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## The global relevance of Indian ethics: An exploration of timeless value 'Dharma'

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### Abstract

In a world grappling with interconnected challenges like climate change, social inequality, and global conflict, ethical frameworks are more crucial than ever. This work delves into the enduring relevance of Indian ethics, particularly the concept of Dharma, in navigating the complexities of the 21st century. Dharma, a multifaceted concept encompassing ethical conduct, fulfilling duties, and maintaining cosmic order, offers timeless values that resonate across cultures. This exploration examines how core Dharmic principles like non-violence (ahimsa), truthfulness (satya), and living in harmony with nature can be applied to address contemporary issues. By examining foundational texts like the Bhagavad Gita and The Manusmriti, the work explores how Dharma can be reinterpreted for a globalized world. It highlights the concept's adaptability in promoting social justice, environmental sustainability, and peaceful conflict resolution. The exploration acknowledges the challenges of navigating complex situations and the limitations of traditional interpretations. It emphasizes the importance of reinterpreting Dharma for a global context, fostering open dialogue across cultures, and finding common ground between ethical principles and scientific knowledge.

Ultimately, this work argues that Dharma's core values hold immense potential to guide individuals and societies towards a more just, sustainable, and peaceful future.

**Keywords:** Dharma, Indian ethics, global relevance, ahimsa, Satya, climate change, social justice, sustainability, Bhagavad Gita

### Introductions

Dharma, a cornerstone of Indian ethics, finds its roots in the ancient Indian texts. These texts, spanning centuries and diverse philosophical traditions, provide a window into the evolution and multifaceted nature of the Dharma. The earliest mentions of Dharma appear in the Vedas, the foundational scriptures of Hinduism. In Vedas, Dharma is associated with Rta, the cosmic order that governs the universe. Fulfilling one's Dharma ensures the smooth functioning of this order, with each element (including humans) playing its designated role. The Upanishads, philosophical treatises associated with the Vedas, elaborate on the concept of Dharma. They emphasize Dharma as a universal principle of law, righteousness, and truth (Satya). For example, the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad equates Dharma with ultimate reality: "There is nothing higher than Dharma".

Further, the later text Dharmasutras lay out practical rules and rituals associated with different social classes (Varnas) and stages of life (Ashramas). The Manusmriti, elaborate on social duties and obligations based on Varna and Ashrama. While these texts can be criticized for perpetuating social hierarchies, they also emphasize the importance of living a virtuous life and contributing to social well-being. The Ramayana and Mahabharata, epic poems of Hinduism, showcase the concept of Dharma in action. These stories depict characters grappling with moral dilemmas and fulfilling their Dharma even in challenging circumstances. Moreover, across diverse religions like Buddhism (Dhamma), Jainism (Dharma), and Sikhism (Dharam), the concept of Dharma is reinterpreted and emphasized.

### Discussion

Now, with this multifaceted nature of Dharma, its contemporary relevance requires engaging with several philosophical questions:

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**Q1. To what extent is Dharma universal, applying to all individuals regardless of culture, and to what extent is it particular, adapting to specific social contexts and personal circumstances?**

As a central concept in Hinduism 'Dharma' embodies both universal ethical principles and a framework that adapts to specific contexts.

**Some Universal Aspects of Dharma are:**

- **Righteous conduct:** Across Hindu texts, Dharma is associated with right action, fulfilling one's duties, and living a moral life. The Bhagavad Gita, emphasizes the importance of fulfilling one's Dharma regardless of personal desires.
- **Harmony and Order:** Dharma is seen as the underlying principle that maintains cosmic order and social harmony. Following one's Dharma ensures the well-ordered functioning of the universe.

**However the Particular Aspects of Dharma are:**

- **Varna (social class) and Ashrama (stage of life):** Dharmic duties vary based on one's social class (Varna) and stage of life (Ashrama). A merchant's Dharma differs from that of a student or priest.
- **Individual circumstances:** Dharma acknowledges the complexities of life. Situations may arise where fulfilling one's duty might cause harm. Texts like the Mahabharata discuss the concept of "Dharma-sankata" where the most appropriate course of action is determined based on specific circumstances.

Therefore, Dharma presents a dynamic framework. Its core principles of ethical conduct and social order hold true universally. However, its application adapts to the specific context of an individual's social standing, life stage, and unique circumstances. This balance between universality and particularity allows Dharma to provide guidance for a diverse range of situations and individuals.

**Q2. Can the emphasis on fulfilling one's Dharma coexist with the emphasis on individual autonomy and freedom of choice prevalent in modern societies? Moreover, can Dharma be secular?**

Although, Dharma, traditionally understood to emphasize duties and responsibilities within societal and familial structures rather than individual rights. However, modern interpretations can align Dharma with individual rights by recognizing that fulfilling one's duty includes respecting the rights of others. For instance, the Bhagavad Gita, promotes the idea of selfless action (Karma Yoga), which can be interpreted as acting in a way that respects the rights and dignity of others.

With respect to Freedom of Choice, while Dharma often involves adhering to prescribed duties and responsibilities, it also allows for personal agency and discernment. In the Mahabharata, characters grapple with moral dilemmas and yet exercise their freedom of choice within the framework of Dharma. Similarly, modern interpretations of Dharma can acknowledge the importance of individual autonomy and the right to make choices, as long as those choices do not infringe upon the rights and well-being of others.

Dharma, in its essence, transcends religious boundaries and can be interpreted in a secular context as a universal principle of ethical living. Secular interpretations of Dharma

focus on its moral and ethical dimensions rather than its religious connotations, making it compatible with secularism. For example, values like compassion, justice, and non-violence, emphasized in various Dharmic traditions, can form the basis of a secular ethical framework that respects diversity and pluralism.

Thus, by interpreting Dharma in light of modern values, scholars and practitioners have sought to reconcile its timeless wisdom with contemporary ethical, social, and political realities. However, it is important to note that interpretations of Dharma can vary widely, and reconciling it with modern values requires ongoing dialogue and interpretation within both Dharmic traditions and broader societal contexts.

**Q3. What does the concept of Dharma imply for our responsibilities as global citizens in a world facing interconnected challenges?**

The concept of Dharma, traditionally focused on individual roles within specific social contexts. In contemporary globalized world, it can be reinterpreted to encompass a wider sense of responsibilities. In the words of Arvind Sharma, "since globalization fosters interdependence across societies and cultures, Dharmic responsibility can extend beyond immediate social circles to encompass the well-being of the entire humanity". In addition, core Dharmic values like non-violence, truthfulness, and compassion can be applied to address global challenges like poverty, war, and climate change. Hence, working towards a just, fair and sustainable world becomes a form of fulfilling one's Dharma. For example, the Principle of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' as a Dharma in a globalized world compels us to recognize our responsibility towards the welfare of the entire planet and its inhabitants. Moreover, raising awareness about global issues, supporting organizations working towards positive change, and promoting peace and understanding can be seen as Dharmic acts.

Since, Dharma encourages living in harmony with nature. Thus, reducing one's carbon footprint, adopting sustainable practices, and advocating for environmental protection are all expressions of Dharmic responsibilities.

Therefore, by reinterpreting Dharma to encompass a broader sense of community, applying its core values to global challenges, and taking action to promote a more just and sustainable world, individuals can fulfill their Dharma in a globalized context. In this way, Dharma becomes a guiding force for positive change that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

**Q4. What are the implications of embracing Dharma as a guiding ethical framework for promoting peace and conflict resolution on a global scale?**

Dharma promotes the principle of ahimsa (non-violence) as a fundamental tenet of ethical conduct. Mahatma Gandhi, influenced by Hindu ethics, applied the principle of ahimsa in his nonviolent struggle for India's independence and advocated for peaceful resistance against oppression. In his book "The Essential Gandhi," he reflects on the ethical imperative of ahimsa, suggesting that non-violence is not only a means to achieve political goals but also a way of life rooted in compassion and respect for all beings. Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance continues to inspire movements for peace and social justice worldwide,

demonstrating the transformative potential of embracing Dharma-based ethics for conflict resolution.

The Arthashastra of Chanakya offers guidance on ethical governance rooted in Dharma, emphasizing the welfare of the people (lokasamgraha) and ethical conduct of rulers. This model prioritizes the common good and promotes social harmony by emphasizing justice, compassion, and ethical responsibility in governance. Chanakya's teachings underscore the importance of promoting peace and stability within society through just rule and ethical leadership.

Additionally, embracing Dharma as a guiding ethical framework nurtures interreligious dialogue and harmony through the promotion of tolerance, mutual respect, and understanding across diverse religious and cultural traditions. Therefore, by adopting Dharma-based ethics, individuals and communities endeavor to construct a more peaceful and sustainable world rooted in principles of non-violence, justice, and ecological harmony.

#### **Q5. How do the timeless values embedded in Dharma inform our approach to sustainability and environmental stewardship on a global scale?**

The concept of Dharma underscores the interconnectedness between humans, other living beings, and the natural world. Swami Sivananda, in his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, highlights the principle of oneness (advaita) as central to Dharmic ethics. Sivananda emphasizes that recognizing the unity of all existence inspires a sense of reverence and responsibility towards nature, motivating individuals to adopt sustainable practices that honor the interconnected web of life.

Since, Dharma promotes reverence for nature and acknowledges the intrinsic value of all living beings. In his book "The Sacred Balance," David Suzuki explores the ecological dimensions of Dharma, drawing parallels between Indigenous wisdom and Hindu teachings on environmental stewardship. Suzuki highlights the concept of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (i.e. the world is one family) which underscores the ethical imperative to treat the Earth and its inhabitants with respect and care.

Additionally, Indian ethics, rooted in the concept of Dharma, emphasizes ethical responsibility towards future generations and the preservation of ecological balance. Vandana Shiva advocates for eco-centric ethics based on Dharmic principles of sustainability and justice. Shiva emphasizes the importance of recognizing the Earth as a living, interconnected system and calls for a shift towards regenerative agriculture and ecological restoration to ensure the well-being of present and future generations.

Therefore, integrating the timeless values of Dharma with contemporary approaches to sustainability and environmental stewardship, individuals, communities, and policymakers can cultivate a deeper sense of ecological awareness, responsibility, and reverence for the natural world.

#### **Conclusion**

Dharma's adaptability addresses contemporary challenges by balancing universal principles with context-specific duties. Harmonizing Dharma with modern values enables ethical exploration, fostering global citizenship and facilitating peaceful conflict resolution. By integrating Dharma's timeless values with sustainability and ethical governance, individuals contribute to a more equitable,

harmonious world, guided by principles of peace, justice, and ecological balance. Ultimately, Dharma offers a holistic framework for ethical living, guiding individuals towards fulfilling their duties in an interconnected world.

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