

The true nature of Dharma, Sect, and Spirituality – A Brief Analysis

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Introduction

Dharma, Sect, and Spirituality - are three aspects of a person's life, which look like each other, but have a completely separate existence in their own nature. Where 'Dharma' speaks about moral values, the sect talks about principles coming from tradition, while spirituality teaches you to be self-conscious. All these are clear and settled in themselves. But without understanding their true nature, when we start mixing them with each other, like the sect to religion and religion to spirituality, instead of reconciling them, then this becomes an unresolved confusion for us. The confusion here refers to swerve. Where there is a lack of 'Right Knowledge', there is bound to swerve.

Meaning of Dharma

There are two levels of meaning associated with the term "dharma": a metaphysical level and an ethical and moral one. Each definition is related to each other with different aspects. The word 'Dharma' has a broad perspective in itself, which is the vast ocean of our universal and eternal inner values. This word relates to every situation and phase in practical life. Religion aims to focus on the complete development of the spiritual growth of an individual. It has been said – “dharati dhārayati vā lokam iti dharmah” – that is, that which is fit to be worn in public life is dharma. On the other hand, the word can be divided into two parts, which are - dhar + ma = dharma, where 'Dhar' means to hold and 'Ma' means value. One who is capable of imbibing values is Dharma. As per Vaisheshika philosophy, it has been said that - "Yato Abhyudaya-nisreyas-siddhiḥ sa dharmah"² – That which leads to the attainment of Abhyudaya (prosperity in this world) and nisreyas (total cessation of pain and attainment of eternal bliss hereafter) is Dharma. It means to say that which gives aggrandizement in this world and accomplishment in the hereafter, that is Dharma.

'Dharma' has been defined in different ways in Indian philosophy. If dharma means righteousness, then moksha is usually translated as freedom or liberation. Until the time righteousness/nobleness is not done by oneself, till then it is not possible to get salvation. It has been said in Jain philosophy - 'Vatthu Sahāvo Dhammo'³ i.e. the nature of the object is its Dharma, i.e. Gunadharmā (Attributes). Whether that object is inert or animate, variable or

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² Vaisheshika Sutra 1/1/2, uddhṛta nītiśāstra kā sarvekṣaṇa, (P.6)

³ Kartikeyanupreksha, Verse 478

constant, eternal or impermanent, that thing that remains in its nature is its dharma. As the nature of water is cold, no matter how hot the water is, it comes in its cool nature. Acharya Kundakunda also defined Dharma as – ‘Carittam khal dhammo’⁴ That is, to be stationed in one’s own-nature (svabhāva) is conduct; this conduct is ‘dharma’.

Dharma and Religion

The sanskrit term ‘dharma’ is generally translated as ‘religion’ in English. Though this term does not seem to represent the whole essence of ‘dharma’ according to some scholars, it has nonetheless gained currency.⁵ If we look at the etymology of the English word "Religion", different theories emphasize its connections to binding, careful consideration, reverence, or devotion. Re-ligare: One theory suggests that "religion" comes from the Latin verb "re-ligare," meaning "to reconnect." Some argue that "religion" derives from the Latin verb "religare," meaning "to re-read" or "to consider carefully." Some theories suggest that the word "religion" has origins in other languages, such as the Old English word "relegere" (to read or study carefully) or the Latin word "religiositas" (piety or reverence). However, these theories are less widely accepted. All these interpretations become true and meaningful when they are used with oneself by looking inside oneself. That is to say, connect with yourself, study yourself, maintain your purity, maintain Samyag Darśana (Right Faith), Samyak Jñāna (Right Knowledge), Samyak Cāritra (Right Conduct), then only you will be able to recognize your qualities and that will be your real religion. For, Dharma, it is said –

ahimsā satyamasteyam śaucamindriyanigrahaḥ
etaṁ sāmāsikam dharmam cāturvarṇye'bravīnmanuḥ ⁶

It indicates adherence to qualities of Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truthfulness), Asteya (not acquiring illegitimate wealth), Shaucha (cleanliness of mind and body, i.e., purity of thought, word and deed) and Indriyanigraha (control of senses), which are in brief the common dharmas for all Varnas.⁷

Dharma and Sect

Everything that is in existence in this world is Anantadharmātmaka⁸ (infinitely virtuous). This means that the existence of many opposing dharma's i.e. Attributes are revealed simultaneously in the same object. Therefore, religion cannot be given any one name. It is relative pluralism. But when they are given different names as a result of differences of

⁴Pravacanasara 1.7 – Acharya Kundakunda

⁵Definition of Religion and Jainism, Nirgranth - Vol 2, 1996, P.93

⁶Manusmṛti 10.63

⁷[https://dharmaWiki.org/index.php/Dharma_\(धर्म\):#cite_ref-4_4-5](https://dharmaWiki.org/index.php/Dharma_(धर्म):#cite_ref-4_4-5)

⁸ananta dharmānastatvam - 2 : Samayasara kalash

opinion, then they become a sect. The sect whose size, type, rules, prohibitions, etc. are determined. It can be of different types due to different ideologies, customs, beliefs, etc. The sect talks about the principles, which are the code of conduct of that particular sect. According to these principles, a person performs his religion by keeping himself disciplined. The aim of the sect is to lead people on the path of Dharma. Due to obstinacy, if this sect turns into communalism, then it leads us to adharmā (irreligion).

Ten Characteristics of Dharma

In Jain philosophy, while explaining the ten characteristics of Dharma, it has been said in Tattvārthasūtra-

uttama-kṣamā-mārdava-ārjava-śauca-satya-saṁnyama-tapa-tyāga-ākincanya-brahmacaryāni dharmāḥ⁹. One can get freedom from this world by following Supreme forgiveness (Uttam Kṣamā), Humility (mārdava), honesty (ārjava), truth (satya), holiness (śauca), restraint (Saṁyam), austerity (tapa), renunciation (tyāg), Non-Attachment (ākincanya) and celibacy (brahmacharya). Similarly, in Manusmṛti, ten characteristics of religion have been indicated - dhṛtiḥ kṣamā damo asteyaṁ śaucaṁ indriyanigrahaḥ dhīrvidyā satyamakrodho daśakaṁ dharmalakṣaṇam.¹⁰

That is, patience, forgiveness, control over desires, not stealing, staying clean, keeping the senses under control, being discreet, acquiring knowledge, speaking the truth, and not getting angry - these are the ten signs of Dharma. The point to be noted in the above definitions is that neither the name of any God was taken here nor the worship-recitation-action, etc., which we consider as religion today. We worship God as an ideal, who has attained salvation by destroying karma through self-mastery. Therefore, Dharma means duty and morality. Because the practical meaning of dharma is the performance of duty. Whether the duty is towards the individual, towards society, or towards the nation, they all come under the same religion.

Philosophy of Spirituality

Spiritual disciplines and practices are representative wings of religion and philosophy. Spirituality is immanent in human nature, religion is a moral force and philosophy is an intellectual instrument for achieving spiritual and religious goals.¹¹ When we talk of spirituality, it is that subtle subject beyond religion and sect, where the attainment of only the soul is predominant. There are two words in spirituality - Adhi+Ātma. Here the meaning of

⁹ Tattvārthasūtra 9.6

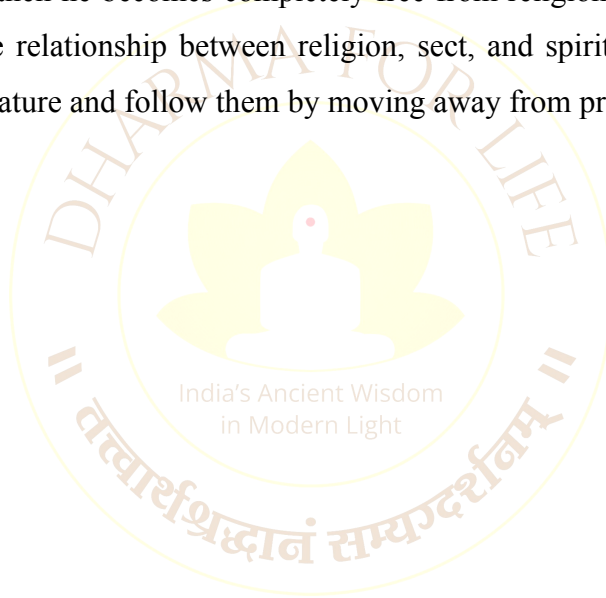
¹⁰ Manusmṛti 6.52

¹¹ Spiritual Disciplines and Practices in Jainism, Jain Journal VOL. XXIII (July 1988)

'Adhi' is to be known. Thus, knowing the soul is called Adhyātma (spirituality). In Buddhist philosophy, it is said 'Appa Dīpo Bhava'¹² which means 'be your own light'. Describing the climax of spirituality, in Jain philosophy, the pure state of the soul has been given the name of Paramatma by saying 'Appā So Paramappā'¹³. That is the goal of spirituality. But to reach this height one has to climb the ladder of right religion and right principles. It is only through proper practice that one can progress from the gross to the subtle.

Conclusion

We often see that when a plant grows and becomes developed and strengthened, then the plant does not need protection measures. In the same way, when a man attains religion by following the due rules, prohibitions, and principles of a particular sect, then the sect becomes secondary to him. When the same person attains self-realization after being fully developed spiritually, then he becomes completely free from religion and sect, etc. In Indian philosophy, this is the relationship between religion, sect, and spirituality. We just need to understand their true nature and follow them by moving away from prejudices and obstinacy.



¹² Buddhavacana mahāparinibbāṇa sutta

¹³ Parmatma Prakash, 312