

October 2009

Dharma and Governance

by Makarand R. Paranjape*

We are passing through unprecedented crises, which affect all of us, not just one particular community or another. For example, global warming is not the problem of only Hindus or Muslims or of Indians or Americans or Australians. It's everybody's problem. Similarly, if we talk about the financial crisis, it is not just the problem of Buddhists or Christians or Russians, but in one way or another, it affects all of us. So, if one looks at all the different crises which affect us today, then, as I understand it, we might see that *governance* is at the root of many of them.

It is also possible to say that underlying all these crises is not just the crisis of governance, but also a crisis of dharma. When we examine these two terms: dharma and governance, or to some extent, even religion and governance, we realize that both perform a similar function. The older meaning of the word religion is to cohere, to bind, and to direct. Dharma, which means to uphold or support, is also a principle of order. So, both dharma and religion have an intrinsic relation to governance. Dharma, of course, has a wide range of meanings, from the cosmic, as in *Rta*, to the individual, as in *sva-dharma*.

So, on the one hand, we could legitimately ask what the dharma of governance is. Or what is the overarching duty or the comprehensive responsibility of good governance. We could also ask a related question, which essentially is: what are the ideas inherent in certain dharmic traditions from which may be derived certain kinds of principles of governance? If both dharma and governance are ordering principles, then, in the modern context, it would seem that they are in competition. The two domains overlap and contend with one another as sources of authority and direction.

If we follow this line of reasoning, it will be evident that dharma is itself a form of governance. It has, moreover, its own principles of operation, as governance has too. It is a way of ordering one's life, and there are many different levels at which it works. We could, as I suggested, start with oneself, in which case we could talk of *sva-dharma* or one's own dharma, which is linked to *sva-bhava*, one's own character, personality, and inherited propensities. Then we could speak of a wider circle of dharma which concerns our responsibility to the people who are related to ourselves. What is our dharma as husbands, fathers, sons, or brothers? Or as wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters? We could start with *svadharmā*, then keep expanding the circles of dharma. As the circles of dharma expand, so does the self. The circle of the self can enlarge to include not only our family, our relatives, but also those we have undertaken to serve as a part of our professional obligations. So, as a teacher, I have to be responsible to my students and also to my university, which employs me. But the self can stretch beyond one's profession to include one's neighbourhood, society, city, state, country, continent, the planet itself, beautiful Mother Earth, and so on, until it embraces the whole cosmos. Such an expansion is also possible in time, not just in space. We could thus speak of the dharma of this instant or of the eon or the age, the *yugadharmā*.

This brings me to the heart of what I want to say. Is it possible, first of all, to try to understand the problems in governance today in different parts of the world as problems of dharma, as crises of dharma? I think such a question brings us to what Mahatma Gandhi was trying to say in *Hind Swaraj*, his 1909 classic critique of the modern Western civilization. Gandhi states very clearly that this is a civilization which is godless. This is a civilization centred on bodily welfare and multiplications of wants. Gandhi is thus critiquing consumerism, much before the word came up. He says true civilization is that which points the human being to the path of virtue. He used the Gujarati word *sudhar*, which also means reform or well-being. For Gandhi dharma in the context of *Hind Swaraj* meant a certain common framework which many faith traditions of the world share concerning "What is the good life?" In our contemporary context, is the good life what we see portrayed in advertisements? Is the good life those fake words and images of happiness, associated with some item of consumption or the other? What kind of life is worth living?

What Gandhi is saying in *Hind Swaraj*, then, is that a culture or civilization which makes it difficult for you to ask whether bodily welfare should be the true purpose of our life is a civilization that he would like to oppose. He prefers a dharmic civilization, informed by a dharma which is not just Hindu or Muslim dharma, but one which might include even atheists. You know that Gandhi had no problem with atheism as long as it was informed by virtue. If truth refers to *what is* and if truth is God, then dharma for Gandhi is

based on what is true, on reality, not on some dogma or abstraction. If such a notion of dharma becomes the informing force of a civilization, then such a civilization, according to Gandhi, would be a highly virtuous one.

Similarly, Gandhi wanted to put dharma at the heart of the struggle for *svaraj*, which is much more than political independence. Svaraj means self-rule, self-mastery, self-perfection, which results in illumination. Svaraj too is, thus, ultimately a question of governance. This is what Gandhi speaks of even in his autobiography, the story of his experiments with truth. Svaraj involves *sadhana* or self-culture. Self culture means fighting against one's own weaknesses. Svaraj to me means that you do not want to rule others, and you do not want others to rule you either. It is the third way—neither to be a victim nor a victimizer, neither to be exploited nor an exploiter, neither to be oppressed nor an oppressor.

Though the Indian Constitution is a great and noble text, it does not reflect this *dharmic* aspiration of Gandhi's or, indeed, of our civilization. It is too "secular." The civic nationalism that it proposes does not have a dharmic component, does not have an appeal to something that is transcendent, and is therefore unable to distinguish between natural law and manmade law. I think civic nationalism needs a touch of the sublime, the sheer vertical appeal to something higher than just the group consensus or rationality or some other form of social contract. It is impoverished because it suppresses the older spiritual quest of human beings, which is an inspiring and perennial quest.

According to our own spiritual traditions, the human being is not isolated in a universe which is unfriendly, but is a part of a cosmic order. That is why there should not be fear. We are not aliens or strangers. The universe is hospitable and "God" is kind. The earth is our mother. We are all linked with one another and must help each other in our common quest for self-realization. In other words, we are not born in original sin, but are children of immortality. I think dharmic nationalism has that leaven which can raise our spirits by appealing to something higher than the notion of contractual obligations which civic nationalism is premised upon. But I would agree that dharmic nationalism needs in practice a *civitas*, the notion of civic well-being, as its basis, as well as *caritas*, true compassion, fellow-feeling, love, which is inherent to the idea of dharma.

The dharma of governance is to be able to offer a just and stable social order that can leave the human spirit to aspire for something higher, a true flowering of the individual and of the collective, so that human life on earth can not only meet the great challenges that threaten its very survival, but also flower to manifest its highest potential.

**Makarand Paranjape is a Professor of English at Jawaharlal Nehru University's Centre for English at the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, New Delhi. Makarand is a prolific poet and writer. His writings include books, poetry, academic papers, reviews, newspaper columns and other publications. www.makarand.com*