CHAPTER I
The Concept of Dharma in Indian Thought

Dharma is the greatest and the most valuable contribution of India to humanity. It is one of the key concepts in Indian thought and it has great relevance in the present age. Annie Besant comments on Dharma, thus: 'That is India's word to the world'. 1 It is very difficult to define Dharma because the word has been used in various senses and its meaning and scope has been enlarged. It signifies differently in different contexts. In the long history of India’s cultural and spiritual development, it acquired various senses and we always have to examine the context carefully before determining the sense in which the word ‘Dharma’ is used. Almost all the philosophical systems of India discuss the concept of Dharma in their own way. These meanings of ‘Dharma’ are different from, and sometimes complementary to one another.

The word ‘Dharma’ and its meanings

As is the case with many other Sanskrit words, it is rather difficult to find an exact equivalent for the Sanskrit word ‘Dharma’ in English or any other. It has been variously translated as ordinance, duty, right, justice, morality, law, virtue, religion, ethics, good works, code of conduct, and so on. There is no word in any other language, corresponding to Dharma. Dharma has its legal, moral and social shades of
meanings which are developed during the course of tradition and historical development.

The word ‘Dharma’ has its root ‘dhr’ meaning ‘to uphold’, ‘to support’, and ‘to sustain’. The famous verse from MB says:

धारणात् धर्म इत्यादिः धर्मां धारयते प्रजाः।

व: स्वात् धारणसंयुक्तः स धर्माति निदित्तः॥

They call it ‘Dharma’ since it is Dharma that upholds people. That which upholds the created universe, supports it and sustains it, without which the universe just falls apart, is ‘Dharma’. Dharma sustains and maintains the social, moral, political and economic order. In the RV, the word appears to be used in the sense of upholder, supporter or sustainer.4 Here Dharma is clearly used as masculine agent noun. In all other places, the word is used either in neuter or in masculine gender.

‘Dharma’ has a wide variety of meanings. For instance, the word is used to mean justice, what is right in a given circumstance, moral values of life, pious obligations of individuals, righteous conduct in every sphere of activity being helpful to other living beings, giving clarity to individuals in need of it or to a public cause or alms to the needy, natural qualities or characteristics or properties of living beings, duty, law, etc.
The MB, the great epic, contains an elaborate illustration of this topic. On being asked by Yudhiṣṭhira to explain the meaning and scope of Dharma, Bhīṣma who has mastered the knowledge of Dharma, explains thus: ‘It is most difficult to define Dharma. Dharma has been explained to be what which helps the upliftment of living beings. Therefore, that which ensures the welfare of living beings is surely Dharma. The learned rṣis have declared that what sustains this universe is Dharma’.5

In most cases, the meaning of Dharma is ‘religious ordinance or rites’.6 It is said in the RV tāṇi dharmāṇī prathamānanyāsan.7 In Vājasaneyya Samhitā, the word ‘Dharma’ is explained in dhruvena dharmāṇā.8 Here the word is used in the meaning ‘fixed principles or rules of conduct’. In Atharvaveda, the word seems to be used in the sense of ‘merit acquired by the performance of religious rites’.9 In the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, the word Dharma seems to be used in an abstract sense, ‘the whole body of religious duties’.10

Dharma as Law of things being what they are

Dharma in its primary sense refers to the essential nature of a thing, without which it cannot exist. ‘That because of which a thing continues to be the thing itself, without which the thing cannot continue to be that thing, is the Dharma of the thing. For example, fluidity is the Dharma of water and if water loses fluidity it will either become vapour or ice; then we
cannot call it water. Similarly, heat is the Dharma of fire. So, if it does not produce heat, it is not called fire. So Dharma is the basis for the existence of a thing. ‘The notion of Dharma is of moral significance here when we understand what the essential nature of man is. Man’s Dharma is the fundamental idea from which all other moral concepts derive their meaning.’ All the Indian systems of philosophies build their systems of morality on the notion of the essential nature of man. The Upanisads teach us that man’s true nature is divine. The supreme reality behind this universe is Âtman or Brahman and that Brahman is the very essence of one’s being. Whatever conduct or way of life helps us to reveal this fundamental principle in us, can also be called Dharma. This realization is the ultimate aim of human life. For, most of the Indian schools accept that the understanding of one’s own true nature is the highest good. What is morally good for man depends on what man essentially is. Man’s being and his morality cannot be conceived as independent of each other. So man’s obligations to the society such as religious rites, ceremonies and observances, fixed principles of conduct, privileges, duties and obligations of a man depending upon his stages of life and status in society, even rules of law, customs and manners of society-every one of these can be included under the term ‘Dharma’ in this sense.
Dharma as Moral order

Dharma in another important sense denotes the moral order. Everything in this universe is under certain rules and orders. The cosmic order, when it manifests in man, becomes moral order. Dharma is the source behind this order. Man has to conform to the higher order of universal Dharma in order to preserve himself. Such conformity leads to one's own welfare along with that of others. This moral order leads to the welfare of the society.

Dharma as the Sum of Duties

Dharma in another important sense means moral duty in general and spiritual duty in particular. 'Dharma' acquired this sense in the Brāhmaṇas, the Smṛti literature, the Upaniṣads and the ritualistic school of Purva mīmāṁsā. The word 'Dharma' occurs in the RV fifty-six times. But in almost all these places it has been used in the sense of duty or action which contributes to the substance of the world. In the Upaniṣads, this sense becomes more explicit. As a member of the society, everyone of us has certain duties and obligations which must be discharged by performing the prescribed actions. This performance of one's allotted duties sustains the structure of the society. Similarly, in our journey towards perfection, we have to pass through several stages of spiritual development and each such stage devolves upon us certain duties or a code of conduct. This helps to sustain our inner development and
simultaneously contributes to the well-being of the society also. These duties include the Varṇāśrama Dharmas also.

**Dharma as Object of pursuit (puruṣārtha)**

Dharma also denotes the moral pursuit of man. It is one of the four objects of human pursuit. The others are artha, kāma and mokṣa. These puruṣārthas also suggest the individual attitudes towards the world of objects. Dharma is considered as the first and foremost of all the puruṣārthas. Dharma has to be followed in all the human endeavours and thus it underlies all the other puruṣārthas. According to Indian thought, Dharma is the basis of all the other puruṣārthas and artha and kāma are to be enjoyed in the path of Dharma. Even mokṣa cannot be attained by being indifferent to Dharma.

**Dharma as Religion**

Dharma in its closer sense refers to religion in general and the practice of religion. We often find usages like Baudha dharma, Jaina dharma, Hindu dharma, where Dharma is used in the sense of religion. Interpreters like Heinrich Zimmer agree that Dharma ‘comprises the whole context of religious and moral duties’. ‘Dharma as religion paves the way for moral development and one experiences the religious life at its best through philosophical understanding of Dharma as expressed in the religion’. Religion, when practised with a dharmic attitude, becomes truly human. The soul of religion consists in man’s recognition of the essential ethical
relationship between himself and his surroundings. Religion, as a collective mode of life, necessarily involves vision and a code of conduct. All the major religions have their own scriptures which embody the preaching of their founders and these scriptures offer moral guidance to the adherents. As far as Hinduism is concerned, the Vedas stand as the revered sources of morality, both social and religious. The Mīmāṃsakas establish and define religious duties in terms of the absolute authority of the Vedas. Religion inculcates the fundamental values through external sacred practices. Religion plays an important role in the propagation of basic virtues and moral practices among people. Dharma is used as religion in many places; but religious interpretation of Dharma forms only a single phase of its vast meaning. Bhagavan Das says: 'Dharma is not a mere other-world religion, but it is also every duty, every law, every proper and specific function of every thing or being in this and other worlds'.[^17] But the well known interpretation of Dharma treats it as a synonym for religion.

**Dharma and Ṛta**

The word ‘Ṛta’ is closely connected with Dharma. Ṛta is a word for truth; it stands for an impersonal order or law, and is in the Vedas the sustaining principle of the higher and of the lower worlds. The word, in its simplest form, seems to indicate a straight or direct line and so, universal law of nature as an impersonal order. When extended to the moral world, it
denotes a straight conduct based on truth which itself is also Dharma. ‘It has also been used in the sense of an inner awareness of what is true, based on the spiritual teachings and needs of the duties on hand. When this awareness expresses itself through words and actions, it becomes satya’.\textsuperscript{18} In the RV, we sometimes find the conception that all Devas are the performers of Rta, which has an ethical character. More often, we find the view that the Devas are presided over by Rta. Rta stands as much for a social as for a moral order.\textsuperscript{19}

As to what Rta may have meant originally, opinions differ. Max-Muller defines ‘Rta’ as the straight line which, in spite of many momentary deviations, was discovered to run through the whole realm of nature. We call that Rta, that straight, direct or right line, when we apply it in a more general sense, the law of nature, and when we apply it to the moral world, we try to express the same idea again by speaking of the moral law, the law on which our life is founded, the eternal law of right and reason, or it may be, ‘that which makes for righteousness both within us and without.\textsuperscript{20} And, further, ‘a law that underlies everything, a law in which we must trust, whatever befalls, a law which speaks within us with the divine voice of conscience, and tells us ‘this is right, this is true’, whatever the statutes of our ancestors, or even the voices of our bright gods, may say to the contrary’.\textsuperscript{21} So, the meanings of the words Dharma and Rta are similar.
Dharma as Ethics

Dharma has ethical meaning also. Dharma as law or convention may have an ethical basis. According to Dr. Illa Ravi, 'Dharma is the central ethical concept in the post-Vedic Indian thought and it is the comprehensive ethical category in the light of which alone the rest of the ethical ideals can be understood'. It is the ethical approach that links philosophy with man and the society. As metaphysics forms the theoretical part of philosophy, ethics is the practical realm of those theories. In this sense, Dharma sãstras are considered as the foundations of Indian ethics. Dharma in its social sense is equivalent to ethics.

We have to look into the scriptures, epics and purânas 'Harmlessness, truthfulness, absence of the tendency to steal, to be free from the passions of desire and anger, activity in the direction of what is agreeable and good to beings, form the course of Dharma common to all Varna'. And even Manu, the foremost authority on law, defines the tenfold Dharma as contentment, forgiveness, self-control, abstention from unrighteously approaching anything, truthfulness, etc. which are ethical in nature. The definition of Dharma given by Mr. Venketeswara in the first volume of his 'Indian Culture through the Ages' seems to cover this. He defines Dharma as 'the discharge of one's duty as rationally conceived as an aspect of social ethics'.
Dharma as Religious duty

We have already discussed the meaning of Dharma as duty, but sometimes it may be considered as religious duty. Śrīkṛṣṇa says in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (Bh P): ‘Whatever promotes devotion to me is Dharma’.26 The same purāṇa adds: ‘Indeed there is no Dharma higher than that by which devotion to Śrīkṛṣṇa arises, a devotion induced by no motive (desire) and unobstructed in its course, a devotion by which the soul becomes pacified’.27

Dharma as Bhakti

Like religious duty or dedication to the Lord, Dharma is sometimes Bhakti itself. Bh P states that Dharma without Bhakti or love will be mere labour. Bhakti is love to God. So Bhakti, here stated as an attitude of Dharma, love to the supreme Lord, is considered as the nature of true Bhakti; love of humanity is a natural outcome of it. Only if Bhakti is stated as an attitude of Dharma, it implies love of humanity, brotherhood.

Dharma as Divine Justice

Dharma is considered to be divine justice, the divine law of cause and effect, which will tend to equilibrium, and which will bring in due time the fruits of the karmas and actions.28 This we may gather from a sentence in Manu, addressed by the assessors to a judge who acted against the law: ‘Dharma being violated, destroys; Dharma being preserved, preserves; therefore Dharma must not be violated, lest violated Dharma
destroy us. \(^{29}\) Human justice is based on the intuitive recognition of this Divine Justice, or of the law of the moral cause and effect, and the law of Karma. The law of nature is beyond human power.

**Dharma as Law**

The word ‘Dharma’ includes this meaning also. Dr. Mackenzine Brown notes that Dharma is more than laws, for it is what underlies law and creates law in the universe. \(^{30}\) Basic to Dharma this is the view of order or law pervasive in the universe. The Dharma śāstras were considered as ancient Indian laws of conduct. Dharma is considered to be the fundamental principle of jurisdiction: Dharma, evidence, custom, and edicts of kings are the four legs of law; of these four, in order, the latter is superior to the one previously named. However, if there is a disagreement between custom and Dharma or between evidence and Dharma, then the matter shall be settled in accordance with Dharma. \(^{31}\)

**Dharma as Good Works**

Dharma is taken in the sense of good works or merit (puṇya), as for instance, in the verse, the only friend who follows men even after death is Dharma; for everything else is lost at the same time when body perishes. \(^{32}\)

**Dharma as Identical with God or the Absolute**

Sometimes Dharma is seen as identical with God or the Absolute. Bh P says: ‘The subject of the whole work is Śrīkrṣṇa,
called Dharma, i.e, the support of pure righteousness, not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality whether presented in a definite and seemingly finite form to the limited vision of Jivās or understood as the omnipotent, absolute, Supreme Being.\textsuperscript{33} The Arthaśāstra says: ‘Dharma is eternal truth holding its sway over the world’.\textsuperscript{34}

**Dharma as a Person**

Sometimes Dharma is described in our scriptures as a person, not a man but a Deva. In the Bh P, Dharma is mentioned as the father of the fourth Avatāra.\textsuperscript{35} In Bh P, we find a symbolic story in which Dharma takes the form of a bull, and the earth, that of a cow.\textsuperscript{36} The bull is trying to go on one leg, because the earth has entered Kaliyuga, the age of discord. In the first age, i.e, in Satya yuga, Dharma has four feet and in the coming ages it loses its legs one by one and in the present age he is walking on one foot.

Lord Kṛṣṇa is the incarnation of Dharma and the purpose of his divine incarnation is to preserve dharma, and abolish adharma.\textsuperscript{37} Dharma is also identical with Yama, the god of death. Yama is sometimes called Dharma rāja.

**Dharma, Karma and Mokṣa**

Dharma is closely connected with Karma. One’s Dharma is the total situation in which he finds himself; it is the law of his own being, the proper function of his nature or constitution. Past and present are also related to future; just as one’s present
state depends on past behaviour, so by the law of Karma, one’s future depends on present activity and faithful obedience to Dharma. ‘By doing good Karma, one may move towards a higher plane of existence and this way progress towards Mokṣa or ultimate freedom. Within the prescribed patterns of one’s dharma, which is theoretically founded on one’s present achievement or one’s actual nature, one can attain a higher future or a new Dharma in future incarnations’.38

Karma primarily means action; secondarily, it consists in the fruits of actions inseparably connected with their source of action. Further, Dharma is sometimes met with in the scriptures as the father of a particular hero, which may be another way of stressing the righteous character of the hero. Dharma takes the shape of some particular saint to test the righteousness of kings, etc. Dharma in its highest sense is an impersonal principle, and is yet intrinsically personal, because it can be experienced as well as performed only individually. Dharma is sometimes said to be Niti. They were not thought to be opposed, but were taken as complementary.

Dharma is karma, but much more than that; for, it is not only the tendency due to past and present work, but also the divine tendency hidden in the inmost being of man, to unfold in the future. Dharma is the law of this unfoldment, the divine inner potentiality. If karma implies law and bondage, Dharma holds the element of divine grace and the principle of freedom.
Karma is a law of cause and effect; Dharma is largely ethical and religious.\textsuperscript{39}

Dharma is considered as the goal or end of life. In Hinduism, life is valued only as it leads to mokṣa and Dharma is the specific organization of human activities to this end. Hiriyanna says: 'Mokṣa replaced Dharmas as the supreme value of human life with Dharma becoming instrumental to the attainment of mokṣa.'\textsuperscript{40} T. M. P. Mahadevan points out that, 'while mokṣa is the supreme end and sole intrinsic value, it is clearly and undoubtedly taught by all Indian thinkers that without Dharma mokṣa cannot be gained.'\textsuperscript{41}

**Dharma in the Vedas**

The Vedas are the authoritative texts discussing the nature of Dharma. They are the chief sources of Dharma.\textsuperscript{42} In the hymns of the RV, Dharma appears to be used either as an adjective or a noun (in the form dharman, generally neuter) and occurs at least sixty times by itself.\textsuperscript{43} It is very difficult to say what the exact meaning of the word 'Dharma' was in the most ancient period of vedic language, because the word was used in other senses also like satya etc. In a few passages, the word appears to be used in the sense of 'upholder, or supporter or sustainer' in the RV.\textsuperscript{44} In these passages the word is clearly masculine. In most cases, the meaning of Dharma is 'religious ordinance or rites'.\textsuperscript{45} The refrain \textit{tāni dharmāni prathamāṇyāsan} occurs in the RV 1. 164. 43 and 50, X. 90. 16 etc. Similarly, we
have the words *prathamā dharma* (the Primeval or first ordinance). In some passages the word is used in another sense as fixed principles or rules of conduct. In Vājasaney Samhitā also, the above sense of the word Dharma is found and in II. 3 and V. 27 we have the words *dhruveṇa dharmaṇa*.

'Svadharma' as an epithet of Agni occurs in the RV and the word *Satyadharman* is applied to different gods alone, viz., to Savitṛ, Viśvedevah, Agni, and to Mitra and Varuṇa. The Atharvaveda contains many of those verses of the RV in which the word Dharma occurs. Sometimes the word seems to be used in the sense of merit acquired by the performance of religious rites. The word Dharma is used in various senses in different contexts. But the source of Dharma is to be found mainly in the Vedas. As a matter of fact, every rule of Dharma must find its foundation in the Vedas.

**Dharma in Smṛtis and Dharmasāstras**

The Vedas are the root of all Dharma. The study of Vedas must be done along with the study of the six Vedāṅgas like śikṣā, etc. The second Vedāṅga is kalpa, and it contains Dharmasūtras, Gṛhyasūtras, and Śroutasūtras, relating to the rites based on the Vedas. The Dharmasāstras are also called Smṛtis. The Smṛtis are considered as the source of Dharma. The sages who had a profound understanding of the Vedas have brought together the duties and rights mentioned in them in the form of notes and they constitute the Smṛtis. They tell us
about our duties in detail, the do's and don'ts and how the rites
are to be performed. Manu, Parāśara, Yājñavalkya, Gautama,
Hārīta, etc. are Smṛṭikāras. There are eighteen Smṛṭis and
eighteen subsidiary Smṛṭis called Upasmṛṭis.

These also contain rules and regulations relating to man’s
conduct in society. In the Smṛti texts, we can see a very detailed
treatment of the subject of Dharma in all its implications. That
is why they have been rightly designed as Dharmaśāstras. If
Dharma is the cosmic law which holds together the beings of
the world and sustains them, it is very necessary that they must
given detailed practical instructions about the way of life which
helps them to be always and in tune with this Dharma. These
codes of conduct construct a society which gave importance to
ethics and morality. This is exactly what the Dharmaśāstras
have done. When the varnāśrama dharmas are demonstrated,
the rules and laws written in Smṛti texts are subject to change
according to the needs and requirements of the age. The
existence of a number of Smṛṭis shows that social usages have
changed from time to time. When a particular Dharma is hated
or disliked by the people, it must be given up. Throughout the
social history of India, we find the laws and rules being
changed to suit the needs of the people, though, of course, the
central principles have always been kept intact.

The writers on Smṛti texts meant Dharma as a mode of
life or code of conduct which regulated man’s entire activities
as a member of the society and also as an individual. In the Smṛti literature, the term Dharma means an act of Vyavahāra.\textsuperscript{53} The activities of Dharma are classified into three groups, viz. ācāra, vyavahāra and prāyaścitta.\textsuperscript{54} Dharma is a mode of life or code of conduct for developing man to reach his goal of existence, as said by Yājñavalkya.

\begin{quote}
इन्याचारदमाहिसादानस्वाध्यायकर्मणाम्।
आद्य तु परमो धमो वद्योगेनात्मत्वदर्जनाम्।\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

**Dharma in the Darśanas**

Darśana means philosophy in general. Of the various approaches to philosophy, ie, metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, etc, it is the ethical approach that links philosophy with man in this society. Generally, this ethical approach is called dharmamīmāṁsā in Sanskrit. Most of the Indian philosophical systems discuss the concept of Dharma in its wider sense. As metaphysics forms the theoretical part of philosophy, ethics is the practical aspect of those theories. It tries to analyse metaphysics through a study of its function in human life. It also looks forward to a better practical life highlighting its moral values. Through this response, philosophy becomes a guidance in one’s practical life and also a reforming factor in society. All the philosophical systems of India discuss the concept of Dharma. Each system gives different interpretations of Dharma. But they are complementary to each other.
Dharma in Buddhism

We analyse the theories of the Dharma of the Buddhists and of the Jain schools, to mention where these differ from the dharma of the orthodox schools described in the main above. Buddhism had such far-reaching social effects, we shall touch up on those characteristics of ‘Dhamma’, the Buddhist interpretation of Dharma, which have a practical bearing.

Buddhaghosha, gave the following analysis of Dhamma, 1) The Doctrine as a verbal, or literary composition to be learnt and mastered. 2) Condition or cause. This is illustrated by the quotation: Dharma-analysis is knowledge concerning conditions and the piṭka phrase: Investigation of Dhamma is insight into cause. 3) Right or righteousness. 4) Phenomenon. The Pali word here used to mean non-entity, non-substrate, non-soulness. It means that a mental object, a state of mind is a phenomenon. 56

This meant that insight into Dhamma means ‘the discernment of an eternal, orderly, conditioned sequence of things, the which, when thoroughly grasped, swept out of a man’s thoughts all speculation on the beginning of life or its ultimate end or on its present nature as entity of soul’. 57 Dharma is considered as theory of non-soul as the law of causation, as moral law, as ideal, as cosmic order, as doctrine, etc.
For practical purposes the Dhamma is defined as the Noble eight fold path: 1) Right comprehension 2) right resolutions or aspirations 3) right speech 4) right acts 5) right way of earning a livelihood 6) right efforts 7) right thoughts and 8) right state of a peaceful mind or right rapture.

Perhaps the attitude to Dharma of the ordinary Buddhist is expressed best in the following verses: Let a man’s pleasure be the Dharma, let him know how to inquire into the Dharma, let him delight in the Dharma, let him stand fast in Dharma, let him not rise any dispute that pollutes the Dharma, and let him spend his time in pondering on the well spoken truths of the Dharma. And in a more sublime setting it shines from the following opening of a Sutra. All aspirations of the Bodhisattvas, countless as Ganges sands, are comprehended in the great aspiration-taking refuge in Dhamma.

Dharma in Jainism

The Jainas do not use the word Dharma in the sense of virtue or merit, or in the sense of moral law or ought, which is transcendental, and objective category. They use it in the peculiar sense of the imperceptible medium of motion of matter and souls. Dharma is an ontological reality. It is the part of the physical universe, it is the principle of motion.

Dharma is supersensible. It is devoid of sensible qualities, taste, colour, smell, touch, lightness and
heaviness. It is perceptible to the omniscient soul (kevalin) only. It is formless incorporeal (amūlya), inactive (niṣkriya) and eternal (lokākāṣa). It is not discrete. It is continuous (sprṣṭa) because its units of space are inseparable (ayutasiddhapradesa). Though it is co-extensive with mundane space, it is regarded as occupying innumerable units of space (asamkhyātapradesa) from the practical point of view. It is without any gaps. It is motionless. It is incapable of being moved. It cannot impel matter and souls to move (niṣpreraka). It cannot impart motion to them. They move by their very intrinsic nature. When they begin to move, it assists their movement.

Dharma is neutral (udāsīna), external (bahiranga) auxiliary cause (sahakārikāraṇa) of motion of matter and living beings which move on account of their own material cause. Dharma merely assists the notion of matter and living beings (gamanānugrahamakāra). It neither moves by itself nor generates motion in other thing. It gives scope (prasara) to motion (gati) of living beings (jiva) and non living bodies (pudgala). Dharma by its mere existence conditions motion without being its efficient cause, since it is devoid of movement. It is the fulcrum of motion without which it would not be possible. It is the natural cause (udāsīnahetu) of motion.
Sāṁkhya

Dharma is a special mood or attitude or functioning of the mind says one school of Sāṁkhyas. According to Sāṁkhya-kārika of Iśvarakṛṣṇa:

Yoga

Patañjali, in the Yogasūtra, uses the word to mean 'a thing gross or subtle like earth, water etc. and cit etc. having śānta, udita and avyapdeśya.' In Vyāsa bhāṣya of the above sūtra it is said that a power related to the inner controller of a thing is called Dharma. Vācaspatimisra explains: 'Those things which possess a particular capacity, faculty or power are called dharma and the ability is called dharma.'

In the first two of the astāngayoga-yama and niyama, it is said that ethical preparation is necessary for the practice of yoga. The practice of Ahimsā is an important path to attain salvation. Yoga says we should practise Ahimsā, satya, asteya, brahmacarya, aparigraham. The chief of them is Ahimsā.

Nyāya

Dharma and adharma are adṛśta or unseen for the Naiyāyikas. This means that meritorious act and sin leave behind impressions in the soul, which act as reactive causes and bring about appropriate consequences, in happiness and misery respectively. Dharma is also one among the 24 gunas of the Naiyāyikas.
Vaiśeṣika

The Vaiśeṣikāsutra of Kaṇāda begin with the statement that the objective of the work is to elaborate on dharma.\(^68\) They explain Dharma as \textit{Yatobhyudaya niśreyasa siddih sa dharmah}. That which is attained from an elevation and an unsurpassed state is dharma.\(^69\) Here abhyudaya means worldly well being and niśreyasa means the final emancipation, or Mokṣa. That teaching which explains this Dharma is the authoritative or valid source of knowledge for the Vaiśeṣikas.\(^70\)

Mimāṁsā

The Mimāṁsakas deal with this topic more elaborately. The Mimāṁsāsūtra begins with an enquiry regarding the nature of dharma,\(^71\) and defines it as that good which is determinable only by vedic commands. Jaimini in his Pūrvamimāṁsāsūtras uses the word in a very restricted sense: \textit{codanā lakṣanortho dharmah}.\(^72\) Dharma is the desirable goal or result that is indicated by injunctive (Vedic) passages. So, Dharma means the Vedic ritualistic actions leading to happiness here or hereafter. ‘Dharma is that which is indicated by the Vedic injunctions as conducive to the highest good or goal (attaining heaven etc). According to Mimāṁsānyāyaprakāśa, ‘dharma means any matter enjoined by the Veda with a view to attaining a useful purpose.’\(^73\) The alaukika, non-worldly, non-secular, means of obtaining what is desired and warding off what is not desired is Dharma for the
Mimāṃsakas. According to the Bhaṭṭa school of Mimāṃsa, only yajña sacrifices etc, constitute Dharma (yāgādireva dharmah).

Uttaramīmāṃsā

Vedānta philosophy also deals with the concept of Dharma in its own way. Sometimes, the word Dharma has been used in the Upaniṣads in the sense of apūrva of the pūrvamīmāṃsā system. This apūrva is nothing but the subtle effect of an action performed as per the directions of the scriptures, which will produce suitable results later. The Br U treats Dharma and Satya as equivalent. In the Ch U there is an important passage with bearing on the meaning of the word Dharma: ‘There are three branches of dharma; one is constituted by sacrifice, study and charity and the second is constituted by austerities, the third is the brahmacārin dwelling in the house of his teacher to study.’ The word ‘Dharma’ stands for duties of the āśrama. In rare cases, the word has also been used to denote the Ātman or the self; the KU passages anureṣa dharmah and evam dharmāḥ prthak paśyan show this meaning of Dharma. In the ācaryopadeśa of the TU, the word Dharma has been clearly used in the sense of obligatory works. The injunction dharmam cara (perform your ordained actions) shows the practical relevance of Dharma.
Dharma according to Śankarācārya

Śankarācārya defines Dharma as that ‘which is the means of abhyudaya and niṣreyasa and which is observed by people belonging to different Varṇas and āśramas’ Abhyudaya means the prosperities of the world and nisreyasa means Mokṣa or liberation. Thus Dharma stands for various duties and obligations of the four Varṇas and four āśramas including the observations of the cardinal virtues. These duties are generally known as Varṇāśramadharmas. Such duties, it was believed, were something appointed by one’s nature, and one’s nature depends on the proportion of these qualities present in him. Śankara believed that the Srutis and Smṛtis prescribe the duties only in accordance with these three qualities. According to Śankara, these Varṇāśramadharmas and Sādhāraṇa dharmas together constitute Dharma.

Śankara divides Dharma into two, viz., 1. Pravṛtti dharma, characterized by action, and 2. Nivṛtti dharma, characterized by knowledge and dispassion. Of these, nivṛtti is the direct means of Mokṣa and pravṛtti leads to the purity of the mind and enables one finally to enter the path of nivṛtti. In the words of Śankara himself, ‘the Dharma of action, though it brings prosperity etc, if performed as worship of God and in a disinterested frame of mind, will lead one to purity of mind, and it is a means of Mokṣa only in so far as it makes one eligible for Jñānaniṣṭha and is the cause of the dawn of knowledge’.
Dharma in Rāmāyaṇa

God descends to this mortal world to uphold the Dharma as and when there is decay in Dharma and the rise of Adharma. He took the form of Śri Rāma and lived like an ordinary man followed the human dharmas, so that people could follow his path. Śri Rāma was acclaimed as the personification of Dharma: Rāmo vigrahavān dharmah. The Ādikāvyya exhibits various dharmas at different places. In the first canto itself, sage Nārada introduces Śri Rāma as the best of human beings knowing all Dharmas (dharmajñāḥ and protector of his own Dharma.)

Tārā, wife of Bālī, even at the time of highest grief, seeing Śri Rāma, who had just killed her husband, praises Śri Rāma as an Uttama Dhārmika, the best among the followers of Dharma. Lakṣmaṇa engaged in a long-drawn battle with Indrajit at Nikumbhilā shoots an arrow, praising the Dharma of Śri Rāma which kills Indrajith instantly.

Rāma’s life is a very good example of the practice of Dharma. To speak truth and to keep the promise given under all circumstances is the keynote of Dharma in the Rāmāyaṇa. No hardship is too great, no sacrifice is too great, when compared to the fulfilment of this Dharma. In his life Rāma followed the principles of dharmic life as a son, husband, brother, ruler, etc.

Rāma had the full power and strength to vanquish Daśaratha or anybody else and anoint himself as the king. Yet
he did not do it since he was afraid of adharma. To please his father and help him keep up his promise to Kaikeyi, he was prepared to jump into fire or consume deadly poison or drown himself in the ocean. He was ready to give up his life for Sītā or even Lakṣmaṇa, but would never break the promise once made.

Rāma set up new norms of Dharma by accepting the hospitality of Guha and Śabari and forcing Vibhiṣaṇa to conduct the last rites of Rāvaṇa.

**Dharma in the Mahābhārata**

Right from very ancient times, Dharma has been accepted as an ideal of human life and has accordingly fascinated and inspired the people. Almost all the systems of Indian philosophy and the scriptures of India extol the virtues of life led as per Dharma. The MB of Vyāsa is replete with various instances of Dharma. The epic gives the wisest practical advice and guidance on righteous living, i.e., living as per the principles of Dharma. The MB brings out the deepest experience of man in both the worldly and spiritual fields of life. The B G, the most practical text on Dharma, appears in the MB.

In the narration of the history of Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, Dharma is brought out in many ways, in particular, the advice given by Bhiṣma to Dharmaputra and Vidura’s advice. The counsels are useful for all people of all countries at all times to
lead a good life. The MB is simultaneously an Arthaśāstra, Dharmaśāstra, Kāmaśāstra and Mokṣaśāstra.\[^{93}\]

In fact, it has been called as ‘fifth veda’ of the material, spiritual, physical and metaphysical life of the Indian masses.

**Rājadharmā**

Bhīṣma’s message to Dharmaputra in the Śānti Parva expounds the principles of Rājadharmā as should be learnt by the kings or rulers eager to be really enlightened about statecraft. These principles of Rājadharmā are very relevant for the present rules also. Bhīṣma also continues his sermons in two other sections of the ŚāntiParva and in the Anuśāsana Parva. These two parvas are scintillating examples of didactic literature, saturated with the exhortations of Bhīṣma on philosophy, religion, ethics, law, statecraft and the art of war, in the form of dialogues and moral stories. In the Śānti Parva, there is a well-considered attempt to highlight the form and objectives of an ideal state. In the conversation between Bhīṣma and Dharmaputra, Bhīṣma postulates the do’s and don’ts of a king for the welfare of the people. Bhīṣma points out that the life of a King is a mission and that he must always remind himself that he happens to be a king only for fulfilling his obligations towards society and not for deriving worldly pleasures. In fact he should always subordinate his own interests to the interests of his subjects. As a matter of fact, the king should treat his subjects as his own family without any
bias and should not avoid punishing even the offences committed by his own sons and favourite persons. Bhīṣma says that a king should be a seeker of good (śreya) and not the pleasurable (preya). He should be truthful, trustworthy, and virtuous. He should be conscientious and simple, hospitable and merciful, yet pragmatic and unbiased. Above all, a king should be the follower of Ahimsā in spirit. A king following the principles of Rājadharma does not despise the weak, slight the enemies, hate any one, do any work in haste and procrastinate.

**Righteousness in life**

In the MB, Dharma has been taken as a source of Artha and Kāma. This is because the ways of Dharma are inscrutable. For, the best way for the people is to follow the right people, as it is said: *Dharmasya tatvam nihitam guhāyām mahājano yena gatah sa panthā.*

Whenever a person is faced with opposing pulls due to strong values, the problem that arises is to determine their relative strength and to take decisions in that context. In resolving such disputes and conflicts, the motives and intentions have also to be taken into account. Fortunately, the MB deals with Dharma in all its ramifications and allows flexibility under special situations.

When Yudhiṣṭhira asked Bhīṣma about the indications of the good and the wicked, the reply of Bhīṣma spells out the nature of true righteousness in ordinary life. All the various
dharmas or duties of different types of people in all walks of life are enumerated in the epic at various places.

Another important context in the MB dealing with the Dharma concept is the yakṣapraśna in the Aranya parva. It is a dialogue in the form of questions and answers between a yakṣa and Dharmaputra, dealing with Dharma as related to family, society and individuals.

**State Administration**

Nārada asked more than 100 questions to King Yudhiṣṭhira. Nārada’s questions are still substantially relevant in the present-day democratic setup. In the questions, Nārada asked whether the farmers and other poor people were happy in his kingdom and whether all the members of the forces and other employees were getting their salary regularly. Nārada emphasized the need specially for sound financial advice. He also cautioned Yudhiṣṭhira against corruption. In fact, Nārada in the MB has a view about the proper welfare state where the poor and the weak would be cared for. Sanatsujātiya appears in the Udyogaparva of the MB, and which is the greatest storehouse of knowledge on various aspects of Dharma.

**Atithi dharma**

The guest has to be honoured like a god. This is the longstanding tradition highlighted in this great epic. According to the MB, even an enemy is not to be denied hospitality.
Practice of Atithi Dharma is thus an integral part of a household.

The MB extols the virtues of Ahimsā. Ahimsā is the highest Dharma according to the MB. It is also the highest truth from which all dharmas proceed.

The MB thus provides a universal message on Dharma for all people of the world. It loudly proclaims that even at the cost of life should Dharma be observed.

It is the message of the MB. One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one’s own self. The essence of the whole story of the MB is that only Dharma brings prosperity. The author of the epic expresses his feelings ‘Lifting up my arms, I proclaim but alas, none listens to me. Dharma only brings prosperity and fulfilment of desires. O men, why do ye not avail it?’

Dharma in the Bhagavad Gītā

In the B G, the term Dharma is used in a more definite and clear sense. Dharma is righteousness, the basis of all puruṣārthas. It is one’s duty ordained by the scriptures as per one’s Varna and āśrama, by properly performing which man attains both well-being in this world (abhyudaya) and highest
good (niśreyasa). The term Dharma has been used in various senses in the B G. Sometimes it has been used as synonymous with ātmajñāna or with karmayoga.

Lord Kṛṣṇa states strongly in the B G that he incarnates in all ages to establish dharma. This statement proves that Dharma is the key concept in the B G. When Kṛṣṇa says sarvadharmān parityajya giving up all the dharmas and come to my shelter alone, he means thereby all the worldly attachments and functions of sense organs. In dharma kṣetra and dharma yuddha the word Dharma is used in the sense of truth. Performing one’s own duty is the highest Dharma according to the B G.

Svadharme nidhanam śreyah parādharmobhayāvahah. Once a person has adopted a particular profession, it is necessary for him to adhere to the duty enjoined upon that profession even at the cost of his life. One should prefer death, while performing one’s own Dharma, to a change of professional duty. Not only this, but the opportunity of laying down one’s life while performing one’s duty is regarded as a golden chance for attaining liberation. This opportunity, particularly the kṣatriya’s opportunity of dying on the field, is considered very rare and is regarded as equivalent to the opportunity of entering open gates of heaven, as it were. Thus, when king Dhṛtarāṣṭra refers to the battle field as the field of Dharma, he has in mind this background of the duty of courting death as
the highest duty of a kṣatriya. Deviation from Dharma is regarded as the most hateful and heinous crime. In the first chapter Arjuna is perturbed, especially because war leads to the massacre of man, and the mass killing of men leads to the corruption of women, which would ultimately result in the destruction of all the ancient Dharmas. The importance of duty is stressed throughout the dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in this great treatise of ethics and philosophy.

Arjuna is facing a dharmic dilemma in the B G. He is described as Dharmasammūḍha cetah and it declares that dharmyāt hi yuddhāt śreyonyat kṣatriyasya na vidyate.

**Dharma in the Purāṇas**

Dharma or duty forms the basis of purānic ethics, and it embraces all those factors which contribute to the progress and well-being of the individual, society and the world at large. These factors include both the possession of virtues (guṇas) and the proper discharge of one’s duty (karma). The purāṇas recognize two types of dharma: Sādhāraṇa Dharma and Viśeṣa Dharma. The latter is also known a svadharma.

In this world, the life of different types and grades of creation are mutually linked up. The factor contributing to the progress and welfare of one life does and should contribute to the well-being of another life also. Individual happiness, to be real and lasting, should make for the happiness of the lives around that individual. Otherwise, it will turnout to be unreal,
impermanent, and painful in its result. The individual, who forms an integral part of human society, owes a duty to himself and to those around him. Hence, in the interest of the society, he must raise himself to the fullest stature. It is both an individual and social duty. Between individual and social duties, there is no conflict.

Dharma contributes to the preservation, progress and welfare of the society, and in a wider sense, of the whole world. In the scheme of life’s eternal values (puruṣārthas), Dharma occupies the premier and basic position. The waning strength and stability of Dharma in the four yugas is graphically depicted by representing it as a majestic bull, which stood firm on its four legs in the golden age of the world (Kṛtayuga) and lost one each of its legs in the succeeding two yugas, Treta and Dwāpara, to stand tottering on a single leg during the present Kali yuga.¹⁰⁷

The purāṇas have made a successful attempt at reconciling Sādhāraṇa Dharma with Svadharma. ‘The former includes the possession of certain humanizing virtues and actions based thereon, which conduce to the welfare of the entire creation. The latter is a practical application of the former with in a particular sphere by an individual belonging to a class characterized by certain prominent qualities’.¹⁰⁸ The scheme of Varna and āśrama dharmas, which the purāṇas unanimously advocate, is based upon the duties of the individuals of a class
and has as its aim the efficiency, welfare, smooth working and material and spiritual welfare of the society.

The nature of Sādhāraṇa Dharma is eternal and its scope is universal. The purāṇas mention Ahimsā, Kṣama, Indriyanigraha, Dama, Dayā, Dāna, Śauca, Satya, Tapas, and Jñāna as Sādhāraṇa dharmas. Dhṛti and Akrodha mentioned in other purāṇas are only aspects of Satya. Jñāna comprehends Vidyā, Tapas includes Brahmacarya, Dhyāna, Ijya and Devapūja, Priyavādita, Apaiśunyam, Alobha and Anasūya are comprehended in Ahimsā, which is mentioned in the purāṇas.

Ahimsā is declared as the Dharma par excellence. It comprehends all the other dharmas. Kṣama, Dayā, Śauca and Satya, which result in the eschewing of injury to others, are rooted in Ahimsā. It is based on the fundamental conception that the lives in the world, from the highest to the lowest, are mutually linked up. The ten varieties of injury enumerated in AP include not only the causing of different grades of physical pain, but also backbiting, obstructing another’s good, and betrayal of a trust. All beings alike, whether man or mosquito, must be treated with equal kindness, for they all belong to the same family of creation. Those who inflict pain are reborn with defective faculties. One who neither kills nor causes killing nor approves of it attains bliss and divinity. He best pleases God. Ahimsā rests on the practice of virtues.
like Daya and the avoidance of Kāma and Krodha, since the vices have their root in the absence of self-control.

The ethics of Ahimsā is expressed in the significant expression of the PP: ‘Do not do unto others, what you do not desire for yourself’.\(^{115}\) Behind this ethics lies the knowledge of Ātman as immanent in all creatures. This is Atmajñāna and one who possesses it will not injure other creatures. It leads to the highest bliss.

Another aspect of Dharma is Satya. Its greatness is illustrated in the purāṇas through such stories as of Hariscandra and Rukmāṅgada. Satya is the highest Dharma. The world is supported on it.\(^{116}\) It is the basis of the puruṣārthas and the source of happiness and bliss. Asatya, the opposite of satya, is considered as sin. The VP condemns even a palatable lie. ‘What conduces to the welfare of the creatures is satya’, says the AP.\(^{117}\) Further commenting on its scope, it says, ‘One should speak what is true and what is agreeable. But one should avoid an unpalatable truth and a palatable lie. This is the eternal law’.\(^{118}\) All laws of nature (Rta) are expressions of truth and work with perfect accuracy and changelessness. Satya contributes to the welfare and harmony of society as a whole. It engenders mutual trust and love, and binds the individuals together.

Śauca (purity) is another indispensable socio-ethical virtue. It ensures a healthy life. Its external and internal aspects
which are mutually complementary are mentioned in the AP. The former is achieved through cleansing with water and other materials and the latter through cleansing the mind of its impurities.\textsuperscript{119} The evil tendencies like kāma, krodha, etc, are to be cleansed through the acquisition of their opposites like vairāgya and kṣama. These are the sāttvika qualities making for enlightenment and have to be developed by a system of discipline consisting of dama, śama and tapas. The AP speaks of the mental, vocal and physical aspects of tapas in the form of eschewing desires, chanting prayers and worshipping God.\textsuperscript{120} Good thoughts and actions purify the mind. It helps to develop Bhakti, and its purifying and sublimating power is specially stressed in the purāṇas like Viṣṇu and Bhāgavata. It is declared as the highest dharma, the best way of pleasing the lord.\textsuperscript{121} Pure mind and its resultant, true speech, lead to heaven.\textsuperscript{122} A person pure in mind will not do anything harmful to others. Thus the mind is the source of all purity. Purity is to be observed not only for ourselves but also for the sake of others around us. It is a social virtue.

Dāna is another aspect of Dharma stressed in the purāṇas. It is a social duty based on the ethical virtues of dayā, tyāga, ārjava, and samata. Its greatness is illustrated through such stories as those of Śibi, Karṇa and Dadhici. The ethics of dāna consists in the fact that it benefits both the giver and the receiver. While it humanizes and sublimates the former, it
materially benefits the latter and conduces to contentment and harmony in society allowing for a fair distribution of riches. The PP classifies dāna into four types: 1) Nitya:- consisting in the daily offering of gifts to the deserving in a spirit of duty without expecting any reward; 2) Naimittika:- given to the learned on special occasions for expiating sins; 3) Kāmya:- what is offered for obtaining material prosperity in the form of wealth and progeny, and 4) Vimala:- the fourth and the best, so called because it is pure, being given to the enlightened in a spirit of dedication to the lord. In a wider sense, dāna includes the social beneficial acts like digging wells, tanks, and canals. Constructing parks, hospitals, and temples are also known as Purtha. Ātithya consisting in the gift of food is dāna par excellence.\textsuperscript{123} The Br P emphatically declares that the purpose of wealth is proper distribution among the needy. Dāna is practical ethics which promotes peace and harmony in society by favouring economic equilibrium.\textsuperscript{124}

Sadhāraṇa Dharma forms the basis of Svadharma and prescribes the limit within which the latter is to be observed. This leads to a peaceful society where ethics and morality take an important role. ‘Non-appropriation is a common duty. A person, on whom religious sacrifice is ordained, should not, in performing it, appropriate another’s property. The individual of a specific community, by doing his prescribed duties, serves not only the community but other communities also, according
to their needs and thus serves the whole society. Through specific duties each class should serve the common good. The ethics of Svadharma does not countenance anti-social acts, for, to cause damage to society is to lower one’s own self.”

Svadharma as comprehended in the scheme of Varṇa and āśrama-dharma holds a prominent place in purāṇic ethics. The purpose of this scheme was the creation of maximum efficiency, progress, harmony and welfare of the society. Each class, as a rule, had to strive after maximum efficiency in discharging its duties to other classes. Thus each part of the social machinery was considered as important as any other, and all were expected to work smoothly helping one another and having in view the welfare of the whole society.

The four Varṇas could successfully discharge their functions only if they possessed certain universal sympathy, forbearance, control of the senses, truthfulness, wisdom, and knowledge of the Ātman. The VP describes universal friendship and objective equanimity as the Brāhmaṇa’s wealth. The Purāṇas describe study and teaching of Vedas, performing and guiding sacrifice, and giving and receiving gifts as the duties of Brāhmaṇas. Vedic study, sacrifice and charity are also wielding arms and protecting the earth by helping the good and chastising the wicked, which are the specific duties of the Kṣatriyas. The specific duties of Vaiśyas are agriculture, cattle-rearing and trade.
Humanity characterizes the Śūdras as the working group in the society. Then the Brāhmaṇa is the custodian of spiritual wisdom, the Kṣatriya of physical power, the Vaiśya of economic well-being and the Śūdra of industry and fine arts. The Br P mentions universal sympathy, patience, humanity, truthfulness, purity, non-injury, sweet speech, friendship, patience, freedom from jealousy and avarice as the virtues to be developed by all the Varnas. The ethics of Varna Dharma lies in that each Varna being a limb of the society, should fulfil its specific duty to the best of its capacity in order secure maximum progress, harmony and welfare in the society.

The āśrama dharma are specific duties to be performed by the aspirant after spiritual evolution within specific stages in his life. During these stages like Brahmacarya etc, one has to do the duties of a student, householder, recluse and ascetic.

Brahmacarya is the period of study and discipline. During this stage, the student has to devote himself to Vedic study caring little for physical comforts. ‘He must serve the Guru, and his life should be characterized by purity, simplicity, agility, moderation and endurance’. By this the mind becomes alert and the body healthy and strong to shoulder the responsibilities of the next stage.

Gṛhaśṭhāsrama, householdership, is the most vital stage in life, as it offers the largest scope for service and sacrifice. The gṛhaśthas have to perform the five daily sacrifices or
pañcamahāyajñas for the satisfaction of all creatures because all āśramas flow to rest in the householder. He should treat the whole world with love. The Purāṇas describe sacrifices to the ancestors. All major purāṇas like AP, Br P, Vy P, Nārada Purāṇa, Markaṇḍeya purāṇa, etc, explain the importance, method, varieties and fruits of the Srāddhas.

Vānaprastha or secluded life in the forest is a stage preparatory to the final stage of renunciation. His life is characterized by severe discipline in matters of food, dress, and other physical comforts. The aspirant’s fare consists of leaves, roots and fruits. The hair is left to grow. The bare ground serves as bed. Skin and kuśa grass serve as clothing. Heat and cold should not affect him. He has to bathe thrice a day, has to worship his favourite god and has to study and observe penance with perfect equanimity.\textsuperscript{134}

The fourth stage is sanyāsa. Detachment from worldly objects entitles one to enter this stage. The sanyāsin has to observe non-injury in thought, word, and deed.\textsuperscript{135} The PP speaks of karma-sanyāsins, veda-sanyāsins, and jñāna-sanyāsins. The sanyāsin subsists on leaves and leads a life of peace, silence, and celibacy, not expecting any reward and caring neither for life nor death.\textsuperscript{136}

The scheme of the āśramas is based on the ethical principle that man should discharge his duties fully before
aspiring for liberation from the bonds of the flesh and the world.

The theory of Karma plays an important and fundamental role in Purānic ethics. Any action, good, bad or indifferent, yields its corresponding fruit. The joys and sorrows of creatures in this life are predestined and determined by the nature of karma performed in a previous birth. Even the nature of the bodies taken by the jiva is determined by the actions of a previous birth. Though karma plays a vital part in determining the life here, man is given the freedom to better his life here by doing good deeds, for which he is given the discriminative power. This freedom of the individual is emphasized in the purāṇas. This has an ethical value as it gives man an incentive to overcome fatalism and do good deeds. The Purāṇas mention a number of hells to which sinners go according to the nature of their sins. Karma is an ethical force which tends to improve the world by bringing its spiritual values to perfection.

Purānic ethics is intensely practical and utilitarian. It takes into consideration the welfare of society as a whole and prescribes the caste and customary duties for the individual.

**The sources of Dharma**

Dharma is one of the key concepts in Indian thought and it is essential to discuss the sources of Dharma. Dharma is theoretically derived from and determined by the eternal Vedas. The acceptance of Vedic authority was a major criterion
for distinguishing heterodox religious and social systems in India. The GDS says that ‘the Veda is the source of dharma and the tradition and practice of those who know it are other sources’.\textsuperscript{137} So ADS says that the authority (for the Dahrma) is the consensus of those that know dharma and the Vedas.\textsuperscript{138} VDS also says the same.\textsuperscript{139} The MB describes truth, the wholesome custom with applicability (upāya) as the source of dharma.\textsuperscript{140}

The four main sources of dharma mentioned in our ancient texts are, Śruti, Smṛti, Sadācāra and Ātmatuṣṭi. The Vedas are considered as the authority for dharma. It is surprising to find that the Vedic texts have very little to offer on dharma in the sense of the scope of social regulation as offered in the dharma sāstras or of the preservation of the philosophical interpretations of the basis of the social system. The formulation of an effective social code and its justification appear subsequent to the Vedic age.\textsuperscript{141}

According to Manusmṛti,

\begin{quote}
वेदोऽखिलो धर्ममूर्तं स्मृतिशीलं च तद्विदाम्
आचारश्रेष्ठ साधृणां आत्मनस्तुष्टिरेत् च.
\end{quote}\textsuperscript{142}

Yājñavalkya declares the sources of dharma in a similar strain: ‘The Veda, traditional lore, the usage of good men, what is agreeable to one’s self and desire born of due deliberation—this is traditionally recognized as the source of dharma.’\textsuperscript{143}
The Vedas are the authoritative texts discussing the nature of Dharma (धर्मजिज्ञासयमानानाम प्रमाणम परामान श्रुतिः). Smṛti comes next to Śruti, while discussing the sources of dharma. Smṛti was the effective locus of dharma. According to the Smṛtikārās like Manu, Boudhāyana, Gautama and Vasiṣṭa, Smṛti comes next to Śruti. It was said that rules which had previously existed only in memory or Smṛti now came to be recorded in works known as Smṛtis. The third source of dharma is Sadācāra or good customs. Manu characterizes dharma as that which is followed by those well-versed in the tradition and accepted wholeheartedly by good men, and enunciates the identity of tradition and righteousness by saying that custom handed down from time immemorial is called the conduct of the virtuous man. The good men who knew the Vedas and were devoid of corrupting passions, were able to perform good custom.

The fourth source of dharma is Ātmatuṣṭi or self-satisfaction. 'Doing what pleases one seems to point to reason and conscience, but it was in fact closely allied with sadācāra in that only behaviour which pleased or satisfied in such a manner as to be consistent with the approved regulations of the communities, moral, social and religious leadership was encompassed, as provided in the agency for employing the criterion of 'self-satisfaction'. Sadācāra and Ātmatuṣṭi were equally affirmed to be only extensions of the Vedas. Sadācāra was listed as the
tertiary source, but in combination with Ātmatuṣṭi. Provisions concerning who was authorised to approve behaviour, were actually the primary effective source of Dharma.\textsuperscript{147} This was true both for the legitimation of the original dharma works and for such modifications as subsequently transpired.\textsuperscript{148}

According to Vasiṣṭa, the Vedas and the Śrītis are more important than the conduct of the noble man, which should be relied upon only in their absence.\textsuperscript{149} The first three sources have been mentioned by Yājñavalkya, who refers to the desire, born of proper intention as the fourth source,\textsuperscript{150} (\textit{samyak sankalpaja kāmaha}).

**Classification of Dharma**

Dharma is the characteristic feature of man and it has to be developed to achieve manhood. There is a well-known saying which means 'Food, sleep, fear and sex are common to both animals and human beings. But what distinguishes man from animals is Dharma.'\textsuperscript{151} Thus, man without dharma would be just like a lower animal. Dharma plays a very important role in distinguishing human beings from animals.

It is difficult to understand the meaning and scope of Dharma because it is broad in scope and minute in application. Dharma has been classified in more than one way. Thus on the basis of its sources, it has been classified under the heads of Śrauta (Vedic Dharma), Śmārta (Dharma based on Śrītis), and Śiṣṭacāra (the conduct of noble men).\textsuperscript{152} At another place the
classification of Dharma is into Deśa-dharma (dharma for particular country or place), Jāti dharma (dharma for a particular caste or class) and Kula dharma (dharma or the tradition belonging to one’s own family).\textsuperscript{153} A more comprehensive classification of Dharma is given in the Mitākṣara of Yājñavalkya. According to him dharma is six-fold.\textsuperscript{154}

It is obvious from the above-mentioned account that the moral standard varies in accordance with persons, circumstances, place and time. It can be classified under two heads: Sāmānya or Sādhrāna or niyta dharma, i.e. the universal code of morality, and Viṣiṣṭa dharma, i.e., the specific moral code. E.g: 1. Varnadharma (the code of conduct for different Varnas). 2. Āśramadharma (the code of conduct for different Āśramas). 3. Guṇadharma (moral code, prescribed for a particular office), 4. Naimittikadharma (expiatory and occasional duties) and 5. Yugadharma (code for the different ages).

Sādhrāna Dharma (Universal moral code)

Sādhrāna dharma means the moral code common to all humanity. This universal code consists of the moral virtues, to be observed by everybody, to whatever caste or creed he or she may belong. The value of these qualities is recognized and emphasized by all religions. Manu defines the Sādhrāna dharma as ‘Ahimsā (non-violence), Satya (Truthfulness),
Asteya (not coveting the property of others), Śouca (Purity) and Dama or Indriya nigraha (control of senses) which are, in brief, the common dharma for all.¹⁵⁵

Satya is one of the fundamental essentials of moral life. It is the highest duty and there is nothing higher than this.¹⁵⁶ It is the basis of everything,¹⁵⁷ and it leads to prosperity.¹⁵⁸ Its importance lies in the belief that it purifies the mind.¹⁵⁹ Gautama allows falsehood for the sake of saving a good man’s life and prohibits its employment for the sake of a wicked person.¹⁶⁰ In his opinion, an infant, old man, idiot, intoxicated, insane, angry and frightened persons are not associated with sin even if they speak a lie.¹⁶¹ Manu favours the sweet truth and is against the pleasing untruth.¹⁶² To be brief, truth under all circumstances is preferable to falsehood, but it is permissible to indulge in falsehood under some circumstances.

Ahimsā, as understood by the ancient Indians, meant the practice of love, which consists in not hurting others by thought, word or act. Having good feeling for others also comes under its connotation. Some other moral virtues are also considered under Sādhāraṇa dharma. Brahmacarya (celibacy) has been explained as discipline and control over sense organs. By leading the life of celibacy, self-discipline and continence, with dedication to higher pursuits, one overcomes all difficulties.¹⁶³ Dama or Indriyanigraha (control over the sense organs) is also a part of dharma. The B G explains the attributes
of the Stīta prajñā and asserts that control over the sense is essential for self-control. In the KU, there is the comparison of human body to a ratha (chariot) and sensory organs to horses of the chariot and buddhi to the reins. One who does not control these horses cannot be free from bondage of birth and death. Kṣama (forgiveness) specially in the persons possessing power, is praiseworthy. In the MB, Yudhiṣṭhira explains: 'The universe is held together because of forgiveness. He is indeed a wise man, who forgives even those who insult, rebuke and beat him. One possessed of Kṣama attains Brahman. He receives honours here and acquires a state of blessedness hereafter. Hence, it is the highest virtue and highest dharma.'

The great Epic MB offers some other classification of Sādhāraṇa Dharma. Regard for mother, father and preceptor is an important duty of everyone. By disregarding these persons, one becomes a greatest sinner. Their worship, it is believed, helps one in gaining fame here, and the desired lokas, hereafter. Sila (good behaviour) consists in abstention from animosity in thought, word and deed, anugraha (compassion), and dāna (donation), madhura vacana (agreeable speech) helps one to be respectable. Śaraṇāgata rakṣa (protecting a suppliant) has been prescribed for kings as well as commoners. Atithi seva (hospitality towards a guest) has been prescribed as a social duty.
The GDS, the MS, the Arthaśāstra of Kautilya and the Bh P also mention these virtues. According to Manu,

\[ \text{धृतिक्षम दमोःस्तेयं शोधामिद्विनिग्रहः।} \\
\text{धीविद्या सत्यमक्रोधोऽदशकं धर्ममल्लक्षणम्।} \]

Viśiṣṭa Dharma

Viśiṣṭa dharma stands for the dharma, specifically laid down for different persons or groups of persons under different circumstances.

Varṇa Dharma (injunctions prescribed for the members of different Varṇas)

In its social manifestation, dharma is generally expressed as Varṇa dharma. W. Norman Brown writes, 'The duty (dharma) of the individual person is the function of his group, and his group membership is the function of his birth.' Dharma as caste duties involved different duties for the various castes. Society was structured upon an intricate system of interrelated obligations of various social groups. The Hindu society consisted of four castes or Varṇas such as Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra. This division is mentioned in the Puruṣasūkta of RV. The Brāhmaṇa was in his mouth, the Kṣatriya was made from his two arms, his two thighs became the Vaiśya; the Śūdra was born from his two feet.

According to the B G, specific duties of the four Varṇas have been fixed in accordance with their inherent nature. 'The
fourfold caste has been created by me according to the
differentiation of guṇa and karma; though I am the author
thereof, know me as non-doer and immutable',\textsuperscript{173} said Lord
Kṛṣṇa.

**Universality of the four Varnas**

The theory of Varnas, in its wider sense, was a theory not
applying to Hindu society exclusively, but to human society
generally. In other words, Varna contains a universal element.
The division into four classes presents the simplest all-inclusive
division of society into groups with special functions in the
organic whole. The four classes of classification are formal
among the Iranians and many ancient cultures.\textsuperscript{174} These four
types of people, like the priestly class, intellectual group,
warriors, labourers have had their own duties in a well
organized society.

**Brāhmaṇas**

They are sātvik in character, and the guṇas of rajas and
thamas are subsidiaries. In the MB, the duties of the Varnas are
enumerated as follows: they should observe fasts, attend
religious discourses, follow the injunctions of the Vedas, have
control over their sense organs, devote themselves to study,
teach others, accept gifts, practise penance, and be
compassionate.\textsuperscript{175} Kṛṣṇa says in the B G: ‘Serenity, self-
restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness and also uprightness,
wisdom, knowledge, realization, belief in God, are the duties of the Brâhmaṇas.'

**Kṣatriyas**

The Kṣatriyas are the rajas-dominated people, with some satva guṇa and tamoguṇa. According to the B G, ‘The inherent natural qualifications of the Kṣatriyas are bravery, brilliance, courage, not running away from the battle, generosity, and exercising authority (over subject people)’. According to Vidura, a Kṣatriya goes to heaven by studying the Vedas, protecting the subjects, performing sacrifices and dying in the battlefield.

**Vaiśyas**

Our scriptures connect the duties of the Vaiśyas with agriculture, honest trade and cattle rearing. In the B G, ‘Kṛṣi (agriculture), gorakṣa (rearing of cattle) and vāṇijya (trade) are the inherently natural duties of a Vaiśya’. Pouring of libations on the sacred fire, making gifts, practising righteousness, leading a peaceful life, practising self-restraint, being hospitable towards Brâhmaṇas and study have been regarded as their eternal duties.

**Śūdra**

The fourth class of the Varna system is that of the Śūdras. In accordance with their position, the most important duty of Śūdras consisted in attending upon the higher Varṇas.
Manusmṛti explains the duty of Śūdras thus: ‘The Lord prescribes one karma only to Śūdras, to serve ungrudgingly these castes’. Moral virtues like truthfulness control over the sense organs, hospitality towards others and righteous conduct are also prescribed for them.

These were in brief, the specific duties of the four Varnas. The MB emphatically says that one should do these ordained duties properly and sincerely because it earns glory and leads to heaven. Kṛṣṇa says in the B G ‘One’s own dharma, even if defective, is better than the dharma of others’. Manu also holds the same view. He says, ‘It is better that one should live by doing the vile works allotted to his own caste than embrace the vocation of superior caste for livelihood; living by adopting the vocation of another caste, one becomes degraded the very day’.

But an important thing in the Varna system was that it was constructed according to the quality and action of the people and by his actions, one can become a Brāhmaṇa or Śūdra. Manu strongly says that ‘the Brāhmaṇa, by not having studied the Vedas, becomes a Śūdra’, and a Śūdra becomes a Brāhmaṇa by his conduct. By birth everyone is a Śūdra. By Samskāra he becomes a Brāhmaṇa. Difference will be there in every society. Different functions are performed by different people. That is natural. There is no special privilege for any group. That is the basic concept of the Varna system.
Asrama Dharma

To the ancient Indian thinkers, a man's life was a kind of schooling or self-discipline. They enumerated four stages of life known as Āśramas. The scheme of the four-fold Āśramas or stages of life is a unique contribution of India to the thought of the ancient world. The four āśramas are Brahmacarya, Gārhastya, Vānaprastha and Sanyāsa. They are connected with the four-fold Puruṣārthas. The Āśramas are ladders to reach the Brahma-loka. Proper observance of Āśrama-dharma helps one to overcome all sorts of calamities and difficulties and to attain salvation.

The Dharma śāstras abound with enumerations of the various duties and of descriptions of the social field of action of the four orders of life.

Brahmacarya-āśrama

This is the stage of a student, or the period of study and self-discipline. Brahmacarya means to live with the Guru and respect and attend on him. Devoted to his studies, he was expected to study the Vedas regularly and thoroughly, to observe celibacy and to perform Agnihotra to propitiate God Agni. The MB says that by all means, he should respect his guru, observe purity and avoid scents, etc. To beg alms also has been regarded as an important duty of a student. As a part of his studies he lives with his guru, who accepts him as a pupil on the day of his ‘Upanayana’. When he is invested with
the ‘holy thread’, he becomes twice-born or ‘dvija’, and gets the authority to study Veda. He must lead a life of continence and learn his duties as a member of the society and his duties in the great cosmic world, as conceived by the sages.

**Gṛhaustāśrama**

After Brahmacarya, one should pay Guru-dakṣiṇa (preceptor’s fee) and then marry to lead the life of a house-holder and a worldly man, which is considered as the most important of all Āśramas. He takes with lawful ceremonies a wife, he maintains a house and possessions and must discharge his duties to the best of his power. The MB establishes the superiority of this Āśrama over other Āśramas by calling it their foundation. In this stage, one has to realize the Trivarga consisting of Dharma, Artha and Kāma. Hospitality is the principal duty of the householder and the poor depend upon him for their maintenance. It is in this period that one could pay the debts that one owed to Gods, gurus, dependants and ancestors, by performing sacrifices, by studying the Vedas, by performing the rites of Śrāddha and by doing good to others. These are called five great sacrifices or pañcamahāyajñas, namely, Brahma yajña, Deva yajña, Bhūta yajña, Pitr yajña and Mānuṣa yajña or Nṛyajña, which should be daily performed by a householder. He should practise non-violence, truth and self-restraint. He should be compassionate towards others and should make gifts, in
accordance with his capacity (yathāśakti). The performance of the Agnihotra sacrifice is another duty.

**Vānaprasthāśrama**

In Vānaprasthāśrama, one has to lead the life of a forest-dweller. It is the life of contemplation and of gradual withdrawal from worldly ties. When his children get married, and no more specially want his attention, he retires, probably with his wife, to a quite place in the country to lead a more introverted life. According to the MB, after passing through the Brahmacarya and Grhasthāśrama, one should leave for the forest, with or without his wife, in his old age, when his hairs have become grey and when the grandchildren are born. There he should sleep on bare ground, worship gods, perform sacrifices, practise celibacy and self-control, forgiveness, purity, and eat roots and fruits. He should put on animal skin and barks of trees. One should strictly follow the rules prescribed for this stage, because thereby one destroys sins like fire that can burn anything.

A Vānaprastha should live upon grains, growing of their own accord. He should also train his body to bear heat and rain without any difficulty and to lead a completely restrained life.

**Sanyāsāśrama**

After the Vānaprastha, one was to enter the Sanyāsāśrama. In this stage he leads a life of complete renunciation. A sanyāsi should be free from anger (roṣa),
delusion and ignorance (moha) and should practise yama and 
niyama consisting of satya (truth), Ahimsā (non-violence), 
avasteya (non-stealing), Brahmacarya (discipline and celibacy), 
aparigraha (non-appropriation), śouca (purity), santoṣa 
(contentment), svādhyāya (study) and ivaśvarapraṇidhāna 
(devotion to god). Free from the attachments of all sorts, he 
should have a similar attitude towards pleasure and pain. A 
sanyāsin forgoes the three objects of life-Artha, Kāma and 
Dharma, to concentrate on Mokṣa alone. Regarding all with an 
equal eye, he must be a friend to all living beings. And being 
devoted, he must not ignore any living creature, human or 
brute, either in action, word or thought and renounce all 
attachments. He lives by begging food at a time when 
people have finished eating and he is continually roaming. 
Women can also enter this fourth order of life.

This system of Āśrama is not a mere theory, the duties 
mentioned for the four orders help man’s journey towards 
perfection. Thus the Varṇāśrama system is relevant in modern 
times also.

A distinction was made between Varṇāśramadhrama and 
Śādhāraṇadharma, or the duties of one’s caste and stage in life, 
and the universal or common duties of man, or differential 
norms, and those norms of behaviour were equally obligatory 
for all men. Primacy was given to the Varṇāśramadhharma. 
According to the B G, where there is a conflict between the
general duties like Ahimsā and the caste duties like fighting, the priority was given to the obligation of one's group. In the words of S. N. Dasgupta, 'in case of a conflict between the Sadhāraṇa dharma and Varnāśrama dharma, the latter should prevail'.

Gurudharma implied the code prescribed for a person, by virtue of his holding a particular office, e.g. Rājadharma, which deals with the duties and rules of conduct prescribed for the kings. A king, though vested with power and authority, should work within limits. He should be guided by dharma and should be well-versed with niti. The very importance of the king lies in his capacity and function of maintaining dharma. The king who maintains dharma is regarded as a God.

Naimittika dharma stands for the duties done with a special purpose, e.g, the expiatory rites, to be performed after behaving in some prohibited way.

Āpaddharma The code of behaviour prescribed for the times of distress differs from that of the ordinary peaceful times and has been called āpaddharma or the ethics of the abnormal times. Under such circumstances, social and political morality and customs can be suspended. Sometimes as apart of āpaddharma, the members of a Varna could adopt the duties and functions of another. Sometimes, Brāhmaṇas could take up arms and fight. Āpaddharma permitted one even to violate the rules of morality. In times of distress, self-preservation
became the highest law and justified all means. Āpaddharma avoids the chaos in the society and preserves the social order.

Yugadharma Ancient Indian thinkers believed in the existence of four ages, namely, Satya yuga (Kṛta yuga), Tretā yuga, Dvāpara yuga and Kali yuga. The moral code varied in accordance with the yuga. Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭīra in the MB: ‘Of one kind is the dharma of the Kṛta age, different it is in the Tretā age. Of one kind is it in the Dvāpara age and different is it in the Kali age. Dharma, in the different yugas, is laid down according to the powers of the human beings in the respective ages’. Manu holds the same view.

Distinctions of dhārma

1. Svadharma is the dharma of the individual which is manifesting itself under the limitations of his former life or lives, of his previous actions, hampering his present unfoldment and which is the inmost law of his being, pointing to his particular line of evolution as an individual member of a group. The svadharma determines the Varna according to the principle: ‘according to the social behaviour of a man his Varna is manifest’.

2. Varnadharma, the dharma of Varnas.

3. Jātidharma, the dharma of jāti or caste.
4. The dharma of a particular social group manifests under the limitations of the karma of that group, hampering the present full unfoldment. It is the inmost law of the group, pointing to its particular line of evolution by performance of its group-duties as a member of the whole family or group in society.

5. The dharma of a nation or a state. For instance, the dharma of a nation at some particular time is the fitting expression of the inner life of that nation in its social forms and its behaviour towards other nations.

6. Pravṛtti and Nivṛtti dharma.

This is an important type of distinction of dharma. Pravṛtti dharma is dharma which leads man to the pursuit of selfish worldly aims and consequently to deeper bondage and ignorance. Nivṛtti dharma is unselfishly performed work for the good of the whole. It is performed without the desire for consequences. The aim of both is pleasure or joy; but of the former, it is egoistic pleasure, of the latter it is pleasure in the harmonious working and in the working of the individuals and groups of society. Manu defines them thus: 'Acts which secure (the fulfilment of) wishes in this world are called pravṛtta, and acts performed without any desire (for a reward) preceded by the acquisition of true knowledge, are declared to be nivṛtta.'
The ingredients of Dharma

Various observers point out the varieties of meanings of the term Dharma which shows the complexity of this important concept. ‘Dharma is perhaps the most comprehensive concept in the entire history of the Hindu thought’ says V. P. Varma.\textsuperscript{211} Hajime Nakamura has given a list of fifteen senses in which the term Dharma is used.\textsuperscript{212} S.N. Dasgupta points out that the word ‘is used in very different senses in different schools and religious traditions of Indian thought’.\textsuperscript{213} K. V. Ramaswamy Ayengar writes: ‘Dharma is used in so many senses that it eludes definition.’ It stands for nature, intrinsic quality, civil and moral law, justice, virtue, merit, duty and morality.\textsuperscript{214} P. T. Raju, in a glossary of Indian philosophical terms, gives the following list: ‘Dharma—law, nature, rule, ideal, norm, quality, entity, truth, element and category’.\textsuperscript{215} Franklin Edgerton writes: ‘Dharma is propriety, socially approved conduct, in relation to one’s fellowmen or to other living beings. Law, social usage, morality and most of what we ordinarily mean by religion, all fall under this head’.\textsuperscript{216} P. S Sivaswami Aiyer says that the breadth of dharma, and the intermixture of religion and ethics involved is evidenced in the treatises on dharma, whose contents are virtually co-extensive with the entire sphere of human behaviour and whose numerous and vital prescripts ‘descend to the minutest details of life and
conduct. P. V Kane is the front rank of scholars of dharma as a far-reaching concept which embraces the whole human life.

**Dharma and Modern Scholars**

Due to the untranslatability and comprehensive importance of Dharma, it has been variously interpreted by modern scholars. Giving an ethical interpretation of dharma, Bala Gangadara Tilak says that the path leading to next worldly happiness.... Ethics may be given the name of dharma. E.W. Hopkins says that it means ‘ethical good usage’ and ‘implies in itself a code of conduct to avoid all crimes, murder, adultery, theft, etc., to avoid less spiritual sins, arrogance, envy, jealousy and ... all injury to others’. J. S. Mckenzine holds that ‘the term dharma covers not only conduct but the whole conglomeration of forms of conduct that were settled or established’. Dr. Bhagavân Das thinks it to be an ethico-religious conception which includes ‘religion, rites, piety, specific property, function etc, but above all the Duty incumbent on man... in the situation he may be in’. He further says that ‘Dharma is characteristic property, scientifically; duty morally and legally; religion with all its implications, psycho-physically and spiritually; and righteousness and law generally, but duty above all’. According to A. K. Sen, it is ‘an admixture of socio-ethical religious ideas, not a purely religious concept’. Radhakrishnan opines that Dharma is the stable condition,
capable of giving perfect satisfaction to man and of helping him in the attainment of happiness and salvation. Its end, according to him, is the welfare of all creation.\textsuperscript{225} P. V. Kane interprets it as the mode of life or a code of conduct.\textsuperscript{226} To quote H. N. Sinha, ‘Dharma may bear the interpretation of customs and usage, both sacred and secular in society’.\textsuperscript{227} J. J. Anjaria says that it stands for social law, duty, custom, religion or religious merit.\textsuperscript{228} It is the ‘principle that holds together the whole universe, physical as well as moral. Hence, the word dharma comes to mean, firstly, the cosmic order, and secondly, the law governing human society’.\textsuperscript{229} To quote H. D. Bhattacharya, it is the ‘ideal in conduct towards which we must move in order to perfect ourselves spiritually’.\textsuperscript{230} Chandravarkar regards it as standing for ‘right thought, right word and right deed’.\textsuperscript{231} V. Raghavan remarks: ‘The scope of the concept of Dharma is universal and comprehends even the personal habits of hygiene, details of courteous behaviour and moral endowments, duties of kings and the administration of justice and the seeking of the summum bonum, spiritual realization’.\textsuperscript{232} To quote G. H. Mess, ‘Dharma is the fundamental motive force in the life of man as a social being’.\textsuperscript{233} It is the ‘underlying motive principle in the social evolution of humanity towards the manifestation and demonstration of the soul, or in other words, of the basic oneness of mankind’.\textsuperscript{234}
Many modern scholars as well as ancient thinkers have discussed the concept of dharma in their own way. The above-mentioned quotations make it clear that many scholars have tried to interpret Dharma from one angle or the other. To run any human activity smoothly, discipline and certain rules to guide the discipline are necessary. The concept of dharma meets this fundamental requirement, by prescribing certain duties and principles of morality, for improving the general behaviour of man.

Resume

Dharma is the greatest and most valuable contribution of India to humanity. It is one of the key concepts in Indian thought and it has great relevance in the present age. Dharma has got a wide and varied connotation in Indian thought. Its relation to Indian society is inseparable and it is considered as India's word to the world. In the long history of India's cultural and spiritual development, it acquired various senses and it has its legal, moral and social shades of meanings, which are developed during the course of tradition.

The word 'Dharma' has its root in 'dhr' meaning 'to uphold', 'to support' and 'to sustain'. Dharma sustains and maintains the social, political and economic order. The word had wide verity of meanings. In its primary sense it refers to the essential nature of a thing, without which it cannot exist. Dharma in another important sense denotes the moral order.
Everything in this universe is under certain rules and orders, which leads to the welfare of the society and dharma is the source behind this order. Dharma means duty and it also denotes the moral pursuit of man. It also uses in the senses as religion, ṛta, ethics, religious duty, bhakti, divine justice, law, good works or puṇya, etc. Sometimes dharma is seen as identical with God or the Absolute. Dharma is also described in our scriptures as a person, not a man but a Deva. Dharma is closely connected with karma also. By doing karma in a dhārmic way, one may move towards a higher plane of existence and this way progress towards Mokṣa or ultimate freedom.

The Vedas are the authoritative source discussing the nature of Dharma. Smṛtis and Dharmaśāstras also discuss dharma and its implications. They tell us about our duties in detail, the do's and don'ts and how the rites are to be performed. Maṇu, Parāśara, Yājñavalkya, Gautama, Hārīta, etc. are Smṛティkāras. All the philosophical systems of India discuss the nature of Dharma. Each system gives different interpretation of Dharma. But they are complementary to each other. Śaṅkarācārya defines Dharma as the means of Abhyudaya and niśreyasya.

The two great Epics of India, Rāmāyaṇa and MB handle the concept of dharma in a practical way. According to Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma is considered as the personification of
Dharma. His life is a very good example of the practice of Dharma. To speak truth and to keep the promise given under all circumstances is the key note of Dharma in the Rāmāyaṇa. No hardship is too great, no sacrifice is too great, when compared to the fulfilment of Dharma. The MB gives the wisest practical advice and guidance on righteous living as per the principles of Dharma. The essence of the whole story of the MB is that only Dharma brings prosperity. Dharma is the central theme of B G also. Lord Kṛṣṇa states strongly in the B G that He incarnates in all ages to establish Dharma. Dharma forms the basis of Purāṇas also.

The Vedas, Smṛti, Sadācāra and ātmatuṣṭi are traditionally recognized as the sourse of Dharma. Dharma has been classified into different ways, such as Śrauta, Smārta and Śīṣṭācāra on the basis of its sources. Sāmānyadharma and Viśiṣṭadharma is also another important classification. The Varnāśramadharmas, Guṇadharma, Naimittikadharma and Yugadharma came under Viśiṣṭadharma.

The concept of Dharma has great relevance in the present age and it has been variously interpreted by modern scholars. These modern readings of Dharma by eminent thinkers show the importance of Dharma in the modern scientific age.
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117. यदृ भूलितमत्यत्वं वचः सत्यस्य लक्षणम। AP, CCCLXXII. 7.

118. सत्यं बौद्धातिप्रियं बौद्धाति न बौद्धातिसत्यमपि।

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