



SLC (University of Delhi)
Shyam Lal College

Saraswati IKS Centre

**Project Title: An Action based Study to Explore &
Connect Select IKS in Contemporary Discourses &
Practices**

**Ancient Indian Tradition: Relevance of *Ramayana* and
Mahabharata in Contemporary India**

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Introduction

The study of Ancient Indian Tradition is important for several reasons. It tells us how, when and where people developed their knowledge collectively as a set of ideas, customs, and behaviour in Indian society. In other words, the Ancient Indian Tradition provides a sense of identity which passed over several generations and is preserved in the form of an individual's day-to-day activities under the corpus of Santana Parampara. Sanatana Parampara emerged as a knowledge system that developed while experiencing life and then started emanating in the form of wisdom and insights arising out of deep experiences, observation, and experimentation over a period. Closer scrutiny of Ancient Indian Tradition shows that societal development in the form of various applied sciences, literature and aesthetics acknowledges their core dependence on Sanatana Parampara originating from Vedas. Vedas like Ganga are natural and pure through *Sruti* tradition that then flows down into various sects and divisions facilitating a foundational stone to Indian culture. According to Schopenhauer, "Hinduism is plural and not an indivisible whole." It develops on the polycentricity which cannot be defined in the tight compartments of division. The idea of dharma remains central to all aspects of life which has trickled down from the Vedas.

Vedas and Upanishads

Vedas are a large body of literature composed in Sanskrit through *Sruti* (oral traditions) and *smriti* (memory). The Vedas are a series of sacred texts revealed by God/ “apaurasaueya” the ones who are not of human origin. (Chaudhari.34). They can be regarded as texts and divine truths that are rendered eternal and comprise four great works, *RigVeda*, *YajurVeda*, *SamVeda*, and *AthravaVeda*. In *Rig Veda*, the quintessential wisdom talks about Universe, human beings, and their close relationship with nature. Natural forces are personified in the form of various „Devas“ to internalize human beings to provide reverence to the Universe. Indra is found to be the supreme power behind the activities of the universe. Other gods like Agni, Vayu, Varuna and Brisphati function according to the universe's planetary formation as well as the presence of elements in the human body. According to *Rig Veda*, it is largely believed that our body is a component of “Panchtatava” i.e., Agni, Vayu, Prithvi and Aakash of which the entire universe is made. The *Rig Vedas* mainly provide knowledge about the interconnectedness between the anatomy of the body and the universe. Then the “*Yajur Veda*” arising from the word “yajna” talks about rituals which are to be performed by people in an agrarian society. It exhibits the keeping of

livestock and the ritualistic performance of various traditions in ancient times. The *Sama Veda* in Sanskrit means “sama” which depicts melodies and chants of the mantras written in *Rig Veda*. It is a creative synthesis of music, sounds, meaning and spirituality. The *Arthva Veda* originating from the mouth of “Rsi Atharvan” consists of cures from herbs, healing from illness and maintaining world peace and prosperity. According to Uma Chaudhari, “the mere recitation of these sacred texts is considered to have a spiritual value...The Nirukta(a part of Vedic literature known as Vedanaga, a glossary of Vedas, states that only he who understands Vedas attains wisdom.” (Chaudhari,35). The four Vedas are further divided into *Brahmanas*(priestly manuals as explanations of rituals). The *Aryanakas*/treatises of the forests provide philosophical explanations of the *Brahmanas* which thus culminate into *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads* exhibit essence of traditional Indian mysticism and philosophy. Then the *Vedanta* are a short summary of the Vedas and they form the basis of Hindu philosophy.

Vedas and Dharma

According to Louis Renou, “The concept of dharma in Vedic literature is free from all dogmas and rigidity. It is a working hypothesis of human conduct adopted for different conditions and requirements of life. Coming from the

root „dhr“ it serves as the norm to support human behaviour or rule of conduct...there is dharma or maintenance of the right path, the order of things transformed into moral obligation, a principle which governs all manifestations of Indian life.” (Renou.48). Thus, it can be said that adherence to dharma is not limited to belief in a particular thought process. Rather it can be regarded as an entire plethora of conduct in life governed through Vedas and its offshoot scriptures. The purpose of this is to achieve universal harmony and brotherhood”. The law-centric disposition of Dharma can be found in *Dhramsutras*, which merge into jurisprudence thus becoming doctrines of conduct ranging from a student to the householder to a king. The ashram, another sect of Vedic tradition in relation to dharma makes the way of living life contextual and enthused with beliefs of contribution and compassion. According to Manu as mentioned in *Manu Smriti*, dharma is not only limited to ashrams and their responsibilities but also includes devotion to mother, father, and teacher as an epitome of human conduct of life. Through the above premises it can be said that Veda and Dharma are intertwined with each other like lock and key as when one understands Veda, one ought to follow Dharma. The charm of Vedic hymns is not constrained to spiritual guidance rather it also includes democratic governance of kingdoms.

According to Prof. Bhu Dev Sharma, “*AtharvVeda* in Ch 19, hymn 55, v6 ...emphasizes the fourfold aim of a government; growth of agriculture, protection of people, progress and prosperity of people, support and sustenance, we appoint you as our ruler.” (Sharma.37). Prof. Sharma further elaborates that Vedic thoughts to a great length dilate on the duties and responsibilities of a king. The aesthetics of a kingdom in a democratic framework works through the concept of social evolution and moral progress that encourages collective consciousness of liberty, equality, and justice. (Sharma.451)

The Vedic thoughts on an ideal ruler and governance can be found in *Ram Rajya* as presented by Valmiki in *Ramayana* and by Tulsidas in *Ramcharitmanas*. The presence of dharma in *Mahabharata* is through pragmatic aspects of ethical human disposition which when transgressed culminates in the apocalyptic end of an entire clan. The dharma in *Mahabharata* is an empirical observation of reaction to actions that lie in the embeds of sinuous conscience. Scholars believe that in *Mahabharata*, dharma is a “socio-ethical concept” visible through the behaviour of Kauravas and Pandavas. But before locating the discourse of Dharma in *Mahabharata* and

Ramayana. It becomes necessary to understand the epic traditions of India and the relevance of the concept of dharma in the Indian epic tradition.

Epics of India- *Ramayana and Mahabharata*

An epic is a long narrative poem in an elevated style recounting the deeds of a legendary hero. Ram in *Ramayana* and Krishan in *Mahabharata*. Like Western features of epic, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* adhere to the laymen's definition of „characters of high positions, central heroic figure and development of episodes important to the history of a nation or a race.“(Bowra.36) But Indian epics differ in the concept of a moral code of conduct, the presence of dharma, and social and moral consciousness among others. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* can be regarded as repositories of the collective memory of a race. The epics do not appear merely as verses but also strictly adhere to the way of life, moral conduct, and social obligations of princes and kings to deal with the situation of crisis. These epics explore emotional spectrums like shame, terror, fury, and exile that can be regarded as realistic in human life. The *Sruti* tradition in the epics depicts communal love and affection that every Aryan should adhere to. According to Gavin Flood, “What seems to be important with these mythological narratives is the story being told, the sense of truth that it conveys ...communal or traditional values and identity being communicated.” (Flood,104). Through the above argument, it is apparent that eternal principles and archetypes present in these oral

narratives examine the ethos and psyche of the people to create a worldwide appeal not only restricted to Indians but to the entire human race.

The subject matter of the Karma cycle at the nucleus of Ancient Indian Epic Tradition appears in *Rig Veda* which propagates the nexus of actions/choices made by an individual resulting in his/her fate. Hence, considering the above statement, the concept of dharma only becomes an ideal way of living life during periods of hardship. The two terms „divine“ and „demonic“ in the context of epic tradition do not mean good or bad in entirety. But two sides of a human character that makes it holistic. For example, in *Ramayana*, the character of Kaekyi is depicted as an evil queen but she cannot necessarily be called evil because she repented to her karma once she realises her mistake. Raavan can be portrayed in the light of being a wise pandit who although abducted a married woman but did not disrespect her chastity. Vibhishana is also respected as counsel of Ram because he took an audacious step to rebel against the wrong deeds of his brother Raavan. In *Mahabharata*, all the characters ranging from Bhisma Pitamah, Yudhistra, Arjun, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandahri, Dhritrashtra, Karna and others are flawed as well as virtuous. The duality of virtue and vice go hand in hand in this epic which led to the need for understanding the philosophy of life – Karma, Ataman, and

Dharma as propagated by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. But before understanding the concept of karma in *Mahabharata*, let us visit *Ramayana* as an epitome of the king's actions and his devotion to his family, society, and world. An attempt is also being made to understand his responses as an affirmation of Vedic philosophy.

Ramayana is concerned with human experience. The epic has an ethical and moral purpose for all sects of society. The tales to be found in this epic largely depict the purpose of human life by indulging in „*purushartha*“ (part of human endeavours) (Chaudhari. 69). According to Uma Chaudhari, “Dharam, Kama and Artha are achievements of life but if Kama and Artha are pursued without Dharma it becomes mortal evil.” (Chaudhari.69). The epic reiterates the same premise repeatedly through various incidents. For instance- in the case of Kaekyi, when she is lusting for the throne asks king Dasharath to exile Ram for 14 years. The non-adherence of Raj Dharma by a king under the pressure of his queen leads to his sudden demise. Although it is clearly portrayed that it happens due to his “*prarabdha*” i.e., the ripened fruit of his past karma (Hopkins.72) when he unknowingly murdered Shraavan Kumar, a little boy who was looking after his blind parents and they died in his pain. But this part

of the story can be said as a pivotal point of Ram's adventure in the forests. Nonetheless, there are other episodes that can be regarded as quintessential examples of Ram and Laxman's dharma as princes of Ayodhya and their devotion to all three mothers, father and teacher, Sage Vishwamitra. (The devotion of a student towards their mother, father and teacher is regarded as part of Naitik Dharma). In Book 1, Ram fulfils his dharma as Valmiki presents the humble disposition of an ideal king in the form of Ram who remains unmoved by getting a kingdom. He does not boast about his privilege as firstborn but only perceives it as a duty that he owes to his countrymen. In Book 2, Ram emerges as an exemplar of all his dharmic intensity when he requests his father to not worry about him and provide him with the sentence of banishment. Moreover, he counsels his brother Laxman not to have any evil thoughts about their mother Kaekyi.

Ram tells Laxman not to hold grudges against Queen Kaekyi. Ram in his calm and composed stature moves to the forest and regard Kaekyi as a ploy at the hands of fate. Ram also preaches to Lakshman to worship his parents as next to God. The moral learning for life comes in the form of satisfaction, purity and humility in heart and soul so much so that even a wrongdoer is not hated for his actions. Ram's ideal character is an embodiment of selfless love,

affection, and virtue. Dasharath in painful hours recalls Ram as “my beloved law-abiding son.” (Rajgopalachari,34). In Book 2, the reader also finds that we do not only have Ram as law-abiding but also Sita as the epitome of her “Patni dharma” and Laxman and Bharat as examples of “*Bhai Dharma*”. Bharat in his rage reprimands his mother Kaikeyi and says that it is she who should be banished from the kingdom. “What possible wrong could severely law-abiding Ram have done to you that because of you they (Dasharatha and Ram) should find death and banishment both at once?” (Rajgopalachari.56). The episode of banishment of Ram can be regarded as an attempt by Valmiki to create a character who is an embodiment of transcendental idealism and heroic power. In Ayodhya Kand, Valmiki says, “Dharamo hi param loke, dharma satyam pratisthiam(Valmiki. 21-41) i.e., dharma is the prime object in this world and in Dhrama is established truth. Valmiki also enunciates that, “Dharma is eternal like soul and pain and pleasure are transient” (Chaudhari.70).

Furthermore, Bharat embodies virtue in him as he goes to Dandaka Forest and requests his brother to accept the kingship. The famous dialogue between both the brothers sets an example of penance and leadership when Bharat takes the slippers of Ram as insignia. The heightened idealism in Bharat and Ram’s

dialogue foregrounds Bharat as an example of a virtuous king who rules the kingdom by values and a true brother who respects his decision. The battle between Viradha and Ram in Danaka van depicts Ram's "patidhrama" as well as Kshatriya dharma where the killing of a demon Viradha helps the latter to attain moksha. After being slain Viradha asks Ram and Laxman who they are and then he realizes that he is being relieved from the curse and now he can go to heaven. But before that, he helps all three of them to go to Rsi Sarabhangha who will guide them further. Ram in both Valmiki's *Ramayana* and Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* is seen as a saviour of the downtrodden and the backward classes. For example, in the case of Jatayu who tries to fulfil his dharma as protector of the jungle fights with Raavan and gets martyred. Ram respects him and completes all funeral rites of him as a son. Up next, in the case of Sabri, Ram gets overwhelmed by the affection of the old lady. Sabri's devotion to Ram which he returns with his overwhelmed love towards the saintly woman by accepting the "half-eaten ber" given by a tribal woman as an offering. This scene gives a moral of the benevolent nature of *Rajdharama* where Ram accepts the hospitality of an aged tribal woman with humility. Moreover, many other episodes like Vali's Vadh and Kabandh's Vadh are significant in the plot of the story. But what appears noticeable is the

difference between a “vadh” and a murder. A vadh through a critical perception cannot be murder because here the heroic figure takes the responsibility to only kill vices of a wrongdoer but also celebrates virtues like that of Vali, Raavan, and Kumbhakaran as powerful warriors who also to be revered for their *Kshatriya Dharma*. Now that Hanuman and Ram meet, Hanuman follows his Bhakti Dharma towards Lord Ram and helps him meet his beloved Sita. The interesting fact here is that now Ram is not a King anymore but next to God and Hanuman as an ardent devotee fulfils all “Ram Karaj.” The binaries between Dharma and Kaam are visible when Hanuman visits Lanka and places himself in front of the mighty Dashanana/ King with Ten Heads. Hanuman then explains to Raavan that if he had not been antagonistic to Dharma then he possessed the ability to be a patron of the entire kingdom of gods. Raavan in his lustful pride and envy causes the destruction of his wealth and prosperity even though he is being warned by many wise people in and out of Lanka to thwart his action. Nonetheless, the story of Ram and Raavan appears perpetual for ages but the reader can find the practicality of Dharma in the entire *Ramayana*. According to Uma Chaudhari, “Valmiki does not believe in the mechanical observance of Dharma, which was generally understood as fixed moral conduct but rather an

essence that regulates family and society in social and moral terms.” (Chaudhari.72). Thus, in the context of *Ramayana*, it can be said that Ram’s dharma is above love and hatred. He is justice personified even if that means banishing his own queen. The *Raj Dharma* supersedes individual love for his wife; thus, he chooses separation. Sita in her pain of separation does not even once blames Ram for his actions and says, “Rama after loving you so long, given you all my heart and practising my vows and penances, I shall abandon my accursed life.” (Hopkins.516) She relates her bhakti to Ram as her *Svadharama* and her role as *Dharampatni*. The fading voice of Sita from the earth makes her powerful as a woman who fulfilled all her roles and now moves away from worldly life after her purpose of Dharma towards her children Luv and Kush is fulfilled and they become warriors in the ashram of sage Vishwamitra. According to Uma Chaudhari, “For Valmiki, dharma is an inner moral order than the mass of external rituals preserved and observed by people. The great sage says, *Dharamsaramidam jagat-* Dharma is an eternal essence of the universe.” (Chaudhari.74). Dharma is hence a pragmatic principle which is an objective of life that may be difficult to understand by an ordinary man. But it is regarded as the soul of every human’s actions. The ultimate essence of Vedic philosophy in Ram is that of the relation between

prema (universal love) and *santi* (inner security) with righteous conduct that has the potential of realisation of Absolute consciousness par excellence in an individual.

Unlike *Ramayana*, which is a true embodiment of an ideal figure of Ram and Sita who possess the strength to fulfil their individual dharma (Rajdharma in the case of Ram, patni dharma in Sita's case), Mahabharata's plot is a quest to establish "Dharma over Adharma" where an individual's choice plays a pivotal role. According to Uma Chaudhari, "Dharma in Ramayana is a linear concept emerging from benevolence, morality and virtue. However, by the time we reach Mahabharata the linear nature of thought is replaced by the complexity of life... What gives depth to this epic is the dharma before acting in progress... It is said again and again in the epic that to live in dharma is to live in one's purpose on earth." (Chaudhari.76). The major conflict in the epic is that Draupadi is humiliated in the court of Indraprastha. The Dharmaraja Yudhisthir himself gambles his wife by becoming a pawn in Sakuni's shrewd dice game. The question of *Raj dharma* is investigated when elders are sitting in the court and the daughter-in-law is being disrobed. So, in *Mahabharata* right and wrong are not polar divisions to be found rather the intent behind the action taken and the choice being made is of utmost importance. The second

instance occurs in the *Aryana Parava* of Mahabharata when the God of Dharma himself disguised as Yaksha appears in front of Yudhisthir and urges him to raise “Shastrath” in order to protect his unconscious brothers. The Yaksha asks 18 questions to Yudhisthir all of which are answered right by him. But a few questions that are worthy of cognizance are,

1) **Yaksh:** What is the highest dharma in the world, what dharma always bears fruit, what when restrained gives grief, and with whom does the bond never wears away?

Yudhisthir: Non-cruelty is the highest dharma, Vedic Dharma always bears fruit, the mind does not bring grief when restrained and the bond with good is never worn away.

2) **Yaksh:** Who is a man and what man owns all wealth?

Yudhisthir: Word of a good deed touches all heaven and earth; one is called a man if the word lasts. And the man for whom dear and undear are the same, as

also happiness and suffering, and both past and future own all wealth.
(Rajgopalachari. 209)

Indeed, the subtale of Yaksh and Yudhishtir's conversation in *Mahabharata* foregrounds that his virtue is exalted when asked to choose one from Bhim or Nakul by the Yaksh and he chooses Nakul over Bhim and abides by the dharma of being the elder son in the family. Krishna in the "Aryana Parva" helping them to understand that the sage was unable to understand "Dharma- vibhaga" (Chaudhari.78) i.e., the practical and the ethical aspect of the Dharma which is intricate and multifarious. Considering the above argument now let us jump onto episodes where Krishna inspires Pandu Brothers to kill the Kauravas with shrewdness. The First is the half-truth said by Yudhishtir to Drona for the killing of Drona. The second is the killing of Karan when he is unarmed and the third is the death of Duryodhan by tearing his left thigh as indicated by Krishna. Krishna as a party in the actions of Pandavas is also their mentor who places dharma on a psychological foundation and makes it practical and prefers dharma to be universal and not just personal. According to Uma Chaudhari, Krishna enunciates that dharma is to be accepted as a value-based structure that

supports and sustains the function of the entire cosmos. (Chaudhari.81). Dharma in the case of Draupadi is of a “*kshatarani*” whose all sons are killed yet she performs the role of a queen and holds Gandhari in the moment of grief. In order to sum up the theme of Dharma in Mahabharata it becomes important to dive into the Vedic philosophy of Karma, Dharma and Atman as propagated by Krishna in *Bhagavad Gita*. The Bhagavad Gita deals with the dharmic dilemma over war and its futility. Krishan in Bhagavad Gita says, “The one who deals with the way of *Samkhya*(knowledge) that speaks of inviolate nature of the soul without getting attached to it performs a yogic level of consciousness.” (Chaudhari.82)

The ethical code of conduct in the Gita can be understood through the integrated picture of a man portrayed by Krishna as “*Svadharme Nidhanam sreya*h”(it is better to die for one’s dharma than thwarting from actions) (Chaudhari. 86) Hence, to sum up, the significance of dharma in Mahabharata,

“Dhramo Visvaya Jagtah Pratishta,

Loke dharamitham praja uparsarpanti,

Tasmat dhramam parmanan vadanti.” (Chaudhari.109)

Dharma is the basis and the sustaining power of the entire cosmic world. Through Dharma, vices and evil get dissipated. All are subsumed in dharma and that is why it is said to be supreme.

Conclusion

Dharma is regarded as an ordered system of moral and spiritual values which alludes to values like devotion, duty, and discipline as essential characteristics for the development of any society. Indeed, through the entire hypothesis, it can be surely said that the term Dharma was found in Vedic philosophy around 200 million years ago; revealing that the Indian Knowledge system provides a way to understand the ultimate meaning of human excellence with a pure consciousness in the self as well as a society for not only material achievement but also the realisation of the supreme truth. To rest my words, I would like to quote powerful lines by Swami Vivekanand,

“Know your past...out of the past is built the future. Look back therefore as far as you can, drink deep of eternal fountains that are behind and after that look forward and march forward and make India greater, brighter, and much higher than she ever was.” (Sharma.56)

The rich heritage from our past offers an outstanding opportunity to strengthen life theories in the 21st century. The Vedic philosophy emanates

light on different aspects of life which aims at the unity of mankind and the welfare of society under the axiom of “*Vasudhev Kutumbhakam*”.

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