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TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF DHARMA AS RTA

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Dharma,</i> <i>Dhamma,</i> <i>Smriti,</i> <i>A primordial</i> <i>unmoved mover,</i> <i>The recurring</i> <i>Paradox</i> <i>Rta,</i> <i>Satya.</i>	The Sanskrit word 'dharma' (or 'dhamma' in Pali) possessing multifarious life forms is derived from the root, dhr which means to uphold, to establish, to support or to maintain. Dharma is that which ensures the order and harmony of the universe and also embodies the guiding principles for social order as well as righteous behaviour of individuals. This omnibus term having no exact translation in any language and defied a universal definition is generally regarded as a normative concept that encompasses the recurring paradox of ancient Indian thought, the paradox being that a tradition based on memory or smriti must establish a perennial relationship between the eternal absolute truth and contingent historical truth. It is also considered as an Indian metaphysical equivalent of a primordial unmoved mover, something that causes motion without itself moving, that can be widely used in a variety of contexts to indicate various ideas. Rta as cosmic truth signifies those principles by which both natural and social worlds are sustained whereas Satya embodies individual truth i.e., the fulfillment by an individual of his personal duty under the rta. The main purpose of the paper is to study the different issues related to the genesis of concept of dharma as rta which are manifested particularly in the Rig Veda.



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Sanskrit word, 'dharma' (or 'dhamma' in Pali) as one of the most comprehensive notions in ancient Indian thought embracing multifarious life forms is derived from the root, 'dhr' which means to uphold, to establish, to support or to maintain. 'Next to the category of reality, that of dharma is the most important concept in Indian thought'. (Radhakrishnan, 1927 P-27). Dharma is that which ensures the order and harmony of the universe and embodies the guiding principles for social order as well as righteous behaviour of individuals. This omnibus term having no exact translation in any language and defied a unified interpretation is generally regarded as a normative concept that is inclusive of the recurring paradox of ancient Indian thought, the paradox being that a tradition based on memory or Smriti that enjoined obedience to the approved ways of living on the followers of Hinduism and its cognate religions must establish a continuous relationship between the eternal absolute truth and contingent historical truth. It is also considered as an Indian metaphysical equivalent of a primordial unmoved mover, something that causes motion without itself moving, that can be widely used in a variety of contexts to indicate various ideas. Rta as cosmic truth signifies those principles by which both natural and social worlds are sustained whereas Satya embodies individual truth i.e., the fulfillment by an individual of his personal duty under the rta. The main objective of the paper is to examine the different issues related to the genesis of the concept of dharma as rta which are manifested particularly in the Rig Veda with the overall aim of proper understanding of its regular rehabilitation as a wider frame of reference within the context of ritual, ethical, social and political changes.

2. THE IDENTITY OF RTA WITH SATYA

While discussing complex issues concerning the historical understanding of the concept of dharma, it is necessary to situate the study relative to the general pessimism inherent in various attempts to bring out its omnipresent meaning. In spite of the view of Collett Cox that 'the ultimate origin of the various uses of the dharma is obscure and that their historical development or inter-traditional diffusion is impossible to determine' (Cox, 2004, p. 122), the paper makes a humble attempt to trace its current usages in different schools of Indian philosophy back to the genesis of the notion of rta and its relation to both satya and yajna as manifested in Rig Veda. Here, Satya referred to as truth is derived from the verb root 'as' meaning 'to be' (Grimes, 1996, p-290) indicates the world of the highest truth or being and rta derived from the root , 'r' signifying 'to rise or tend upward' (Grimes, p-256) is defined as fixed or settled order, rule, divine law or truth. Rta as cosmic truth signifies those principles by which both natural and social worlds are sustained whereas Satya indicates individual truth i.e., the fulfillment by an individual of his personal duty under the rta.

One important issue concerning the rudimentary stage of the evolution of dharma which has its origin in the myths of Vedic Hinduism may be discussed in the light of the inseparable relationship between satya and rta which becomes the foundational idea behind the dynamic concept of dharma, as 'the Law of Being'. (Mckenzie, 1922, p. 38) In this context, it is important to point out the fact that the notion of 'Tapas' (heat or energy; derived from the verb root, 'tap' meaning 'to



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burn') (Grimes, 1996 p-315) which plays a prominent role in the creation myth in the sense that it was through this notion that the Primal Being began to create (Rig Veda 10.129 (Mckenzie, 1922, p. 14) symbolizes the original stuff that underlies the Vedic vision of the highest reality. The highest reality i.e., That One (tadekam) which exists prior to being and non-being is the end product of the internal working of 'tapas'. Rig Veda 10.129 presents an interesting account of the unique feature of this transcendental reality which is conceived as the hidden and unmanifest source of the phenomenal world. 'There was darkness, hidden by darkness, in the beginning. This All was an undistinguished ocean. From the potentiality enveloped by emptiness that one was born by its own tapas'. (Koller, p. 138, April, 1972). In the words of John M. Koller, 'That one appears as the first manifestation and then through desire, volition and thinking, the processes of manifestation and differentiation proceeded to produce this world'. (Koller, April, 1972, p. 138). Further, 'in Rig Veda 10.190 it is said that from tapas (heat; may be the heat of the yajna fire) were born rta and stya. And from that (referring to rta and satya together as though they were one and the same), was born night, and from that the billowy sea'. (Koller, April, 1972, p. 136).

Satya is cognate with Rta in the sense that the former denotes the truth of the highest reality, and the latter indicates the order or functioning of the said reality. 'Rta and Satya, in their fullness, belong to the unmanifest reality, and only in their lower expressions are they found in the manifest world of ordinary experience' (Koller, April, 1972, p. 137). 'It is not surprising that almost the entire Rig Veda in its speculative passages seems to be a quest for the deeper structure of reality (Koller, April, 1972, p. 137) though 'praise of the power and skill of the gods, prayer for temporal benefits and celebration of the power of the sacrifices are its chief themes'. (Mackenzie, 1972, p.4). One universal reality is, thus, represented by the names of different gods viz., Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Agni, Yama Matarisvan, etc. In Rig Veda 1.164 it is mentioned that 'They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni and he is heavenly, nobly winged Garutman. To what is One sages give many a title. They call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan. (Mckenzie, 1972 p-4) Among a pantheon of gods, Varuna as the Vedic God of the guardian of cosmic order and Mitra as the Vedic God of harmony are given a special position because they possess the extraordinary moral authority in the proper maintenance of the functioning of the universe. The following description of these two gods (devas) as mentioned in the Rig Veda clearly testifies to this fact. 'The home of Mitra-Varuna is in heaven (Rig Veda I. 136-2). There they sit in their golden dwelling place, supporters of mankind (RV5:67.2). Their eye is the sun and with it they watch mankind. To Mitra-Varuna the Sun reports the deeds of men, watching the deeds of living creatures like a herdsman (RV7:60 1-3). Nothing can happen without Varuna's knowledge or without his sanction. Even Gods themselves follow his decree'. (RV 8: 41.7) (Mackenzie 1922, p.5). The fact that the gods (devas) in particular Varuna as 'the omniscient, all-encompassing sky (James, 1969) and the personalized aspect of the otherwise impersonal rta, (Ramakrishna, 1965) reveal their true nature when they follow the path set for them by the way of rta mirrors the identity of truth with rta which is regarded as one of the profoundest aspects of the Vedic world outlook (Koller, p. 136).



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Further, in Rig Veda, it is said that ‘All falsehood, Mitra-Varuna, ye conquer, and closely cleave into unto the Law eternal. (Rig Veda 1. 152-1). Far from deceits, thy name dwelled in holy Law’. (Rig Veda 5: 44-2) (Mackenzie, 1922, p.8). In some other passages of Rigveda, Mitra-Varuna are shown as ‘true to Law, born in Law, the strengtheners of Law, haters of the false’. (RV, 7; 66-13)(Mckenzie, 1922, p.8) and the laws of Varuna are considered as ‘ever true’ (RV 5: 44-2) (Mackenzie, 1922, p.8).As Edwin James rightly says, ‘Varuna attained the position of universal Power par excellence maintaining ‘Rta’ and is celebrating as having separated and established heaven and earth, spreading them out as the upper and lower firmaments, himself enthroned above them as the universal king, ordering the immutable moral law exercising his rule by the sovereignty of rta’. (James, 1969).

Thus, it may be pointed out that the issue of the identity of truth with Rta has two important implications. Firstly, truth becomes not only the law of the universe but also the eternal basis of both moral and cosmic order. This fact is fully illustrated by the following passage as stated in Rigveda. ‘Truth is the base that bears the Earth (Rigveda 10 85-1) (Mckenzie, p.8) From Fervour kindled to its height, Eternal Law and Truth were born (Rigveda 10: 190-1) (Mckenzie, p.8).Secondly, Rta occupies the centre of reality known as the Kendrasya Kendram(center of centres) which is identified with the Satyasa Stayam (truth of truths) as mentioned in Brahmans.(Koller, p. 136). In brief, the nature of the highest reality which is regarded as the genesis of the manifest reality of the terrestrial world is synonymous with truth expressed as rta. This is, in one important sense, the embryonic stage of the evolution of the concept of dharma as the universal principle of law, order, harmony and truth.

3. RTA AND ITS RELATION TO YAJNA (SACRIFICE)

The cosmic order or law prevailing in nature is recognized under the name of rta.... The same word also designates ‘order’ in the moral world as sacrifice or ‘rite’. (McDonell, 1897 p-11).‘In religious practices, rta refers not only to the harmonious sequence of ritualistic function but to their inner meaning: a dramatic, miniature and symbolic representation of the cosmic process that process according to which all parts work in harmony with the whole towards a common end’. (Miller, 1978 p-144). ‘The world order, its regular movement, its activities converging on the aim of fostering life, all this seems to have been considered from the very beginning of manifestation’.

- ‘By that sacrifice the gods paid homage to the sacrificial-host. Such were the first ordinances’ (Rig Veda X 90.16)
- ‘All the gods worshipped in sacrifice the divine life’ (Rig Veda X. 130.3) (Miller, 1978 p-144).

As Jeanine G. Miller rightly says, ‘The underlying factor of the inter-linkedness of all participants, their joining forces in a common re-enactment of the universal process of creation –the sacred ‘work’ apas par excellence – is a peculiar characteristic of the Vedic conception of the sacrifice, a



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characteristic which explains its intimate link with rta.’ (Miller, 1978, p. 144). Yajna or sacrifice as ‘a work’ (apas), religious ceremony, an action (Karman), ‘a participation, communication-in-worship or communion’. (Miller, 1978 p-145) is conceived by the Rigvedic seers as a universal process to which all things are subservient, an eternal give and take.’ (Miller, 1978 p- 147).

On the importance of the Vedic sacrifice, Michael Witzel said, ‘The ritual oblations and the hymns of praise are just one act in an endless cycle of exchanges of anna food between the humans and the gods’. (Witzel, 2003 p. 78) Foods travel towards the gods in the form of smoke and aroma (medha) and is consumed by them. The remains here on earth are a return gift of the gods who have tasted the food while sitting at the sacred fire’ (Witzel, 2003) and the remnants are consumed by the human beings. ‘The gods also give other return gifts to men, e.g., rain, sons, food, long life –the standard wishes of a Vedic Indian.’ (Witzel, 2003) Thus, ‘the sacrificial action which consists in enlightening of the fire, the pouring of the ghee, the pressing of the Soma and its preparation with milk by means of which songs of praise and visions-translated-into-hymns are offered up to the gods is the Vedic ritual par excellence.’ (Miller, 1978 P- 152).

The close relation between rta and sacrifice in Rig Veda is clearly expressed by H. Lefever. He remarked;

In the hymns of the Rig Veda, the term rta is most frequently used in connection with the sacrifice. It denotes ‘the law of worship’ in accordance with which the sacrifice reaches the Gods and elicits their aid. It is thus not the actual ceremony itself, nor the ‘institution’ of the sacrifice ... But the ‘ordered course’ of the sacrifice both of the ritual and of the divine power by which the sacrifice achieves its end’. (Lefever, 1935 pp-2-3).

4. THE UNIQUE NATURE OF RTA

‘The concept of rta is most often used in the Rigveda to signify the unchanging order of the highest reality which is the source of all order in the universe’.(Koller, 1972 p-136).It is regularly referred to in connection to various Vedic deities particularly Varuna who is identified as the ‘friend of Rta’ (Rig Veda 7.52. 9: RV 8.25.2 in Rama Krishna, 1965 p-133) Varuna and Mitra ‘who by rta foster the rta, lords of the lights of rta; (Rig Veda 1.23.5 Miller, 1978 p-67) have ‘overcome all disorders’ and ‘aligned themselves with rta’(Rig Veda 1.152.1 Miller, 1978 p-67). They ‘rule over the whole world in accordance with the rta (Rig Veda. V. 63. 7 Miller, 1978 p-67). In the words of John M. Koller, ‘The whole universe is described as being founded upon rta and moving according to it. The down follows the path of rta, the right path, as if she knew them before. She never oversteps the regions. The sun follows the path of rta.’ (Rig Veda 1.24.8)’ (Koller, 1972 p-135). Thus, the unique features of rta can be stated as follows. ‘It is the cosmic and dynamic principle of Law and Order or the transcendent objective Law of the Universe, applying not only to ritual and natural phenomena, but also to human conduct’. (Lefever, 1935 p-14). In one important sense, the Rta was not created or willed by any being or beings, the gods or any other above them. It existed before them but became known by them. They were powerless to alter it; they were only agents to execute it or supervise its execution’. (Brown, 1992 p-373). This statement clearly shows the underlying



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assumption behind the development of the complex concept of dharma. Further, 'all the created beings fulfill their true nature when they follow the path set for them by the ordinances of Rta and failing to follow those ordinances was thought to be responsible for the appearance of various forms of calamity and suffering' (Day, 1982 P-28).

5. CONCLUSION

As E.W. Hopkins has suggested in his work, 'Ethics of India', there is a threefold use of the term, 'rta' viz., (i) the regularity or order of non-human physical processes, (ii) order in moral conduct and (iii) order in the relations of gods and men as expressed in the ritual or sacrifices of religion. (Hopkins, 1924). Submission of all to the dictates of rta, referred to as their dharma, becomes mandatory in the maintenance of an ordered course of the universe that will usher in harmonious progress of all. 'Since to do what is right safeguards the good of all qua Rta, it is assumed that it is more or less obligatory to do or perform the right acts'. (Bilimoria et.al., 2007, p- 33) Thus, the individual who follows the ordinances of nature can be described as one who acts according to the 'Dharma of Rta'. (Day 1982p- 45).

There arises a convergence of the cosmic and the moral orders and this fact becomes the ontological foundation of Dharma. In brief, dharma originated as a finite or particularized manifestation of Rta became so useful for framing religious, moral and social regulations, that interest in it and discussion of its application to social and moral orders eclipsed all discussions of metaphysical and theological ideas ...' (Day, 1982 p-42).

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