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## ***Dharma Philosophy in the Epic Period-with Special Reference to Mahabharata***

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### **Abstract**

The Indian Philosophy is mainly divided into four periods and they are the Vedic period, the Epic period, the Sutra period and the Scholastic period. In this paper, I am concerned mainly on the epic period and mostly on the period of the *Mahabharata*. In this short sphere, I am discussing the concept of *Dharma* and the different approaches towards *dharma* from the perspective of *Mahabharata*. What is the meaning of *dharma* and the different aspects of *dharma* has also been discussed in this paper. However, in this paper, I want to investigate how *dharma* philosophy has been developed in the epic period, especially in the *Mahabharata*.

Indian philosophy has had a long and complicated development. Broadly, the Indian philosophy can be divided into four main periods. The first period of Indian philosophy is called the Vedic Period and may be placed between 2500 and 600 B.C.E. This period can be regarded as the dawn of civilization in the world. This is the age of the assimilation of the great Vedas, culminating in the Aranyakas and Upanishads. The Vedic period covers the rise and the development of the Aryan culture and civilization. The literature of the Vedic period is considered to be the most ancient in the world. It consists of the four Vedas, namely, Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda. Each of the Vedas is divided into four parts: The *Samhitas* (the *Mantras*), the *Brahmanas*, the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads*.

The second period of Indian philosophy is called the Epic Period, dated approximately from 500 or 600 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. This was a fertile period in the philosophical development of the world

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in general. The great works in China, Greece and Persia coincides with this period of Indian philosophical development. Not only the great epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were written during this period but also the early development of Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism and Vaishnavism took place simultaneously. *Bhagavad-Gita*, which is a part of *Mahabharata* ranks as one of the three most authoritative texts of Indian philosophical literature. The philosophies of skepticism, naturalism and materialism arose and the orthodox systems of Hinduism took shape. Systematic treatises were written that brought into focus the unorthodox systems of Buddhism, Jainism and Carvaka during the Epic Period. In addition the codes of conduct, social and ethical philosophy were compiled in the *Dharmashastras*.

The third period is called the Sutra Period, dated approximately the early centuries of the Christian era. Most of the Sutras in short enigmatic aphorisms were written as treatises to the earlier schools of philosophical thoughts. This helped in organizing the various doctrines in a systematic, orderly form and the systems took a basic form in which they were to be preserved. In contrast to the Epic Period, when the philosophical thought and discussions had their origins, the Sutra Period saw criticism of opposing thoughts develop. The six Hindu systems, collectively called the Darsana literature developed during this period.

The fourth period of Indian philosophy is called the Scholastic Period. During this period commentaries were written on the sutras. Literature from this period, which lasts from the Sutra Period to the 17th century, is mainly explanatory. It is also controversial and often argumentative.

In my present thought provoking paper, my intention is to analyze and explicate the concept of *dharma* from the perspective of one of the great epics in India and that is *Mahabharata*. The paper is mainly concentrated upon the fact that how the philosophy of *dharma* has developed during the epic period. This paper is divided into five sections. The first section of this paper begins with the analysis of the etymological meaning and its significance of the word '*Dharma*'. The role of *dharma* has been explained in the second section. In the third section, categories of

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*dharma* have been discussed. What are the approaches of *Krishna* and *Yudhisthira* regarding *dharma*? These all has been discussed in the fourth section. In the concluding section, the different aspects of *dharma* from the perspective of the epic period especially from the perspective of *Mahabharata* have been critically analyzed.

I

In the great epic, *Mahabharata*, the word ‘*dharma*’ is used in different senses. The word is derived from the root ‘*dhr*’ used in the sense, ‘to support’, or ‘to sustain’<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, *dharma* supports men from falling down. It is the one which sustains all. In other words, men who follow *dharma* or righteous path will not fall and perish. One has to be guided by *dharma* or moral law in order to lead a good life. The epic is replete with the use of *dharma* in various senses as, ‘conduct’, ‘duty’, ‘virtue’, essences or nature of a thing, etc. The religious significance of *dharma* can be seen where dharmic life is insisted to follow scriptural instructions. There are three sources of *dharma* that has been discussed in the *Mahabharata* and these are: *dharma* that is taught in the Vedas, *dharma* that is detailed in the *Dharmasastras* and *Dharma* may be treated as the conduct of the cultured men.<sup>2</sup> We are not going into the details of this discussion in this paper. However, the concept of *dharma* figures prominently in the epic and it plays an important role in social life in the epic age. Indian masses over the centuries have derived moral laws from the ethics of *dharma*. Whether one is literate or illiterate, one understands the ethical significance of *dharma* in relation to the stories of the *Mahabharata*. In spite of that, there are some phenomenons by which we are in confusion regarding the connotation of *dharma*. A paradoxical situation is given in the epic where a hunter (*vyadha*) teaches *dharma* to a sage.<sup>3</sup> However, the answer of *Yudhisthira* to a query by *dharma* himself who appears in the form of *Yaksa* is that, ‘Logic cannot be a testimony. Scriptures are many. There is no unanimity among the sages about

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<sup>1</sup> *Dharanat dharmaityahuh dharmena vidhrtah prajah*

*Yah syat dharana samyuktah sa dharma iti niscayah. Mbh-8.69.58,12.109.11*

<sup>2</sup> *Vedoktah paamo dharmo dharmasastresu caparah*

*Sistacarasca sistanam trividham dharmalaksanam. Mbh- 3.208.82*

<sup>3</sup> 3.208

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*dharma*. So therefore the reality of *dharma* is lost in secrecy. Therefore the path of *dharma* is the path trod by the great.<sup>4</sup> Though this appears to be a straightforward statement it is not because it gives no hint as to who can be called a great man. It cannot be called one who follows *dharma* because doing that will make it a circular definition.

II

'*Dharma*' is used in the *Mahabharata* as a multivocal concept. *Dharma* is described as an accepted path for the attainment of man's highest good. The *Vaisesika sutra* reflects this faith, namely 'that which brings prosperity and eternal good is *dharma*'.<sup>5</sup> During the days of the epic, *Dharma* permeated all aspects of life, individual and social. Thus, *dharma* or moral law is generally thought to have brought *Yudhisthira* and his brothers to victory, as they also resorted to some *adharma* or immoral practices. Even the *Mahabharata* repeats the maxim, '*Yato dharmah tato jayah*'<sup>6</sup> In the days of *Mahabharata*, *dharma* is believed by many as a way of life to be followed by all men, though it is not so treated therein. The *Mahabharata* declares itself as a science of *dharma*. In spite of all analysis, the most important thing is that the epic refers to the four aims of life of which *Dharma* is an important component, though it refers to the other *purusarthas*, i.e, *kama*, *artha* and *moksa*. The first two values may be termed as instrumental values and the other two, i.e., *dharma* and *moksa* are intrinsic values. It is also believed that *kama* (desire) refers to the body, *artha*(economic well-being) to the mind, *Dharma* (moral law) to the intellect, and *moksa*(self perfection) to the soul. There are references to such other subtypes of *dharma* as *varnadharma*, *asramadharmah* etc. With the exception of *moksa* or self perfection, the other three values, called *trivarga*, have an integral approach to the social organization in as much as they are pursued by individuals as members of the society.

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<sup>4</sup> *Tarkopratisthah srutayo vibhinnah  
naiko munir yasya vaco na bhinnam  
Dharmasya tattvam nihitam guhayam  
Mahajano yena gatah sa panthah. Mbh- 3.313.317*

<sup>5</sup> *Yato 'bhyudayanihsreyasasiddhah sa dharmah, Vai, su, 1.1.2*

<sup>6</sup> *Na te yuddhannivartantedharmopetah mahabalah  
Sriya paramaya yukta yato dharmas tato jayah. Mbh- 6.65.18*

### III

*Dharma* in the *Mahabharata* can be categorized under three heads and these are:

- a) *Yugadharmā*, i.e., *Dharma* of an epoch. This *dharma* reveals how there happens a steady degeneration in moral standards.
- b) *Dharma* of the individual in his social life, *asramadharmā* and *varnadharma*
- c) *Dharma* in general and these are: ethics of the king or the ruler (*rajadharmā*), ethics in distress (*apaddharma*), ethics in charity (*danadharmā*), and ethics in self-perfectionism (*moksadharmā*).

### IV

In this section, the approaches towards *dharma* of *Yudhishthira* and lord *Krishna* have been critically analyzed.

*Yudhishthira*, the elder brother of the *Pandavas*, is supposed to be the symbol of *dharma*. The greatest moral character of the epic is *Yudhishthira* who has no divinity attached to him. Yet he is called the greatest among those who know *dharma*. *Yudhishthira*'s attitude towards *dharma* has few parallels in the epic. 'I do not aspire for fruits of all that I do' say *Yudhishthira*, 'but I just perform my duty. I give only because a thing has to be given. I perform sacrifice because I should perform it.'<sup>7</sup> These words, in reply towards *Draupadi*'s arguments that destiny has been adverse to them, show that *Yudhishthira* did his duty regardless of the consequences. This is a type of *niskama karma*. *Yudhishthira* repeats his stand that he will stick to *dharma* without waiting for rewards. But he succumbs to the temptation and tells a blatant lie to win the war.

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<sup>7</sup> *Dharmabhrtam sresthah , suto dharmasya , dharmavit  
naham karmaphalanvesi rajaputri caramyuta  
Dadami deyamity eva yajai yastavyamityuta , Mbh-3.31.2*

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It is well known that in the *Dronaparva* of the *Mahabharata* a detailed account of the heroic fight of *Drona* against the *Pandava* force is given. The invincible warrior *Drona* shakes the morale of the *Pandavas* and the *Pandavas* are perplexed about the future course of action. Then a suggestion comes from *Krsna* that *Yudhishtira* should make a loud, though false announcement, that *Asvatthama*, *Drona*'s son, is dead. It was only then that *Drona* would abandon his weapon and could be killed. The announcement had to be made about the death of *Asvatthama*, *Drona*'s son; though only an elephant called *Asvatthama* had been killed. *Yudhishtira* after *Krsna*'s persuasion shouted loudly that *Asvatthama* was dead but uttered inaudibly the word 'elephant'.<sup>8</sup> This means that he too agreed ultimately that one could lie in the war to win it a pragmatically defaceable but morally indefensible practice. He could not have the moral courage to refuse to tell the lie which resulted in the killing of his guru.

*Krsna* is the only person taken to be a divinity in the *Mahabharata* in the sense that he is an avatar of *Visnu*. He, as a character, plays an important role in the epic in helping the *Pandavas* on crucial occasions. He employs sometimes ethical and sometimes unethical means to achieve the end because he follows traditionally accepted moral practices without scrutinizing their moral merit. He is shown quite often as possessing superhuman powers. The epic narrates many events when *Krsna* comes to the rescue of the *Pandavas*. Regarding the strategies evolved by *Krsna* and others in eliminating the invincible warriors of the *Kuruksetra* war like *Bhisma*, *Drona*, *Karna*, *Duryodhana* and others some unethical means had been employed without which defeat was certain. There are so many instances where *Krsna*'s strategies for winning the war by eliminating great warriors are morally not acceptable though the end is taken to be good. It is claimed as victory of *Dharma*. The traditional justification for employing some unethical means in winning a war is thus worth noting.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Tasya tadvacanam srutva krsnavakyapracoditah  
bhavitvacca maharaja vaktum samupacakrame  
tamathyabhhhhaye magno jaye sakto yudhishtirah  
asvatthama hata iti sabdam uccaiscacara ha  
avyaktamabravit rajan hatah kunjara ityuta.* MBH. -8.191.54, 55.

<sup>9</sup> *Pranatyaye vivahe va sarvajnativadhatyaye*

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V

*Dharma* is referred to in the *Mahabharata* in various ways namely, ‘*Dharma* is the rights conduct’, ‘Non-violence is the supreme *dharma*’, ‘Truth is *Dharma*’ and so on. Ethically each of these is a virtue and therefore has importance in ethical life. At the beginning, the epic refers to three sources of *Dharma*, viz. the *Vedas*, the *Dhamasastras*, moral wisdom of cultured men. Each aspect of *Dharma* can be understood contextually. *Dharma* is understood as right conduct or *acara*, as *ahimsa*, as truth, as *dama*, as *tyaga*, and as *ksama*.

*Dharma* as right conduct is called *acara*, *sadacara*, *sila* and *vrta*. The ethics of the *Mahabharata* insists that *vrta* or right conduct or following the path of the noble should be adopted for one’s upliftment. It is noteworthy that *Yudhishthira* emphasizes one’s *vrta* or conduct as the basis for becoming a *Brahmana*. ‘Neither the family, nor Vedic study nor scriptural knowledge makes one a *Brahmana*. It is only conduct which, no doubt, qualifies one to become a *brahmana*. According to that epic, right conduct needs knowledge of *Dharma*. Another word for conduct is *sila* used in the epic. *Duryodhana* is curious to know how *Pandavas* had conquered the world. To his query *Dhrtarastra* points out that in ancient times *Narada* taught what right conduct should be. *Prahlada* followed that right conduct and secured his kingdom back. *Dhrtarastra* then says that, ‘One should behave oneself in such a way among men that one should earn their admiration. That is the right conduct.’<sup>10</sup>

*Ahimsa* is a virtue which has received the highest importance in the *Mahabharata*. It is declared as the greatest *Dharma*. *Ahimsa* or non-violence had its root in ancient Indian philosophy going back to the upanisadic period. It has also been a part of the *Yoga* system. Asoka, who lived during, perhaps, the redaction of the *Mahabharata*, became, in his later life, a champion of the principle of non-violence. The epic thus reflects the then prevailing faith in the virtue of *ahimsa*.

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*Narmanyabhipravrtte van a ca proktam mrsa bhavet  
Adharmam natra pasyanti dharmatattvarthadarsinah.* ?MBH,-8.69.62

<sup>10</sup> *Tattu karma tatha kuryat yena slaghyete samsadi  
Silam samsenaitat te kathitam krusattama .* MBH-12.24.68

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*Dharma* is supposed as truth in the *Mahabharata*. It is a cardinal virtue which is glorified in the epic. There are some *adhyayas* which determine what ‘*satya*’ and ‘*asatya*’ are, mainly occurring in the *Santiparva*. Bhishma exhorts Yudhisthira, ‘To speak truth is good. There is nothing superior to truth.’<sup>11</sup> In another context, Bhishma enumerates thirteen aspects of *Satya*. They are ‘truthful speech, equality, self-control, absence of envy, tolerance, shyness, tenacity, freedom from jealousy, sacrifice, meditation on god, noble acts, fortitude and non-violence’.<sup>12</sup> Bhishma elaborates each of these virtues supposed to come under ‘*satya*’ because, according to him, all these virtues depend on truth. The thirteen aspects of truth relate to the application of truth as well as to its pursuit in life. In *Karnaparva*, Krsna asserts that, given the dangerous situation, telling an untruth is as good as telling the truth. So, it may be concluded that telling truth is supposed to be *dharma* as well as *adharma* in considering the different situations and different contexts in *Mahabharata*.

Self-control or *dama* is one of the most valued virtues in Indian philosophy. It is the quality in human beings which make them different from other animals. It is considered as one of the three means (*sadhanatraya*) for liberation according to the *Brhadaranyakopanisad*.

It is this quality which provides a disposition for charity, penance, knowledge and study. It adds to one’s strength. It is possible to acquire noble qualities through self-control. The epic gives details on what ‘*dama*’ is when Bhishma explains to Yudhisthira what it is. *Dama* has to be practiced by all because without self-control nothing can be achieved. A self –controlled man is free from anxiety and his mind will always be cheerful.

The virtue of renunciation or *tyaga* is another virtue which is hailed in the Upanisads. The epic shows that this virtue enables one to dedicate oneself, according to Indian tradition, to a life of simplicity and humanness. Swami Vivekananda hailed *tyaga* throughout his lectures and he

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<sup>11</sup> *Satyasya vacanam sadhu, na satyad vidyate param*. MBH.-12.109.4

<sup>12</sup> *Satyam ca samata caiva damascaiva na samsayah  
amatsaryam ksama caiva hristitiksa nanusuyata  
tyago dhyanamatharyatvam dhrtisca satatam sthira  
ahimsa caiva rajendra satyakaras trayodasa*. MBH-12.162.8,9

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quoted the upanisadic statement to substantiate it. ‘Neither through wealth, nor through progeny, but by giving up alone immortality is to be reached.’<sup>13</sup> The epic reflects this spirit of *tyaga* in several passages.

*Ksama* or forgiveness is another important virtue described in the epic. From the *Mahabharata*, it can be known that forgiveness is a virtue which Duryodhana cannot entertain because he is vindictive by nature. Yudhisthira glorifies forgiveness in its entire splendor. According to him, forgiveness is Brahman, it is truth and purity.

However, in this paper, we have so far reviewed important virtues highlighted in the epic. These represent the approach of the epic to ethics which had a tradition already laid down. The explanatory parts of the ethical discussion in the epic are meant to convince people of the merit of practicing them. As Mackenzie observes, ‘the term virtue is employed to denote a good habit of character, as distinguished from a duty which denotes rather some particular kind of action which we ought to perform. Thus a man does his duty, but he who possesses a virtue, is virtuous.’<sup>14</sup>

I would like to conclude that the above discussions centered on the question, ‘How to live?’ and cultivation of virtue that is *dharma* provides ways to live well that promotes life for oneself and others. Virtue in fact differentiates persons who live long life and those who live full (good) life. Thus, in the context of the Indian epics, mostly in the context of the *Mahabharata*, it is found clearly that the obedience to *dharma* is not to enjoy freedom from action, but to enjoy freedom in action and that can reveal the true aspiration of human existence. Rabindranath Tagore, in his essay, entitled, *Realisation in action* observes: ‘The true striving in the quest of truth of *dharma*

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<sup>13</sup> Lectures from Colombo to Almora, p-241  
(*na prajaya dhanena tyagenaike amrtatvamanasuh*)

<sup>14</sup> A Manual of Ethics, p.247

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consists not in the neglect of action but in the effort to attune it closer and closer to the eternal harmony.<sup>15</sup>

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