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Universal Concepts of Dharma: Understanding Dharma through the Tales of the *Mahābhārata*

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Abstract

Everywhere it is admonished not to follow adharma, which means to follow dharma. This concept has served as the beacon of hope guiding the lives of the world over millennia. Although dharma is a timeless and universal concept, the original concept evolved in ancient India. It would also be a futile attempt to give any definition of the word as it can only be explained. It has a wide variety of meanings. A few of them would enable us to understand the range of that expression. Hence dharma can be briefly said as that which contains or upholds the cosmos. The present paper aims at understanding sādharma-dharma i.e. universal dharma (dharma common to all). This dharma is śruti based, impregnated with universal or spiritual or moral teachings, categorically stressing the importance of charity, integrity, non-violence, self-control and compassion for lokasaṃgraha i.e. the good of the society. The Mahābhārata, seven times larger than Iliad and Odyssey combined, available in three recensions (Pune, Kumbhakonam, Nīlakanṭhiki) with, in all, 100217 śloka arranged in 18 books (parvas), excluding the supplementary Harivaṃśa Purāṇa, is oceanic in its size and reflects in its span the grandeur of the civilization that has produced it. Called by various names – prabandha kāvya (structured composition), itihāsa (record of what all happened), purakalpa itihāsa (a narrative with several protagonists), 'fifth Veda', Dharmasāstra (sociological treatise) – Mahābhārata has, in its long history, been commented upon by 36 learned commentators. In the Mahābhārata the message of sādharma-dharma is imparted through different tales and dialogues that is the major concern of the present paper.

Keywords: universal; dharma; mahabharata;



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An enumeration of the types of dharma enunciated in the *Dharamśāstras* (including the *Mahābhārata*) can be a pointer to the aim that the ancient sages have in developing an orderly and non-conflicting, self-contained and stable society. Everywhere it is admonished not to follow adharma, which means to follow dharma. This concept has served as the beacon of hope guiding the lives of the world over millennia. Although it is a timeless and universal concept, the original concept evolved in ancient India. The texts of India's intellectual tradition define this concept in different ways. They, in general, help understanding the question of life, instead focusing on the issues of dharma. The concept of dharma evolved over time, its meaning shifting from a 'ritual ethics of deed' to a more personal virtue based on one's conscience. British colonialists endeavored to map Indian traditions onto their ideas of religion so as to be able to comprehend and govern their subjects; yet the notion of dharma remained elusive. The common translation into religion is misleading. A religion is a set of belief systems; dharma is more a way of living. A religion, basically, is rituals and practices followed by a particular sect; on the other hand, dharma is abstract. Indian scholars and academicians, after their deep researches, have given several definitions of dharma. In no other culture has a non-scriptural text been so deeply imbricated in the life of the people as *Mahābhārata* has been in Indian life and thought since ancient days. In the knowledge-centered oral Indian culture, like other intellectual texts, *Mahābhārata* has played multiple societal roles – as source of knowledge and values, as sustainer of the social fiber and fabric, as inspiration in adversity, as entertainer and educator in happy times and as proto-explanatory model for any number of problems encountered by the society. The present paper aims at understanding *sādhāraṇa*-dharma i.e. universal dharma (dharma common to all). This dharma is *śruti* based, impregnated with universal or spiritual or moral teachings, categorically stressing the importance of charity, integrity, non-violence, self-control and compassion for *lokasaṃgraha* i.e. the good of the society. This dharma teaches an individual to



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act for the sake of the survival of society, for the maximum possibility of human existence and for maintaining the cosmic balance. In the *Mahābhārata* the message of *sādhāraṇa*-dharma is imparted through different tales and dialogues. But, the tales of King Śivi, Ṛṣi Dadhīci, a butcher and a brāhmiṇ (*Vyādha-Gītā*) and the conversation between Vedvyāsa and Pāṇdavas, Yakṣa and Yudhiṣṭhira and the teachings of Ṛṣi Sanat-Sujāta are of vital importance for understanding *sādhāraṇa*-dharma in a proper manner.

Before discussing the tales and dialogues imparting the message of *sādhāraṇa*-dharma, let us have a general account of dharma as given in the *Mahābhārata*. As referred to before, the dharma stresses becoming one with the universal flow of life, to maintain the cosmic balance. This obliterates the biased view-point towards others. Explaining it, Bhīṣma says:

“It is dharma that leads to the behaviour which promotes harmony in society, facilitates its growth, and ensures its happiness. One should not do unto others which is unpleasant to oneself.” **XII.251.19**

He adds:

“Whatever one desires for oneself one should desire the same for others.” **XII.251.21**

This very notion leads to *sādhāraṇa*-dharma in which one does good to all, not with the intention of any ill-will and personal gain, rather one contributes to maintain the balance. Yudhiṣṭhira also speaks in the same manner to Draupadī when she importunes him to follow *sādhāraṇa*-dharma and to fight. He says:



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“I do not act for the sake of the fruits of dharma. I act because I must. Whether it bears fruits or not, buxom Draupadī, I do my duty like any householder . . . I obey dharma, full-hipped woman, not for its rewards . . . but by its nature my mind is beholden to dharma.” **III.31.4**

Thus cosmic balance is the pivot of *sādhāraṇa*-dharma where every act is performed with a view to maintain a cosmic balance. This dharma is impregnated with different features and characteristics illustrated variously in the tales and dialogues between characters of the *Mahābhārata*.

The tale of King Śivi narrated by Ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya in “Vana-Parva” exemplifies the virtue of working selflessly. One day, a pigeon falls into the lap of King Śivi being afraid of a hawk. The pigeon requests King Śivi to protect him. In a while, the hawk also reaches there. He argues for his own case and urges to King Śivi that he should not be an obstacle in the way of getting his food. Now the King has two options—to hand over pigeon to the hawk and to provide the hawk with the food of his own choice. The King considers the first option as an improper action. He gives an answer for considering this action improper:

“He that gives up a frightened creature seeking protection cannot hope to get protection when he himself needs it –even clouds do not provide adequate rain for him, nor do the seeds, though planted in the field, grow for him.” **III.197.12**



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The King remains firm on his decision and offers to provide some other food to the hawk. But the hawk does not change his mind and asks for the pigeon only. Then the King offers him his own life in the place of pigeon's life. The pigeon then asks for an equivalent amount of his thigh's flesh. The King abruptly accepts the hawk's demand. He cuts off a piece of flesh from his thigh as may be equal to the weight of the pigeon. But the weight of his thigh's flesh weighs less than the pigeon. Then he cuts off more of his own flesh—from all parts of his body. Finally, the King himself ascends the scale.

Another story is also from "Vana-Parva". Ṛṣi Lomaśa narrates the story to Yudhiṣṭhira when he laments for the loss of his Kingdom. The story of Ṛṣi Dadhīci's sacrifice represents a real life situation. Ṛṣi Dadhīci sacrifices his life for the welfare of society without any grief or pain.

Once, *Kālkeyas* (demons with their leader Vṛtrāsura) become equipped with deadly weapons and attack the gods. Realizing that the gods do not have adequate means to achieve success over Vṛtrāsura, the gods go to Brahmā seeking his advice. Brahmā advises them to go to Ṛṣi Dadhīci and suggests making a request to Ṛṣi Dadhīci to grant them his bones for killing Vṛtrāsura. The gods go to Ṛṣi Dadhīci and beg for his bones. Ṛṣi Dadhīci says:

“What is to the good of all of you will be done by me immediately, i.e. I shall give up my body voluntarily” **III.100.21**. [And then Ṛṣi Dadhīci renounces his life. In this way, the gods become able to kill the demon Vṛtrāsura. The same story is reproduced briefly in the “Śānti-Parva” due to its universal message.]” **XII. 342.40**

Another example of *sādhāraṇa*-dharma is the direct message given by Vedvyāsa to the Pāṇdavās, when he visits them in the forest and feels compassion on seeing them looking thin,



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living on fruits and roots. He says to Yudhiṣṭhira that fortune and misfortune comes to all. Fortune does not last forever that is why the wise behave equal at all times, whether in fortune or misfortune. It is the best for man to enjoy good fortune when it comes and endure misfortune when that comes. He suggests to observe *tapas* i.e. austerity and follow truth, gentleness, not getting angry, charity, restraint, forgiveness, never being sad at another's good fortune, non-violence, purity and keeping the sense-organs under control. The wicked and foolish do not respect these qualities and do not attain happiness. Therefore one should strive to perfect oneself in this world through self-discipline.

The story of a butcher and a brāhmiṇ (*Vyādha-Gītā*) narrated by Ṛṣi Mārkaṇḍeya in the "Vana-Parva" also elaborates the *sādhāraṇa*-dharma. In the story, the butcher teaches a brāhmiṇ the universal dharma. It represents a dialogic conversation between a brāhmiṇ and a housewife and then a brāhmiṇ and a butcher. The Vyādha's dialogues with brāhmiṇ presents the universal message of doing good to all. It is also prescribed that if one is doing good to his family, then in a way, he is also profiting the society. The story goes like this. A brāhmiṇ while performing his 'yogic-kriyā' feels disturbed due to dirt dropped by a bird on his head. He looks at the bird with anger and the bird falls down dead. This fills the brāhmiṇ with arrogance. With this feeling, he goes to a house, begging for alms. The housewife who is nursing her sick husband, requests him to wait. The brāhmiṇ expresses anger at which the housewife says that she is not the bird. The brāhmiṇ feels shocked and amazed. So he asks her how she comes to know about the bird. The housewife concludes with some words of advice to the brāhmiṇ and says that although he has studied the Vedas, but has not understood the essence of dharma. She describes the virtues of *sādhāraṇa*-dharma by focusing on the harms of anger. She says:



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“The gods know him for a Brahmana who always speaketh the truth here, who always gratifieth his preceptor, and who, though injured himself, never returneth the injury. The gods know him for a Brahmana who hath his senses under control, who is virtuous and pure and devoted to the study of the Vedas, and who hath mastery over anger and lust.” **III.206.34 & III.206.33**

Now realizing the power of the housewife, he requests her to teach him dharma. She sends him to the *dharmavyādha* (righteous butcher) in Mithilā. The brāhmiṇ goes to Mithilā meets the butcher who is selling meat. The butcher welcomes the brāhmiṇ, giving him the reference to the housewife. The brāhmiṇ is again amazed to hear the reference to the housewife who has sent him to the butcher. The brāhmiṇ asks the butcher why after having acquired so much knowledge about dharma, he still sells the meat. The butcher replies:

“O learned brāhmiṇ, my family has been engaged in this occupation (of selling meat) since many generations, so I have felt that this work is suitable for me too, and is not contrary to dharma. Please do not think that I am doing anything improper.” **III.207.20**

“O kind – hearted soul, I only sell the meat of those animals which have been killed by others, i.e. I myself do not kill any animal. Furthermore, I do not eat meat.” **III.207.32 & III.207.33**



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After hearing such truthful and witty talk from a butcher, the brāhmiṇ asks to teach him the right conduct. The butcher says right conduct is achieved in two ways—

- i. Keeping under control the vices (the most harmful vices being selfishness, anger, vanity, greed and crookedness), and
- ii. Promoting virtues (the most helpful virtues being those that hold the society together).

The butcher says that the said practice is necessary even after attaining the state of perfection. He adds:

“ *Ahiṃsā* (non-violence) and *Satya* (truth) are the two main pillars of dharma through which the highest good of all can be achieved. In fact, a decision on what is true (under difficult circumstances) should be made by sticking to that course of action which leads to the highest good of beings.” **III.207.74 & III.209.4**

The butcher explains the *ahiṃsā* and says that one should have compassion towards all beings and one's conduct should be lawful and just. Moreover, the essence of dharma is the desire to do good to all. Above all, it is the service to one's parents, which he has neglected. The butcher tells him that he should have to pay heed to his parents who have become blind. He advises him to go back to his home and serve them. Thereafter he should study the *Vedas*. He finally tells him to have purity of heart and gratefulness which are necessary for acquiring the ability to distinguish between dharma and adharma.



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The dialogue between Yakṣa and Yudhiṣṭhira occurs in “Vana-Parva” when the brothers of Yudhiṣṭhira are lying fainted for disobeying Yakṣa and drinking water from the lake. Nakula ignores the warning and drinks water. The rest of the brothers of Yudhiṣṭhira do the same. Yakṣa asks many questions to Yudhiṣṭhira. Yudhiṣṭhira answers the questions by explaining virtues leading to highest dharma.

Here Yudhiṣṭhira explains and upholds the universal virtues i.e. charity, skill in action, truth, good conduct, sharing, even-mindedness, compassion, contentment and absence of cruelty as the highest dharma. He concludes by saying:

It is by the (study of the) *Srutis* that a person becometh learned; it is by ascetic austerities that one acquireth what is very great...by serving the old that one becometh wise. The best of all laudable things is skill; the best of all possessions is knowledge: the best of all gains is health: and contentment is the best of all kinds of happiness.” **III.313.78**

Yudhiṣṭhira’s preference for his step-brother to be alive to his own real brothers pleases Yakṣa, and as a result his all brothers are granted life again, is an instance of this dharma.

In “Udyoga-Parva”, Ṛṣi Sanat-Sujāta upholds this message in a different way. The teachings of Ṛṣi Sanat-Sujāta highlight three characteristics of *sādhāraṇa*-dharma:



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- i) Knowledge should not be confined to the words only; it should be the part of one's conduct (V.43.52).
- ii) Spiritual perfection can be attained by self-discipline (*dama*) and seeking the good of all (*hitam*) (V.46.20).
- iii) To avoid *nṛśaṃsa* i.e. cruel behaviour (V.43.15)

To conclude, the tales narrated by different narrators and the conversations of the characters of the *Mahābhārata*, are the expositions of *sādhāraṇa*-dharma where one needs to understand the worth of others, considering them as one's own self. One has to obtain virtues and adopt a virtuous code of conduct that may help for the sustainability of society. Here the *sādhāraṇa*-dharma has been explained as the propriety of action sanctioned not only for the survival of an individual, rather for the welfare of all human beings i.e. *loksaṃgraha* (welfare of all). The key points that *sādhāraṇa*-dharma discusses are *avibhaktam-vibhakteṣu* (all are one), *praspara-bhāva* (an attitude of mutual co-operation), *praspara-prīti* (to love one another), *mat-karma* (dedicate all acts to God), *sattva-guṇa* (good values), *sarvabhūtahitam* (doing good to all human beings), *yathā-śakti dāna* (charity according to capacity), *loksaṃgraha* (good of the all world), *nirmamo nirahamkāraḥ* (going beyond mineness and egotism), *samadṛṣṭi* (even-minded vision) and five *daivī-sampat* — *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *abhaya* (fearlessness), *ānṛśaṃsya* (absence of cruelty), *adroha* (absence of ill-will). Here it is noteworthy that the common denominator the approach i.e. performing acts for *loksaṃgraha*, in accordance with the situation i.e. concerning the place, person and time.



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