through the mechanism of birth and ritual failed to resurrect it in its pristine purity. They found it necessary to rearrange and redistribute property and privilege. They had to come to terms with many foreign and indigenous chiefs who assumed power not on account of legitimacy and kṣatriya origin but by dint of valour and adventure in a period of social upheaval. These had now to be accorded the corresponding ritualistic status and called kṣatriyas, however grudgingly...\textsuperscript{91}

D.N. Jha also relates the description of \textit{kaliyuga} to the transition from pre-feudal to the feudal society applicable only to the heartland of India. He says that the description of the \textit{kaliyuga} indicates that this was a period of sharp social conflict and crisis, largely generated by a two fold social contradiction: the one between brāhmaṇas

\textsuperscript{88} B.N.S. Yadava, "The Account of The Kali Age...", pp.58-59.
\textsuperscript{89} B.N.S. Yadava, "The Account of the Kali Age...", p.55.
\textsuperscript{90} B.N.S. Yadava, "The Account of the Kali Age...", pp. 60-61.
and kṣatriyas on the one hand and the vaiśyas on the other, the other between the brāhmaṇas and the śūdras. Although there may be many dimensions to the social tension in the early centuries of the Christian era, from the economic point of view one may legitimately ascribe it to a change in the earlier method of extracting surplus from the producing classes and distributing it among the various sections of the ruling class. The state now gave up the earlier practice of collecting taxes directly through its agents and then distributing them among its priestly, military and other employees. Instead it now began to assign land revenues directly to priests, military chiefs, administrators, etc. for their support. 92

B.D. Chattopadhyaya comments that breakdown implies social crisis and it is precisely in terms of a social crisis that the breakdown of the early historical civilizational order has been envisaged. He says that the recent writings attempt to analyse the crisis in concrete historical terms, from the way the brāhmaṇical texts delineate kalyuga, namely as marking the fall from a normative social order which is assumed to have been the existing social order. Chattopadhyaya differs from such writings and argues that detailed empirical research presents us with the image of a society which was going through change, but the change did not necessarily include the elements which were the opposites of elements constituting early historical society. 93 In other words, one cannot really attempt to analyse the crisis, in concrete terms, from the way the epics, the Purāṇas and other brāhmaṇical texts delineate the kalyuga, although some parallels can be drawn with the historical moorings. However, the myth of the four-yuga cycle provides a schematic framework to express the changes in the socio-material conditions and traditional values as perceived by the brāhmaṇa ideologues. It is apparent from their desperate attempt to preserve the varṇa order through the instrument of dharma that changes had already started threatening their power and privileges.

1.5. The Sources

The Mahābhārata constitutes the main source of this work. However, we have also used the Dharmasūtras (Gautama, Vasiṣṭha, Āpastamba and Baudhāyana) and the Śrautasūtras (Manu, Yājñavalkya, Nārada, Brhaspati and Viṣṇu), since these texts, although generally translated as law-books, are treatises on dharma. They contain rules of guidance on a

---

wide variety of human conducts as enjoined by the brāhmaṇa law-givers. Moreover, they are also characterised as repositories of the brāhmaṇical tradition.

It is difficult to establish the exact dates of these texts, for ancient Indian tradition was primarily oral. Therefore, these texts remained fluid for centuries before they were committed to writing. Moreover, the extant texts suffered from too many interpolations and alterations despite the use of writing, thus affecting the general character of the original versions. Scholars have attempted to assign tentative dates to the Dhamasūtras, the Smṛtis and the Mahābhārata, on the grounds of similarities in language and subject matter.

The Gauṭamadharmaśūtra, the earliest of the Dhamasūtras, is usually assigned to the period between 600-400 B.C. Bühler says that the original text, although not devoid of additions, has not suffered much from alterations. The Āpastambadharmaśūtra, probably intended for the benefit of the adhvaryu priest, Kalpasūtra, forms part of an enormous According to Bühler, Āpastambadharmaśūtra probably falls in the last six or seven centuries before the beginning of the Christian era. Winternitz argues that there are good grounds for assigning Āpastambadharmaśūtra to the fifth or fourth century B.C. According to Kane, the text belongs to 600-300 B.C. The Baudhāyanadharmaśūtra belongs to the YajurVedic school. According to Bühler, while the works of Āpastamba seem to have been kept from extensive interpolations, several parts of the Baudhāyanadharmaśūtra have received considerable additions. Bühler maintains that the original version comprised the first two prasnas, the third and the fourth being later additions. Kane is of the opinion that the Baudhāyanadharmaśūtra was composed between 500-200 B.C. or 600-300 B.C. The Vasiṣṭhadharmaśūtra is probably the last remnant of the Vedic school which, along with the greater part of its writings, has perished. It has been preserved probably because

---

of its title and its legend connecting it with Vasiṣṭha Maitrāvaruṇi, one of the most
famous rṣis of the RgVeda and a champion of brāhmaṇism. 104 Kane is of the opinion that
this text may tentatively be assigned to the period between 300-100 B.C. 105

Among the Smṛtis, Manusmṛti is the most famous. It is usually agreed that this
text was composed and compiled over a long period of time between the second century
B.C. to second century A.D. 106 The Yajñavalkyaśmṛti is a large work on a variety of
subjects. It is generally accepted that the text was composed between the first century
B.C. and the third century A.D. 107 Scholars are not unanimous on the date of the
Nāradasmṛti. While Julius Jolly dates it to the period around the fifth century A.D.,
Kane maintains that the Nāradasmṛti was composed probably between 100-300 A.D. 108
A complete version of the Brhaspatismṛti has not been found. According to Julius Jolly,
the text was composed around sixth century A.D. 109 However, Kane is of the opinion that
the author of the Brhaspatismṛti flourished around 200-400 A.D. 110 Scholars find
Viṣṇusmṛti the most problematic to date. On the one hand it incorporates very old
material, which belongs to the period between 300-100 B.C. On the other hand, the text
was recast several centuries later from the Vaiṣṇavite point of view. Kane says that we
have no means of determining when these additions were made 111. Julius Jolly is of the
opinion that Viṣṇusmṛti cannot be placed earlier than the third or fourth century A.D. and
the lowest limit must be put before the eleventh century A.D. 112

The Mahābhārata appears to have had its origin in an oral tradition of heroic
ballads. The original epic was recited at sacrificial rituals, at social gatherings and at the
court of the chiefs and the kings. Romila Thapar maintains that the origin of the epic can
be seen as a eulogy of a patron or else the eulogistic functions could be seen as a
simile. 113 The story involved the families of the kṣatriyas, chiefs and warriors, with other
social groups playing lesser roles. However, the appropriation of the text by the
brāhmaṇas converted it from an oral tradition into sacred literature. The structure, a set

106 For details see P.V. Kane, History, Vol. I, pp.306-349.
107 For details see P.V. Kane, History, Vol. I, p.421-459.
110 For details see P.V. Kane, History, Vol. I, pp.484-495.
111 For details see P.V. Kane, History, Vol. I, pp.112-127.
112 Julius Jolly, The Institutes of Viṣṇu, The Sacred Books of the East Series, edited by F. Max Mueller,
113 Romila Thapar, "Epic and History: Tradition, Dissent and Politics in India", Past and Present, Number
125, 1980, p.5.
of narratives, facilitated the incorporation of new material. Passages from legal, social and moral codes were incorporated which appealed to people much more effectively than dry sermons.

It is difficult to date such a fluid text, which was redacted by each successive generation. It was a part of a continuing tradition and was made to change its function over a period of time. E.W. Hopkins uses the term epic and pseudo-epic to distinguish between the early and the later didactic additions. He has developed an elaborate schema of dating the epic. Hopkins writes that by 400 B.C. there was a collection of Bharata-Kuru lays. In the second stage, by 400 B.C., there was the beginning of a Mahābhārata tale with Pāṇdu heroes, lays and legends combined by the Purānic diaskuasts, and Kṛṣṇa as a demigod. In the third stage, the epic was remade, around 200 B.C.-200 A.D., with Kṛṣṇa as the complete god, new masses of didactic materials were added. In the final stage, between 200 A.D.-400 A.D, introduction to the first book was added and the swollen Anuśāsanaparva was separated from the Śāntiparva. Winternitz generally agrees with Hopkins, and adds that the Mahābhārata was already a religious text by the fifth century A.D.

V.S. Sukthankar finds these dates hypothetical and perfectly arbitrary. According to him, there is not one figure or one statement in Hopkins’ study which can be verified or which can lay claims to objective validity. Sukthankar, an editor of the Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata, while identifying the distortions, himself stops short of dating different layers. He argues that the epic is in part at least a fairly well constructed narrative, which is worthy of our attention. Gauri Lad uses similarities in subject matter to identify the layers. According to her, the first layer belongs to 600-400 B.C. The inner core was transformed into a great epic at the second stage in the early historical period. She maintains that in the third phase of growth, the Mahābhārata acquired a thin veneer of the high style and luxury, typical of the centuries between the first and the third centuries A.D. By the fourth century A.D. the epic had assumed its present colossal form. Thus, it is evident from the foregoing discussion that the Mahābhārata cannot be precisely dated with an objective validity. Some scholars have

attempted to use archaeological findings to identify the different layers. However, as B.D. Chattopadhyaya aptly says that there can in fact be no unanimity regarding the relative chronology of the two epics. Their growth process, spread over a number of centuries, presupposes a considerable degree of overlapping in time, and it may be too much to expect that the chronology of a few ‘epic’ sites, even after they are correctly ascertained archaeologically, will settle the problem of relative dating. However, the consensus view on the date of composition of the Mahābhārata seems to be 400 B.C.-400 A.D.

As far as authorship of the text is concerned, the majority agree that is a compilation, embodying the work of many writers, who have added to the original corpus from time to time. Some scholars identify at least three major redactions of the Mahābhārata such as – the Jaya, the Bhārata and the Mahābhārata. We will study the text in its totality, primarily because we have taken it as a summation of the brāhmaṇical ideology up to the fourth century A.D. and secondly because there is no established study on the layers of the epic. We will use the Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata, for it is the most authentic text. However, since the translation of this edition is not available, we will use P.C.Roy’s translation. At times we have borrowed the extracts directly from the translation even when it is not found in the Critical Edition, for the purpose of citation, strictly when required.

1.6. Chapterisation

We have used the brāhmaṇical texts as the sources for our study. These texts were written with the objective to reestablish the supremacy of the brāhmaṇical ideology. Therefore, they recorded only those aspects which would promote the interest of the patriarchal brāhmaṇical social order. So, one cannot claim that the information supplied by these texts actually correspond to the social reality. Moreover, these texts were designed to indicate how the world should be rather than what it was. Nevertheless, the texts encapsulate the dominant ideology of that period, an analysis of which is absolutely necessary to comprehend the process of evolution of dharma. However, while dealing with these texts, we remain aware of their function in society. We are also aware that

---

119 For details see B.D. Chattopadhyaya, “Indian Archaeology and the Epic Tradition”, Pratatti, No. 8, 1975-76,pp. 67-72.
120 B.D. Chattopadhyaya, “Indian Archaeology and the Epic Tradition”, p.69.
ideology performs social functions, but it does so by distorting objective realities and obscuring real contradictions. It may even justify, reinforce, and perpetuate human sufferings. It also offers imaginary resolutions of real contradictions. Nevertheless, ideology is a form of consciousness, which is much more than mere state of mind. It continuously constitutes and reconstitutes social subjects. It not only shapes the existential reality and in turn shaped by it but it is also a part of it. Briefly, our sources are not totally divorced from the social reality, but they also do not mirror the reality as it was.

The plan of this thesis is to study different categories of dharma such as varṇadharma, āśramadharma, strīdharma, rājadharma and āpaddharma as discussed in the Mahābhārata. First, we will discuss the directive principles i.e. rules, regulations, customs etc. as codified by the Dharmāśāstrakaras. Next, we will examine the extent to which these paradigmatic Dharmāśāstras correspond to the didactic sections of the Mahābhārata. We will then look into how these principles were put into practice and the ensuing problems, for while dharma is unchanging ideal, man’s capacity to obey the laws changes in different ages. The crisis would be more acute in the kaliyuga, since man was naturally inclined to fall prey to evil as he was caught up in the cycle of yuga. This would be illustrated by examples taken from the narrative sections of the Mahābhārata, in the sections designated Vyavahāra.

We begin chapter one in the form of an introduction. In chapter two we will discuss varṇadharma – the most crucial among all dharmas. Varṇa refers to the four social categories of men – brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya and śūdra. The varṇas constitute ideally the totality of society. They are each defined by their functions in society and their relation to Vedic ritual. The first three among the four are called dvija-varṇas, for they share the access to Vedic education and the ceremony of the sacred-thread. The śūdra is thus set completely apart, since he is excluded from these rituals and in this respect he is different from all other varṇas. On the other hand, the kṣatriya and the vaiśya are within dvija-varṇas, but there is also a subtle opposition between the brāhmaṇa and the two other upper varṇas. Only the brāhmaṇas possess theoretical and practical Vedic knowledge, while the kṣatriya and the vaiśya may have the Vedic rites performed on their behalf by brāhmaṇas. They may learn the Vedic texts but they must not teach them. The practice of svadharma, i.e. learning and teaching of the Vedas and officiating at sacrifices for the brāhmaṇa, protection of people and practise in arms for the kṣatriya, trade and agriculture for the vaiśya and service of other three varṇas for the śūdra, is
considered important for social stability. So much so that the law-givers enjoin that it is better to do one’s duty imperfectly rather than doing another’s perfectly. The Dharmashastras are very particular in enforcing this injunction that one must never stray from one’s svadharma, or the universe will be plunged into chaos. Therefore, if one defies the rules of varṇadharma one is liable to be punished. The punishment is also relative and prescribed in strict accordance with the varṇa of the offender and of the victim. We will study the normative regulations and then we will look into their applications in “real” life situations. We will also examine the causes and implications of emergence and sustenance of such an ideology.

In chapter three, we will focus on āśrama which is considered second in importance, next only to varṇadharma. A man goes through four āśramas – brahmacarya, gṛhasthya, vānaprastha, and saṁśīya – in his life. We will argue that the āśrama system is basically a theological construct and it should be distinguished from the socio-economic institutions comprehended by the system, as illustrated in the epic. It is rightly believed that the āśrama system arose during the fifth century B.C. as a result of changes within the brāhmaṇical tradition. It appears that brāhmaṇism incorporated the system to meet the challenges posed by the heterodox sects. Such a belief is supported by the law-books themselves when they constantly ordain that the stage of the householder is the best among the four āśramas because it supports all other. A man is permitted to move on to the third āśrama only after having passed through the first two stages. He should not aim to attain mokṣa (through saṁśīya) without paying his daivaṇa, pitṛṇa and īśiṇa. In other words, brāhmaṇism does not favour a man to skip his gṛhasthadharma. A man’s primary dharma is to discharge his social obligations. It is thus made clear that while renunciation and the goal of liberation are valid, they must be deferred until social obligations have been discharged. In brāhmaṇical tradition, dharma (in the sense of social duties) is clearly superior to mokṣa, and mokṣa can be achieved only through the performance of svadharma. We will try to find out the reasons behind such an ideology.

Chapter four will discuss the most problematic of all the categories of dharma, strīdharma. It is considered problematic because it is held that a woman’s nature (strīsvabhava) always tries to wean her away from her dharma. In other words, strīsvabhava and strīdharma contradict each other. A woman is not only the abstract cause of a number of evils and sins in this world, she is also an instrument, at the hands of gods, to corrupt sages and demons. Therefore explanation and execution of
strīdharma is deemed painstaking since a woman is an evil incarnate. That is why the Dharmaśāstras ordain that she must always be subject to male authority. Though it is difficult to engage her in her prescribed duties, she must be directed towards it lest she may lose all her virtues. Her chastity must be guarded as it ensures purity of bloodline and varṇa-order. Therefore all efforts are made to chain her mind and body either through promise of a niche in heaven or through strict vigilance over her conducts. It is feared that when women are corrupted, confusion of varṇas sets in. We will argue how the patriarchal brāhmaṇical society writes every scene of a woman’s life in order to suit and promote its own interests. In examining brāhmaṇical literature on dharma we will be dealing with brāhmaṇical self-representations and idealised images of gender roles. In the Dharmaśāstras we have a clear picture of brāhmaṇical ideology, but the degree to which this reflects the reality is unclear, although we will try to see the applications in the section titled vyavahāra. We will argue that women probably exercised some power within the household, within the realm of domesticity, through their dedication and self-sacrifice, but they wielded little power in the public realm, which was predominantly a male bastion.

In chapter five we will discuss rājadharma. The significance of rājadharma can be discerned from the statement that it is the king who can, by his conduct, introduce the characteristics of one yuga into another. The law-givers unanimously believe that the king should not be misled into thinking that kali is inevitable. Indeed, the king, by his example and virtue, can stop or hasten the cyclical motion of time; i.e. he can either block or usher in the kaliyuga. The king should see to it that his subjects are engaged in their respective duties. He is provided with dana and divine status to enable him to support, extend and establish dharma. However, the very dana strikes the king down if he fails to execute it perfectly. The duties of the king revolve around the protection of the subjects but this is seen not merely as protection from external danger; it is also the maintenance of internal social structure, encapsulated in the expression – the upholding of varṇāśramadharma. We will elucidate the socio-cultural milieu behind such an ideology of kingship. We will also discuss the special relationship between the brāhmaṇa (authority) and the king (power), and we will see to what extent brahmanical theory of dharma influences the king’s conduct. Theoretically, the king is an integral part of a whole structure in which he and those below him function in an integrated way. We will try to study why rājadharma continues to enjoy high regards irrespective of the actions of any particular king. Although the day-to-day running of a region is important, it is the
and ritual aspect that has been highlighted the most. We will attempt to explain why the brāhmaṅical king is more important as a ritual figure in close proximity to the divine – a dharmarāja – than as a ruler involved with the running of the kingdom.

In chapter six we will deal with āpaddharma i.e. dharma during situations of crises. The law-givers are prudent and realise that dharma, in order to be a universal and eternal principle, must also relate to the ever-changing world of human beings. In other words, dharma must be context-sensitive, for a man cannot be expected to follow the rules of normal times at the time of exigency. Dharma must be flexible and adaptable to different circumstances and a variety of situations. Thus the law is made for man and not vice-versa. It is interesting to note that law is context-sensitive only for the upper three varṇas but not for the sūdra, women and the king. Perhaps the complete dependence of the former two categories and their inferior status debar them from āpaddharma, which is a type of privilege. The king, being the maker of his age, cannot be allowed to digress from his dharma. Indeed, crisis would ensue if he transgresses.