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श्री गणेशाय नमः

Védic Dharm

(Sanātan Dharm, Mānav Dharm or Hinduism)

by

Arun J. Mehta

Please use this knowledge wisely, for the good of all, and pass it on to anyone who is genuinely interested in learning about Védic Dharm.

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Preface

Why write a book on ‘Védic Dharm’?

अयं बन्धुरयनेति गणना लघुचेतसाम् ।
उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् ॥ ६:७१ ॥

*Ayam bandhuh ayam néti gaṇanām laghuchetsām
Udāracharitānām tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam*

*A (spiritually) less evolved person says ‘This is a friend. That one is not.’
To a broad minded (spiritually evolved) person the whole world is a family.
Mahopanishada VI.71*

“It is already becoming clear that a chapter that has a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race...At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation is the ancient Hindu way. Here we have the attitude and spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family.”

Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975)
British historian

For some time I had been sending short e-mails to my friends and relatives about ancient Indian culture. Now I would like to share this with wider audience through this booklet. In Védic tradition knowledge is given free to all deserving students interested in learning. The thoughts presented here have been around for millennia and there is nothing original in this booklet. It is written for high school and university students in language simple enough so that they can understand. It is recommended that readers read a small segment - a paragraph or one page - at a time. They should feel free to discuss with their parents or other knowledgeable adults. They may write to me at my e-mail address too. Contemplation on the material followed by practicing it in life will be the real test of usefulness of these ancient teachings.

I am not an expert in this field and am grateful to Dr. B. V. K. Sastry of International Védic Hindu University, Florida, USA for very helpful suggestions. He went over the draft for accuracy. I also appreciate comments and suggestions by my wife, Lila Mehta and daughter Angana Shroff.

All *Sanskrit* (Sanskrit) words are in *italics*. Plural version of *Sanskrit* words e.g. *Véd-s*, is written with – before ‘s’, like *Véd-s*. Ā & ā are pronounced as in ‘bark’. é is pronounced as first ‘e’ in ‘level’ and í as Devnāgari ण (no equivalent sound in English). European spelling of

Sanskrit words is written in parenthesis as (Sanskrit). Attempt is made to spell Sanskrit words as they are spoken in Sanskrit.

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Table of Contents

1. Dharm	5
2. ‘Védic’, ‘Sanātan’ or ‘Mānav’ Dharm	6
3. Origin of word ‘Hindu’	8
4. Culture	9
5. Essence of our Culture	10
6. Goals or Purpose in Life	12
7. Our Basic Beliefs	14
8. Important Values	16
9. How can we preserve our cultural heritage?	22
10. Four Stages of Life	23
11. Four Pillars of the Society	29
12. Four Paths	32
13. Different Methods Prescribed for Personal Evolution	39
14. Three Gooń-s (गुण)	41
15. Sanskār-s	47
16. Vivék Buddhi	50
17. How Do I Get There?	51
18. Yathā Icchasi Tathā Kuru	54
Appendix I. Some Interesting Quotes about India	55
Appendix II. Great Reformers of India – A Timeline	57
Further Reading:	59
Useful websites:	59
Videos:	60

1. Dharm

The word “*Dharm*” has no equivalent word in English. It takes many English words to describe *Dharm*. The word ‘religion’ is commonly used but a religion is a specific system of institutionalized faith or worship. “*Sanātan Dharm*” or “*Mānav Dharm*” is not just a religion but a way of life. Everything we do in life, including eating and sleeping, are done according to *Dharm*.

More than 5,000 years ago, when *Védic Dharm* was practiced, no Prophet had yet established any religion. During British Raj, as part of their policy of divide and rule, religion, caste, and sub-caste were given a lot of importance. Since Hindus were the majority, all other religious groups were given special privileges and even tax breaks. This created a lot of animosity amongst all, weakened India and reduced chances of any resistance movement to succeed against the British. Religious label became important and ‘Hinduism’ became a religion.

The *Sanskrit* word *Dharm* is derived from the root word “*Dhri*” which means to hold together or support. *Dharm* supports or holds together everyone and everything. *Dharm* is also described as ‘duty’ - one’s duty towards herself, her family, community, country, and the world. Knowledge about *Dharm* - what is right and wrong - will help guide us through our lives. This knowledge should be taught when a child is very young and not at the end of life, during retirement or on deathbed. It is too late to know how to lead a life when we have gone through most of it.

*“Dharm exists for the welfare of all beings.
Hence, that by which the welfare of all living beings is sustained,
That for sure is Dharm.”*

From the *Mahabharat* (*Shanti Parva* 109.10).

Dharm is the universal code of behavior towards all living creatures and nonliving things. It is in the best interest of all and includes all the virtues like truth, nobility, justice, nonviolence, compassion, faith, duty, modesty, steadfastness, control over senses, loyalty, honesty, etc. *Dharm* is also absence of negative tendencies like selfishness, lust, greed, envy, anger, arrogance, etc. A life according to *Dharm* is necessary for success in meditation and also for the family, community, country and the world. *Dharm* sustains and supports life in general, and helps to hold the community together.

The word Dharm, at a higher intellectual or philosophical level is that without which we will not be able to exist, the essence of our existence. It is that, 'force' without which this world as we know, will not be able to survive.

2. 'Védic', 'Sanātan' or 'Mānav' Dharm

The *Sanskrit* root word *vid* means to know and *Véd* means (sacred) knowledge. There are four *Véd*-s: *Roog* (Rig), *Yajur*, *Sām*, and *Atharva*. *Véd*-s were revealed to *rooshi*-s during meditation thousands of years ago. The knowledge of *Véd*-s is timeless. The end (*ant*) portion of *Véd*-s is called *Védānta* (*Véd* + *ant*). *Védānta* is also called *Upanishad*. The *Upanishad*-s are declarations of the highest spiritual truths and a guide for 'How to live your life'. Most of us ask our children to read *Bhagawad Gitā* when we are on the deathbed. It is like reading the instruction manual for a super computer when we are ready to throw it in a junk yard. *Bhagawad Gitā* is the cream of the *Upanishad*-s. Pearls of wisdom are also found in *Rāmāyan*, *Mahābhārat*, *Bhāgavat Purān*, etc.

Sanātan and *Mānav* are also *Sanskrit* words used for our Dharm.

'*Sanātan* = eternal. A *Dharm* that has been there from the beginning of time or one that has no beginning or an end.

Dharm = code of ethics, code of behavior, religion, virtues, beliefs, moral obligations, traditions, righteous actions that sustain and support life, and hold a community together.

Sanātan Dharm = *Dharm* or code of ethics which has always existed.

Mānav = Mankind (includes woman).

Mānav Dharm = religion or code of ethics, or code of behavior for the mankind.

The original people of India were called *Āryan*-s or the 'noble ones' and the country was 'Āryāvart'. The *Āryan*-s did not come from anywhere but had lived there for millennia and had developed a well advanced civilization. Other names for their religion were – *Sanātan Dharm* (eternal religion), *Védic Dharm* (religion of the *Véd*-s), *Ārya Dharm* (religion of the *Āryans*), or *Mānav Dharm* (religion of mankind). The name of the country 'India' was also coined by foreigners. The Indian names for India are 'Āryāvart' (the land of *Āryan*-s) or 'Bhāratvarsha' (the land of king Bharat).

The word 'Hindu' is not found in the *Véd*-s, the ancient scriptures of India. People living along the river *Sindhu* were called 'Hindus' by foreigners. River *Sindhu* flows from Himalaya Mountain in the North and through North Western part of what was India. Most of the foreign invaders came to India from the North-West. The religion followed by people of India was called "Hinduism" by the foreigners. This is similar to how the original people of North America were called 'Indians' by Europeans who were looking for 'India' and when they first arrived in America thought they were in India.

Dharm has two parts –

1. *Sāmāny Dharm* – duties that are common to all people.
2. *Vishésh Dharm* - is special duties of husband, wife, child, student, teacher, farmer, business person, king, soldier, etc.

All these duties are described in ancient Indian literature.

What happens when “*Dharm*” is not followed? There are many examples in history of societies and civilizations that have fallen apart. Even today we can see so many individuals, communities, and countries wasting their resources after unethical projects and leading their families & people to disaster.

3. Origin of word 'Hindu'

The word 'Hindu' is not found in the Véd-s, the ancient scriptures of India. People living along the River Sindhu were called 'Hindus' by foreign invaders who probably had trouble pronouncing the letter 'S'. River Sindhu flows from Himalaya Mountain in the North and through North Western part of what was India. Most of the foreign invaders came to India from the North-West. The religion followed by these people was called "Hinduism" by the foreigners. This is similar to how the aboriginal people of North America were called 'Indians' by Europeans who were looking for 'India' and when they first arrived in America thought they were in India.

Original people of India were called Āryan-s or the 'noble ones'. Āryan-s did not come from anywhere but had lived there for millennia and had developed a well advanced civilization. Nazis took this word, inverted a holy Aryan symbol of goodwill to all and created 'Swastika' for themselves.

Names for their religion were – Sanātan Dharm (eternal religion), Védic Dharm (religion of the Véd-s), Ārya Dharm (religion of the Āryan-s), or Mānav Dharm (religion of the mankind). The name of the country 'India' was also coined by foreigners. The Indian names for India are 'Āryavart' (the land of Āryan-s) or 'Bhāratvarsh' (the land of king Bharat) or Bhārat.

4. Culture

Culture has been defined in different ways. In “Foundations of Indian Culture”, K. M. Munshi has defined culture as:

“a characteristic way of life inspired by fundamental values expressed through art, religion, literature, social institutions and behavior”.

It may also include education, scientific and technological advances, customs of the people, and the way in which people interact with each other and live in a society.

He mentions that the ‘Indian’ culture is one of the very few cultures that has continuously survived for quite a few millennia in spite of multiple invasions, brutal occupations by foreigners, and systematic attempts to destroy it. Very little of the original Egyptian, Babylonian, Syrian, Persian, Inca, or Mayan culture is visible now.

How did it survive in India? A system of ‘*Gurukula*’ schools providing free education to all, strong family traditions, and the unique system of dividing the society into four classes with assigned duties for education, defense, trade, and service (*Varṇāshram*) that helped maintain the knowledge and culture in India.

Knowledge of one’s cultural heritage is important for one’s self-esteem. When people lose their self-esteem and self-respect, they do not do well in life. It is very important for the welfare of our future generations that they learn the positive aspects of our culture and heritage.

5. Essence of our Culture

We cannot possibly learn and pass on to our children all that can be included in our ‘culture’. All of us may not agree - ‘what is essential and what is not’. The choice lies with the individual.

Our culture shows us how to live our life whether we are in India or North America or any where else in the world. It is therefore important to teach our children and grandchildren at the earliest age about their culture and heritage before their brains are filled with negative ideas about our ‘culture’. Second reason for preserving cultural heritage is for the children to grow up having positive self-esteem, a good feeling about themselves. If children know that they are coming from a good, strong, and stable background they will have the confidence to handle any situation and do well in life. If children learn at an early age that their culture, heritage, and ancestors were of inferior quality or ‘they will burn in hell for eternity’ because of their religion then they are likely to have many problems throughout their lives.

“...if all the Upanishads and all other scriptures happened all of a sudden to be reduced to ashes, and if only the first verse in the ‘Ishopanishad’ were left intact in the memories of Hindus, Hinduism will live for ever.”

M. K. Gāndhi, *Harijan*, 30-1-1937, p. 403-4.

ॐ ईशावास्यमिदम् सर्वं यत् किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।
तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीथा मा गृधः कस्य स्विद् धनम् ॥१॥

*“ॐ Ishāvāsya-idam sarvam yat-kincha jagatyām jagat
Tēna tyaktēna bhunjithā mā grudah kasya svid dhanam”*

*God pervades all this (the whole universe).
Enjoy what He gives you. Do not steal wealth of others.*

Ishopanishad 1

This first part of the first *shlok* tells us ‘The Divine spirit is everywhere in the universe - in the living and non-living. Love and respect all creatures and even inanimate objects. There is an ‘energy’ that forms the basis of all that exists in the universe, a ‘force’ that keeps us alive, something that cannot be described nor can it be experienced by our senses (touch, smell, sight, hearing, and taste); an ‘entity’ that can be addressed by any name or imagined to take up any form, and ‘That’ which has no beginning or an end. Be grateful for what He/She gives you, respect Her gift and enjoy it. Do not forcefully take something that belongs to others.

Another basic advice to remember is:

एकं सत् विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति

Ekam sat viprā bahudhā vadanti

Truth (God) is one, the wise call 'It' by many names.

Roog (Rig) Véd 1:164:46

People refer to God by various names but ultimately 'He', 'She' or 'It' is the same entity. This is misunderstood by many by thinking that their 'God' is the only true 'God' and they can use violence, lies, cheating, coercion, etc. (*Adharma*) to convert people in the name of religion is acceptable.

6. Goals or Purpose in Life

*“Our plans miscarry because they have no aims.
When a man does not know what harbor he is making for,
no wind is the right wind.”*

Seneca.

We all want to be 'happy' in life. Those who do not have money think money will bring happiness. Who are not married, think marriage will bring happiness. On and, and on goes the wish list. But if we look at the rich or married people, we will find that they are not totally happy all the time. They are still looking for happiness somewhere else.

If we reflect upon our ancient scriptures and epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* and analyze them carefully; we will find lots of suggestions on 'how to achieve this goal'. They teach us 'where' happiness is and 'how' to achieve it by living a life according to '*Dharm*' with right attitude.

We are always looking for happiness somewhere outside - like a big house or a fancy car. But these external objects do not keep us in a state of happiness for too long. We all need basic necessities of life - clean air to breathe, water, food, shelter, good health, etc. Beyond that, we should be looking for the 'right' way of life with the 'right' attitude. This we can learn from our ancient guide books - scriptures.

Following shlok from *Bhagavad Gitā* is a good example. It, not only gives us the goal to achieve but shows the path on how to achieve it:

वीतरागभयक्रोध मन्मया मामुपाश्रिताः ।
बहवो ज्ञानतपसा पूता मद्भावमागताः ॥ ४:१० ॥

*When people are able to give up the pursuit of pleasures of the senses, fear and anger;
Focus our attention and surrender to the 'Higher Power',
Acquire a lot of scriptural knowledge, become spiritually purified,
Then they come to Me
(Realize Me, merge with Me or attain Moksh).*

Our *shāstra*-s (sacred texts) mention:

Four goals in life

1. *Kām* (desire) – fulfilling desires to satisfy the senses e.g. thirst, hunger, etc. These are common to all in the animal kingdom.
2. *Arth* (wealth) – earning money to buy food, shelter, etc. This goal is considered higher than *Kām* because it is not found in the animal kingdom. However, wealth is like a knife - it can be used as a destructive weapon and also useful in everyday life. Blind pursuit of wealth creates degeneration of human values. Their destructive power lies in creating lust, greed, desire to hoard tons of money, exploitation of animate life and inanimate objects.

यावत् भ्रियेत जडं तावत् सत्त्वं हि देहीनाम् ।
अधिकं योभिमन्येत स स्तेनो दण्डमर्हति ॥

One may [rightfully] claim proprietorship to as much wealth as is required to maintain oneself [to fill the stomach]; but he/she who claims proprietorship over more than what is required for survival is a thief and deserves to be punished.

Mahabharat and the Manusmriti

3. *Dharm* – *Kām* and *Arth* are achieved according to *Dharm*. *Dharm* is higher than both (*Kām* and *Arth*). This requires study of *Dharm* early in life and practicing it all through the life.
4. *Moksh* – liberation from the cycle of birth and death or merging of *Ātmā* (soul) with *Paramātmā* (God). This is the highest goal in life. All activities in the fields of *Kām* and *Arth* give temporary pleasure. *Moksh* is permanent bliss. According to *Védānta* all human beings and even animals can achieve this goal. One does not have to pray to a specific ‘God’ or belong to a specific religious sect.

प्रणवो धनुः शरो ह्यात्मा ब्रह्म तल्लक्ष्यमुच्यते ।
अप्रमत्तेन वेद्धव्यं शरवत् तन्मयो भवेत् ॥४॥

*Pranavah dhanuhu sharah hee ātmā
Brahm tat lakshyam uchyate
Apramatténa véddhavyam
Shara-vat tanmayo bhavét.*

*Pranava (mantra ॐ) is the bow,
ātmā (soul) is the arrow.
Brahman (God, Paramātmā) is the target (goal).
(With) steady (hands and focused mind) hit (the target).
And like the arrow (ātmā), become one with the target (Brahman).*

Mundakopnishad II.ii.4

7. Our Basic Beliefs

Vèdantin-s (Hindus) believe in many things – from one all pervading God to many Gods and even no God. All views are accepted. Everyone has the freedom to choose and nobody is permanently denied *Moksh* (salvation). Following beliefs are some of the important ones:

a. *Ātmā* (Self, soul, *Jivātmā*) and *Paramātmā* (Brahman, God)

The force or energy that keeps us alive is called *Ātmā*. Our body becomes life-less when it leaves the body. This energy cannot be damaged or destroyed. It is the same in all living beings. *Paramātmā* is the ocean of life-force from which all *Ātmā*-s originate. After a process of evolution, all *Ātmā*-s merge with *Paramātmā* (God). God can be worshiped in any form we wish to give Him or Her, any name he / she wants to call Her / Him / It. All prayers are heard by one and the same Supreme Reality (God).

b. *Karm*

Literal meaning of *Karm* is action. However, *Karm* in scriptures includes the intentions behind the action, the means used in performing the action and the consequences of that action (*Karm-phala*). An ‘action’ is good if the intention is unselfish and methods used are nonviolent (according to *Dharm*). We do not have any control over what follows the ‘action’ (the result or consequences). Every act or even a thought has similar consequences. ‘Good’ thoughts and ‘good’ actions have ‘good’ consequences. We have choice only over our intentions and the means used to perform any action. If we do something for others with good intentions and without expecting anything in return for ourselves, good things will eventually happen to us too. It is essential that we analyze our intentions continuously, do our best, work hard, perceive, and leave the results to Him.

c. **Punarjanm (Rebirth)**

वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय
नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि ।
तथा शरीराणि विहाय जिर्णानि
अन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही ॥

*Vāsāṅsi jirṇāni yathā vihāya
Navāni gruhṇāti naroparāṇi
Tathā sharirāṇi vihāya jirṇāni
Anyāni samyāti navāni dehi.*

*Just as we discard old clothes and
Put on new (clothes).
In the same way (we) discard old bodies
(And we) obtain new bodies.*

Bhagawad Gitā, II. 22.

We believe that the soul leaves the body at the time of death and takes up another body (reincarnates). We are all evolving spiritually and take many births until we have no desires and all *karm*-s resolved. Then our *ātmā* (soul) merges with *Paramātmā* (*Brahman*, God) and attains liberation from the cycle of birth and death (*Moksh*). Everyone, even an animal, is entitled to *Moksh*.

If at the time of death we have any unfulfilled desire or unresolved *karm* then we take birth in a new body. We are born in a family and under circumstances according to our unresolved *karm*-s and unfulfilled desires. This gives us the opportunity to progress spiritually.

d. **Scriptures**

The holy scriptures - *Vèda*-s, were revealed to *Rooshi*-s in deep meditation.

8. Important Values

Saty (truth), *Ahimsā* (nonviolence), and *Brahmachary* (discipline, self-control) are the most important values for people who follow *Mānav Dharm*.

सत्येन लभ्यस्तपसा ह्येष आत्मा
सम्यग्गानेन ब्रह्मचर्येण नित्यम् ।
अन्तःशरीरे ज्योतिर्मयो हि शुभ्रो
यं पश्यन्ति यतयः क्षीणदोषाः ॥५॥

Satyén labhyah tapasā hee ésh Ātmā
Samyak-gnānèn brahmacharyèn nityam
Antah-shariré jyotirmayah hee shubhrah
Yam pashhyanti yatayah kshina-doshaha.

(Self realization) is experienced through constant practice of truth, self-discipline, and (life according to) the right knowledge (the highest wisdom, Dharm) (A person), who has reduced all his faults (impurities) to the minimum (and purified himself), sees the luminous Self within himself.

Mundakopnishad, III.i.5

1. Truth (*Saty*)

The official seal of India says:

सत्यं एव जयते

Satyam éva jayaté.

Truth only prevails.

There are three meanings of the word ‘truth’:

- The dictionary meaning of truth is ‘what is real’.
- Second meaning of truth is ‘when our speech and actions are the same as our thoughts’.
- In *Véd-s* ‘Truth’ means what is real today, what was the same yesterday, a hundred years ago, and even a billion years ago; what will be the same tomorrow, a hundred years from today, and even a billion years from now. In other words, some thing that does not change over time. That ‘Truth’ is changeless, beginning-less, and endless. That is *Paramātmā* (God, the Supreme Power).

God has been explained as follows:

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