Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies

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Dharma in the Hindu Epics

The Hindu epic poems, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, serve to this day as significant ethical models influencing Indian theories of rights, justice, and social and individual morality. The Mahabharata is a prominent example of ethical controversy as a product of human nature, whereas the Ramayana represents a paradigm for human behaviour as conveyed by the gods in reincarnated forms on earth. In this regard, the Mahabharata plays a bigger role in defining the themes that shape premodern Indian ethical thinking, namely dharma.

The ethical implications of the Mahabharata are based on philosophical principles that give meaning to life. The underlying natural order in the Hindu belief system that connects individuals, society, and the universe as a whole is known as rita (‘universal order’). This constitutes the overarching social, moral, and natural order that must be maintained and relies on human compliance by renouncing selfish desires and accepting individual responsibility. Rita conveys the struggle for balance in the world and for the welfare of all beings, including humans, gods, and animals. The interconnectedness of humanity and nature is a recurring idea in the epics and is the foundation of the traditional ethical system (Matilal 1989).

The all-encompassing cosmic order must be upheld by dharma, defined as the embodiment of rights, duties, laws, justice, virtue, and
truth. Dharma has no direct English translation—it is a broad concept that establishes individual duties, obligations, and place within society and on earth. Alterity is a key idea here; it implies that the obligations to be fulfilled are not just restricted to the individual or even to one's peers—they extend to all beings, both human and nonhuman. Thus the oneness of all living beings is emphasized, tying morality to responsibility. Dharma revolves around disinterested action; any agent must fulfill his duty without regard to the consequences that may arise (Bhagavadgita, II.39). When dharma is not followed, for example when avarice and selfishness overcome righteousness, adharma, the negation of dharma, prevails. Adherence to dharma, that is, the fulfilling of one's predetermined obligations, minimizes the burden of karma (Bilimoria 2007).

Karma puts forth the idea that every action creates impacts that go beyond the immediate effect of that action. It is manifested in the transmigration of the soul, which continues on through a cycle of rebirth. Karma is an action–retribution system in which the fulfillment of one's dharma in one life may improve his or her dharma for the next. This is because dharma is regulated by varnashramadharma, the premodern Hindu social order. The first group comprised the Brahmins, or religious leaders and teachers; these were followed by the Kshatriyas, who were the warriors and military leaders of society, whose duty it was to fight and to govern—the Kshatriyas play a key role in the Mahabharata. The third group was called the Vaishya, and included merchants and landowners, and were those who kept the economy alive. Finally, at the bottom of the caste system was the Shudra group, which consisted of the manual labour force. An individual's dharma was thus dependent on his or her varna: duties and position in society went hand in hand (Chapple 2007). Dharma was also influenced by ashrama, or 'stage of life'. The first stage of life was characterized by the attainment of knowledge, then the working and householder stage, thirdly the gradual withdrawal from societal demands, and lastly transcendence through 'asceticism'. Social stratification and life-stage played important roles in determining an individual's specific role, and determined what actions he was to take in order to live an ethically appropriate life.

As mentioned before, the Ramayana is a more dogmatic, paradigmatic text that idealizes human behaviour by glorifying the gods. The Mahabharata, on the other hand, is a text that explores the conflicts of dharma faced by warriors, kings, and gods in the struggle to allow righteousness to prevail. The epic depicts a story of a deeply divided family fighting for kingship; on one side the Kauravas, blinded by greed and
jealousy, and, on the other, the Pandavas, struggling with moral conflict. The height of the struggle is reached during a section of the text called the Bhagavadgita, when the commander-in-chief of the Pandava Kshatriya army, Arjuna, is preparing to fight for his brother's rightful kingship. He realizes that on the other side of the battlefield are his uncles and cousins who have wronged him and his brothers. However, he cannot bear the thought of being the one to kill his kin in the battle that is about to ensue. The Gita depicts the conversation between the conflicted Arjuna and his mentor, Krishna, who is a reincarnation of the supreme lord, Vishnu, and is the orchestrator of the gods' efforts to restore righteousness on earth. In this dialogue, Krishna aims to convince Arjuna to fight in the war by preaching the idea of disinterested action, asserting that Arjuna must selflessly fulfil his dharma as a Kshatriya without regard to the consequences (Mohanty 2007). Krishna also stresses the importance of devotion to God (a practice known as bhaktiyoga), and the existence of an imperishable, universal soul that connects all beings—thus death is not absolute. Arjuna's ethical dilemma is an example of the conflicts imposed by dharma; Krishna’s solution emphasizes the duty- and action-oriented stance individuals must take when faced by moral conflicts. Here dharma is given authority to strictly define one's course of action. Action taken in accordance with dharma is seen as morally sound and only in this way can an individual achieve ultimate liberation.

The Hindu epics put forth an ethical perspective imbued with religious presuppositions which has been used in the context of politics, war, family life, and love. It is important to note that while the idea of dharma forms the basis of Hindu philosophy it has also been applied in secular ethos, for example in law and legal jurisprudence (Bilimoria 2011). Many analytical texts have placed dharma in contexts that have little to do with pious action. Disinterested action, duty and obligation, and individual liberation all rely on dharma as a presence in various aspects of society and life.

Further reading: Bilimoria et al. 2007; Bilimoria 2011; Creel 1977; Mohanty 2007; Olivelle 2009.