

## **CONCEPT OF DHARMA – A RESSURECTION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

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The present paper deals with the arguments through which the celebrated social philosopher of Kerala, Sree Narayana Guru, tried to establish the truth behind the implication of 'Dharma'. The confusion between the various theoretical expositions on the concept of 'varna' were countered strongly by this philosopher establishing equality of all – the denial of difference of any sort as in "Advaita."

### **Introduction**

Dharma is the scheme of values. Dharma is defined as that which supports and retains the cosmos structurally and functionally<sup>1</sup>. It occupies a key position in man's priorities for the fulfillment of the aim of life. In the Brāhmanical Tradition the word Dharma is equated with law and behaviour. That is why the legal treatises were known as Dharma śāstras and Dharma sūtras. Buddha used the term dharma or dhamma to denote the moral laws prescribed by him. Subsequently the term came to be used in the sense of nature, duty, phenomena, doctrine, truth, justice and virtue in Buddhism. In the Purāṇic Tradition dharma is a moral order. As the principles of dharma are so deep, for all practical purposes the common man generally follows the path trodden by his ancestors and predecessors. Tradition thus became the best and most important source of dharma. The social function of dharma is to hold together, maintain and perpetuate a given social order. In Dharma śāstras the principles of dharma are seen categorized as sādharma, adharmā, jātidharma, kuladharmā, viśeṣadharmā, āpaddharma etc. In short, the concept of dharma is the most basic and comprehensive and the most loosely used one. Modern thinkers in Indian Tradition have offered different interpretations to the concept of dharma. Sree Narayana guru, one of the pioneers of modern India, also interpreted

the concept of dharma in his inimitable style and scheme. In this essay an attempt is made to draw out the moral, religious, and philosophical implications of the word dharma in the philosophy of Sree Narayana guru.

### **Dharma in Hindu Tradition:**

In Vedas, dharma, like ṛta is given a near ontological status. Both are equated to truth<sup>2</sup>. Ṛta or dharma signifies the moral order of the universe that governs and determines the course of events so as to ensure that truth or dharma is always victorious and that untruth or adharma is finally defeated<sup>3</sup>. Pūrvamīmāṃsā defines dharma as what is enjoined in the Vedas<sup>4</sup>. This mīmāṃsā theory has been greatly responsible for a reverential attitude to law and its observance.

In the dharma-śāstras dharma is equated with duty. It is argued that duties ought to be performed solely because they are perceived to be one's duty, and not for the sake of any desire for their fruits. But the majority of Hindu thinkers have shown an ambivalent attitude towards the problem of relation between duty and desire for results. Dharma is frequently asserted to be as a means achieving either heaven or a better birth in the next life or even the prosperity here and now.<sup>5</sup> The vaiśeṣika sūtra clearly defines dharma as "that from which results the accomplishment of exaltation [abhyudaya] and of the supreme goal [niśreyah]<sup>6</sup>. This view of dharma or morality is apparently influenced by the traditional equation between moral and ritualistic duties. According to Āpastamba the ritualistic and social-moral duties should be performed for their own sake<sup>7</sup>. But Manu says that "akāmasya kriyā kācit dṛśyate neha karhicit", there can be no endeavour without desire<sup>8</sup>.

The Brāhmanical ritualism is generally equated with moral duty. As a result, the concept of dharma has been further enlarged and it remained associated with the concept of debt(ṛta). An individual is supposed to be born with the three-fold obligation ie, to parents, seers and gods; and that way of life is Dharma which helps man to discharge his debts to all of them. Gradually the concept of dharma has acquired a truly moral meaning, a righteous conduct in the society. According to the Mahābhārata "dharma has no limits. It extends to all spheres. It is what sustains the world<sup>9</sup>. It means that dharma or righteousness is socially oriented that is largely consists in social morality. Since

the aim of dharma is to preserve the social order, it has been generally understood as duties according to one's varṇa and stage of life. (Varṇāśramadharmā). It is in this sense that the term dharma is mostly used in the Hindu religious texts. The Bhagavadgīta strongly advocates the performance of one's duties as a necessity and it has consistently understood man's duties in terms of his class or caste<sup>10</sup>.

The referent of the concept of dharma was mostly the class (varṇa) and not the individual. One's varṇa is decided not only by one's socio-moral duties but also by the spirituo-moral virtues one was expected to practice. While Brāhmaṇas were to practice calmness, fortitude and forgiveness, Kṣatriyas were asked to practice a very different set of manly virtues<sup>11</sup>.

Dharma also means the Moral Law within man., so that acting according to dharma would mean acting in accordance with one's spiritual nature. It was naively believed by the ancient Hindus that duties in accordance with one's varṇa and stage of life are also in tune with one's inclinations or character; and hence performances of one's caste duties (svadharmā) leads to self-fulfilment<sup>12</sup>.

The Hindu concept of dharma has thus often been vitiated by its very close association with both ritualistic and caste-ordained duties, so that the purely moral sense of duty is overshadowed by these ideas. The Bhagavadgīta is a classical example, where there arises a clash of interest in between the universal duties namely, compassion, non-injury, benevolence, etc and the caste ordained duties, the former will be deserted. Hinduism has developed and emphasized its peculiar modification in the term dharma by the introduction of the prefix 'sva' to form the compound svadharmā'. It obviously refers to the social duties of the individual as they are determined by his position within the varṇa structure. Above all, in Hinduism 'dharma is a very comprehensive concept which makes it almost coextensive with entire morality. A man's dharma includes all the duties he ought to perform and all the virtues he ought to practice, that is, dharma comprehends all one ought to do all one ought to be. Bhagavadgīta observes thus: 'Sve sve karmaṇyabhirataḥ samsiddhim labhate naraḥ' (Dharma or moral law is innate in man and performing one's duties man fulfils his own inner being)<sup>13</sup>.

## Sree Narayana Guru

Sree Narayana Guru was an extraordinary phenomenon who strode over the spiritual firmament of Kerala where the Brahmanical ascent was succinctly harming the social equations, like a colossus during the late 19th century and early 20th century. He left an indelible impression on those who met him including luminaries like Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. He was a yogi, visionary, poet and a social reformer. While trying to uplift the downtrodden by fighting against the entrenched caste system, he was pursuing truth by delving into the depth of Vedic lore. While he had his feet firmly planted on earth to ensure social equality, he had his head in the high altitudes of Vedānta. He proclaimed that his ideal and goal was non-duality of reality as enshrined in the Upaniṣadic wisdom. He was acclaimed as a Siddha Puruṣa and Mahārṣi from the beginning of the 20th century. Throughout his life he executed his mission without confrontation and without creating any enemies. He never argued about anything. He never criticized anybody. He was a man of composure and action. He transformed the lunatic asylum to an abode of self respecting, forward looking and tolerant society with fraternal feelings smoothly and efficiently. People of various talents from various fields of activity were attracted to Guru. Social reformers, freedom fighters, educationalists, thinkers, poets, writers, journalists and many more were lured to Guru for guidance, light and inspiration.

## Dharma Ressurrected - in Guru's Philosophy

Sree Narayana Guru always stood for the Upaniṣadic Dharma. That Dharma is based upon spirituality which takes a comprehensive and integral view of life and that forms the basis of ethics. This is unlike the one dealt with in the Dharma śāstras like Manusmṛti which are advocating inequities among men ignoring man's inherent divinity. In the Ātmopadeśaśatakam Guru elaborates the theme of dharma that shows how a code of conduct based upon altruism is needed as a part of man's dharma for realizing the object of life.<sup>14</sup> Guru relates an ethical behaviour pattern in the worldly life to the Absolute Source of all phenomena i.e., God. Therefore, we observe him paying the highest tribute to the practice of dharma in daily life. Guru says :

Dharma eva param daivam. Dharma eva mādhanam

Dharmaḥ sarvatra vijayee. Bhavatu śreyase nṛṇām

(Dharmam is the God Supreme. Dharmam is the Wealth Greatest. Dharmam becomes Victorious ever. May it make Humans Blessed.)

Narayana Guru is often referred to as a modern Buddha. Guru incepted many ideas from the Buddha Dharma into his philosophy. Indeed the organization of sanyasins known as the “Dharma Sangham” which the Guru founded has the avowed object of propagating the Dharma of Narayana Guru in tune with the Buddha sanghams.

Guru’s stance on dharma is a complex one. According to the Advaitins, dharma, the flux of the phenomenal transformation, is not the last word. They look upon Brahman, the Absolute Being, as the ground of all. But when Guru sings ‘dharma eva param daivam’ (dharma alone is the Supreme God) he means by ‘Daivam’ the ground of all knowledge seen and unseen, just as the term ‘that’ stands for all embracing universal in the Upaniṣadic dictum “tat tvam asi” (that art thou). Elsewhere, in his Ātmopadeśasatakam Guru refers to this as “Dharmi” of which everything else is an attribute.<sup>15</sup>

Guru in ‘Nārāyaṇa smṛti’ elucidates Dharma thus: Dharma is that about which one should become enlightened. Dharma is what is to be pondered on, to be practiced and to be taught, in respect of millions of karmas. The entire visible world emerges from the one reality that is dharma in essence; it lives because of that, and merges back into the very same reality. For this reason, everything is that reality in essence<sup>16</sup>. Thus Guru reminds that being constantly interested in doing well to others, man should certainly be seeking for the dharma, which is always sinless and is the cause of attaining all that is meaningful in life. Here I would like to point out just some examples from the noble life of Sree Narayana Guru to enlighten how the Dharma has been manifested in various forms in his activities.

### Consecration of Temples

What Sree Narayana Guru essentially demonstrates through his idea of consecrating temples for the downtrodden masses of Kerala is his adherence to his dharma of “making man a better man” through the purer and nobler aspects of religion. Moreover, Guru’s practical genius

for transforming traditional institutions to serve as vehicles of change and modernization was reflected in his concept of the temple. His establishment of new temples for the lower castes was historically a major rebellion against Hindu Orthodoxy. His conception of the temple and the role he assigned to it in the society was something new, “Temples” he said, “should not be built in an expensive manner as was the custom in ancient days. No money should be spent on elaborate festivals. Adjacent to the temple there should be schools and reading rooms. Small scale industrial training schools should also be attached to the temples. The offering at the temples should be used for the welfare of the people”.<sup>17</sup> This is the creative approach of a social revolutionary, who understood the people and their culture, and who sought to transform a traditional institution into an organ of social change while maintaining its characteristic as a place of worship. Sree Narayana Guru’s message is that temples are not made for the gods but for man, for the all round development and self fulfillment of man. Recognizing the need for inculcating values for righteous ways of life, at one of the temples he installed a slab with the words satyam (truth), dharmam (Righteousness), dayā (compassion) and sneham (love).

### **One Caste, One Religion One God for mankind**

Sree Narayana Guru was a great revolutionary humanist. His humanism was so systematic that it had a revolutionary impact on the spiritual and material development of man and the society. His creed of “One Caste, One Religion, and One God for mankind”<sup>18</sup> logically and inevitably put man at the centre of things. He declared ‘‘which ever be the religion, it is enough if it makes a better man’’. He envisaged happiness both temporal and spiritual; as the goal of human striving, not only the happiness of the individual but of mankind. Every one strives for his own happiness”<sup>19</sup> so said Guru. Though he put the individual human being at the centre of things and maintained that man were motivated in all their actions by the desire for happiness, he believed that the happiness of the individual should sub-serve the happiness of all in the society. His humanism was thus not one of narrow individualism as of many mystic self-realization, but an all-encompassing social concept. It is therefore, not easy to categorize him in terms of philosophical schools or ideological isms as has been attempted by many.

### **Education as a Developmental Impute :**

To analyze further Guru's dharma epitomizes the field of education as a necessary prerequisite for the development of man. Guru's faith in education was touching. He rightly considered it the sovereign remedy for the backwardness of the depressed classes. Education is the only way they can uplift themselves from ignorance and poverty and challenge successfully the discriminations and exploitations, to which they have been subjected for centuries. He advocated English education and also education of both boys and girls. If Kerala is today the most educationally advanced state in India it is partly because of this passionate advocacy of education for the masses by Sree Narayana guru. He was very much ahead of his times when he pleaded for and set up institutions for technical and industrial education and for developing handicrafts and small-scale industries.

Sree Narayana Guru was a fighter, a compassionate fighter and 'his creed of 'One Caste, One Religion, One God for mankind', was a battle-cry against the entrenched system of caste in Hindu society. Since the days of the Buddha, no one, not even Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Sri Ramakrishna, Svami Vivekananda or Mahatma Gandhi had questioned the caste system so fundamentally and totally as Sree Narayana Guru did. All others wanted to reform rather than abolish this inequitable system. Assembling a formidable array of simple, direct, moral, ethical and rational arguments, he challenged theoretically as well as practically the validity of varṇāśrama dharma. Characterizing caste as a ridiculous phantom he demonstrated that it had no basis in philosophy, tradition, reality or biological factors. Caste could not be found in man's body or mind or speech or action and 'it were not Brāhminhood but "Man's Humanity" that marked out man"<sup>20</sup>. The most penetrating argument used by the Guru was that Caste has no justification in terms of profession as claimed by the orthodox and the pseudo-modernists among the Hindus. Guru said, "Caste degrades the professions, those who know only one thing in the world and have no idea about anything else will not be skillful in any work. Caste makes it impossible to take up professions according to aptitude. Progress becomes impossible. It is therefore false to say that caste creates hereditary experts".

## Conclusion

In short, Sree Narayana Guru was a satyadarśin and samadarśin. The fountain source of all activities of Guru was Dharma which is Truth and Righteousness. Dharma manifested through Guru in the form of compassion, kindness and love. Guru utilized his philosophical vision of non-duality as a formidable weapon against all social evils. Especially Guru's idea and arguments were so powerful to fight the menacing survival of casteism of India. At the same time they have world wide significance to fight discrimination everywhere and in every form. In asking the people to depend upon their own resources, he inspired them with self-respect and self-help, which helped to draw out their latent capacities. The power thus released was canalized into constructive channels, resulting in the creation of network of institutions to serve the religious, educational, social and economic needs of the community throughout the province of Kerala. Sree Narayana Dharma thus stands as the supreme symbol of hope and redemption to the depressed classes of India.

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