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## Dharma And Duty In The Framework Of Varnashrama: A Gandhian Perspective

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### Abstract

This paper critically explores Mahatma Gandhi's interpretation of dharma (duty) within the framework of Varnashrama Dharma, a traditional Hindu classification of social and spiritual life. For Gandhiji, the concept of rights was inseparable from duties—he firmly asserted that “real rights are the result of the performance of duty.” Dharma, in his view, transcended religious rituals or scriptures, existing instead as a spiritual quality intrinsic to every soul. Rooted in self-realization, this inner dharma guides human beings to perform their duties towards themselves and society. Drawing from Hindu philosophy, especially the Bhagavad Gita, Gandhi emphasized svadharma—one's personal duty based on nature (svabhava)—as a moral imperative.

Within this framework, the varna system represents occupational classification based on aptitude and qualities, while ashrama represents the stages of life. Gandhi endorsed Varna, not as a rigid caste system, but as a dynamic, functional structure for harmonious social living. He opposed untouchability and the hereditary caste-based discrimination, recognizing these as corruptions of the original varna ideal. This study thus reaffirms Gandhiji's call to reinterpret traditional frameworks in ethical and inclusive ways, especially in the context of modern Indian democracy and social reform.

### Introduction

The concept of dharma—often translated as duty, righteousness, or moral order—holds a central place in Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions. Within this broad framework, the doctrine of Varnashrama Dharma seeks to organize human life through a dual classification: varna (based on one's nature and work) and ashrama (based on stages of life). However, Mahatma Gandhi reinterpreted these concepts through a deeply ethical and spiritual lens, linking dharma directly to human responsibility and the pursuit of truth.

For Gandhiji, the modern emphasis on individual rights, divorced from responsibilities, was insufficient for building a just and harmonious society. He argued that real rights emerge from the sincere performance of one's duties. Dharma, for Gandhi, was not tied to any specific religious dogma or scripture. Instead, it was a universal moral quality embedded in every soul, guiding individuals toward self-realization and social harmony. Drawing inspiration from Hindu philosophy, especially the Bhagavad Gita, Gandhi emphasized svadharma—one's personal duty according to one's inherent nature (svabhava)—as the foundation of ethical life.

Gandhiji's interpretation of Varnashrama Dharma rejected its rigid, birth-based caste application. Instead, he envisioned a society where social roles were determined by individual abilities and moral growth, not heredity. While upholding the functional value of the varna system, he firmly opposed untouchability and social discrimination.

This paper explores Gandhiji's vision of dharma as a dynamic, moral force deeply connected to both personal evolution and social order. It critically examines his reinterpretation of Varnashrama Dharma, distinguishing it from the regressive caste system, and highlights its relevance in the modern discourse on duty, rights, and justice.

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## Dharma

For Gandhiji, only right is not sufficient to bring a peaceful state for human beings. Hence, right needs to be accompanied by duty (*dharma*). Here *dharma* for him is not understood in the sense of creed, or any particular religious text does not learn it. Gandhiji states, “*Dharma does not mean any particular deed or dogma. Nor does it mean reading or learning by rote books known as Shastras [the traditional treaties on dharma] or even in believing all that they say. Dharma is a quality of the soul and is present, visibly, or invisibly, in every human being. Through it, we know our duty in human life and our true relations with other souls. It is evident that we cannot do so till we have known the self in us. Hence dharma is the means by which we can know ourselves.*”<sup>1</sup> Anthony. J. Parel calls this *dharma* “natural *dharma*” according to Parel, ‘through this *dharma*, we have access to basic moral insights about what is right and wrong, good and evil.’ Therefore, Gandhiji said, “Real rights are a result of performance of one’s duties.”<sup>2</sup>

According to Gandhiji, to be a human being, a person learns to live with others, respect them and respect himself, which indicates taking care of oneself and cooperating with others. Gandhiji holds that to perform one’s duty is to be free from all barriers in his life. To perform a duty freely indicates liberty to think as he wants. More clearly, it is independency to live, which is his right. With this reasoning, he repeatedly persists that “rights are a result of performance of duty.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Gandhiji stated to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Committee, “All rights to be reserved and preserved come from duty well done. Thus, the very right to live accrues to use only when we do the duty of citizenship of the world. From this fundamental statement, perhaps it is easy enough to define the duties of man and woman and correctly every right to correlate to some corresponding duty to be first performed. Every other right can be shown to be usurpation hardly worth fighting for.”<sup>4</sup>

Dr Bhagwan Das states, “In its exact ethical sense duty means an action which is due, which ought to be done, which is owed; it is an obligation to be discharged. Nature is ever restoring disturbed equilibrium, and the universal law of karma, of action and reaction, is the full statement of this fact. She is always balancing her accounts. Duties are the debts a man owes his fellows. Paid to discharge the obligations under which he lies for benefits received.”<sup>5</sup>

The word 'Dharma' has been variously translated as an ordinance, duty, right, justice, morality, law, virtue, religion, ethics, good works, code of conduct, and so on. Karma theory in Indian philosophy is closely allied to the concept of Dharma. Its literal translation in English is Religion, but in its connotation, *dharma* is more comprehensive and all-pervasive than a just form of some institutionalised religion. Its semantic connotations fall more in line with Law, Commandments, or Injunctions,

than religion. Religion is the institutionalized form of Dharma expressed in various Indo-religions like Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam, but *Dharma*, as such, is more comprehensive than its pragmatic expressions. Etymologically derived from the root *Dhr*, *Dharma* means that which ‘holds or support’. It is a principle of giving unity, coherence and cohesiveness to reality. It is a blanket term for those universal laws that uphold cosmic creation, which supports an individual’s life in this cosmic scheme. Whatever *Dharma* ordains an individual to perform is moral and acceptable as it is in the general welfare of the person and applies to all individuals, like Kant’s first maxim of moral imperative. Whatever is against these universal laws is *dharma* or immoral. Cosmic harmony manifests itself in the principle of *Rta*, in individual life, expressed in *Dharma*. It is a comprehensive doctrine of morality in an individual’s personal and social affairs, which is to be obeyed with spiritual religiosity. Deviation from one’s *dharma* is scoffed at as an act of humiliation. *Dharma* is thus a combo term covering a whole range of controls. It is a supervisory sanction by which every karma is acceptable to the society and scriptures and has to be in tune with it. Karma is held acceptable only if it obeys the command of Dharma. Like *Rta*, *Dharma* is eternal and all-pervading, covering every single human activity within its gamut. Charting out the immense field of Dharma, remarks Joshi, “Dharma is indeed a law or a guideline to prevent human beings from falling into crooked ways of the ordinary and unbridled demands of impulses, desires, ambitions and egoisms.”<sup>6</sup> Dharma is the compendium of ethical decorum codified in the form of Vedic injunctions for various stages of human life and various activities. Delving upon the relationship between Dharma and *Rta*, Billimoria remarks -

“One’s actions are therefore consistent with that which promotes the good so perceived, and desists from doing that which promotes or stimulates the bad so that the *Rta* is not unduly disturbed. An act is therefore right if it conforms to this general principle, and an act is wrong if it contravenes it (and so is *anrta*)... This convergence of the cosmic and the moral orders is universally commended in due course in the all-embracing appellation of *dharma* (from its earlier sense of ‘religious ordinances and fixed principles’)”<sup>7</sup>

As the famous verse of *Mahabharata* defines *Dharma* --

धारणात्धर्म इत्यहुः धर्मो धारयते प्रजाः।

यः सयात्धारणसंयुक्तः स धर्मोति निश्चितः॥३

“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.”<sup>8</sup>

And, “Dharma or duty forms the basis of Puranic ethics, and it embraces all those factors which contribute to the progress and well-being of the individual, society and the world at large.”<sup>9</sup>

Sri Aurobindo also says that, “it has been said that democracy is based on the right of man; it has been replied that it should rather take its stand on the duties of man; but both rights and duties are European ideas. Dharma is the Indian conception in which rights and duties lose the artificial antagonism created by a view of the world, making selfishness the root of action and regaining their deep and eternal unity. Dharma is the basis of democracy which Asia must recognise, for in this lies the distinction between the soul of Asia and the soul of Europe”.<sup>10</sup>

As we know, Gandhi was very fond of the Hindu religion, especially a follower of *Vaishnav*, more clearly the follower of the almighty God Bishnu. In the Hindu religion, duty has been explained in terms of *Dharma* – the cementing force of the universe. In Hindu tradition, duty is classified into five categories: sacrifices to Brahman, ancestors, animal creation, and fellow beings. Through these five-fold duties, man can realize himself and the universe. “Dharma meant not just the religious duty of the individual but also of the status group: its objective was making a human society that would conform to an underlying order and balancing in the universe (*rita*)”.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Gandhiji’s vision of Duty and Varnashrama Dharma**

For Gandhiji, the duty of human beings is nothing but the way of the union of the individual to the whole cosmos. This activity elevates one from wild to civilized, gross to refined, and physical to spiritual upliftment. Action accrued from the spiritual enlightenment enriches social life. A balanced life between the individual and the society is maintained so that each finds the platform to fulfil their goal according to their potential qualities. In this sense, it may be called a sustainable societal approach. But the word ‘*varna*’ stands for the choice of action according to one’s nature (*svabhava*), whereas the term ‘ashrama’ stands for the individual’s life stages. In other words, the whole profession of social life can broadly be categorized under four heads-Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The concept of ‘ashrama’ signifies the stages of individual life. A man’s life span in normal condition is viewed under four stages. It says one has a specific duty to discharge at a certain stage. Discharge of appropriate duties in the proper stage makes it easy to realize the ultimate goal. It prescribes the ways to lead a good and fulfilled life. That means each one undergoes these stages, but in the ‘varna’ system, each one is not entitled to do a particular kind of profession. Qualities and propensities are not equal, so professions cannot be one. There are as many professions as there are qualities and choices. From this, it appears that there is no connection between the concept of ashrama and varna. But in fact, there is a close relationship

between them. In each stage of life, one must discharge duties appropriate to one. Such practices in life unfold the creativity within, and accordingly, the agent's choice and course of action alter. The alterity within brings alterity outside. The way of life (*svadharma*) gets modified by modifying one’s nature (*svabhava*). The life of the individual is intertwined with the life of the universal. Gandhiji, therefore, says that varna is not to be identified with caste and religion. As he says- “untouchability is a crime against God and Man”. As S. Radhakrishnan expresses his view in *THE HINDU VIEW OF LIFE* – that the individual and social sides of karma are inseparably intertwined, the theory of Varna or caste emphasises the social aspect, and that of ashrama or stages of life, the individual aspect.

For Gandhiji, the concept of caste is a perversion of the original. In the last chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, it is said that an action should be performed according to his qualities, from where he gets inspiration. And he recognized the biological basis of caste and its basic non-alterability.

Later, Gandhiji did not keep up his defence of eating and marriage restrictions. He firmly opposed untouchability. But he was not anti of *Varnashramadharm*, the social four divisions. But he says that caste has nothing to do with religion; it is a custom whose origin I do not know, and I do not need to know for the satisfaction of spiritual hunger. This sort of activity is harmful to both the spiritual and national good.

He believed that marriage should be arranged within the caste in the early days. It was uttered in 1918 by him, indicating that ‘*Varna*’ is somewhat more specific than the concept of *Jati*. But later on, in 1931, he condemned *Jatis* the division of social structure, which is based on one’s birth; and extolled the Varna system based on the occupation consisting of (1) deliverer of knowledge, (2) defenders of the defenceless, (3) provider of food to the people, and (4) provider of service to all others. In the meantime, he announced that there should be the intermarriage.

So, according to him, a man’s duty should be considered based on Varna, not caste. According to him, caste should go for having a good social and political India. The emergence of the caste system has been a subject of controversy and discussion among scholars. But it is generally accepted that its four divisions are initially based on occupation, not birth. Though the distinction between *jati* and *varna* has importance for the discussion of the concept of Gandhiji’s notion of duty, in the present time, it is essential to re-imply the Varna system instead of the caste system because the design of caste or *jati* exists with its all features of discriminations and untouchability.

#### **Conclusion**

Mahatma Gandhi’s reinterpretation of dharma within the framework of Varnashrama Dharma presents a profound moral vision rooted in both individual self-realization and

collective harmony. For Gandhi, dharma was not a rigid set of religious commands or caste-based obligations but a spiritual principle inherent in every human being. He viewed duty as the foundation of a just society, asserting that rights flow naturally from the sincere performance of one's responsibilities. In this sense, dharma is not merely a social code but a path to personal freedom and moral upliftment.

Gandhi's approach to varna emphasized natural aptitude (svabhava) rather than hereditary privilege. He upheld the functional aspect of the varna system, where social roles are defined by qualities and actions rather than by birth. At the same time, he firmly rejected caste-based discrimination and untouchability as moral and social evils. His insistence on the distinction between varna and jati reflects his deeper commitment to social equality and human dignity.

By harmonizing the ethical teachings of the Gita with the lived realities of colonial and modern India, Gandhi transformed Varnashrama Dharma into a tool for both spiritual growth and social reform. His philosophy challenges modern societies to move beyond the language of entitlement and reorient towards a duty-based ethics that nurtures both individual potential and communal welfare.

In today's fractured world, where rights are often demanded without a corresponding sense of responsibility, Gandhi's emphasis on dharma as duty offers a timeless corrective. Reclaiming his vision can serve as a guiding principle for reshaping contemporary discussions around justice, freedom, and societal well-being.

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