

# What Does It Mean to be a Hindu?

Mudrarakshas

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In the more than one hundred texts in the area of dharm shastra, including the *Manusmriti*, the term “Hindu dharm” is never used. In the Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upanishads the term “Hindu” is never used, either with reference to a people or a dharm. It never appears in the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārat*. Nor do the grammarians Yāska, Pāṇini or Patañjali ever use it. It does not appear anywhere in the vast ocean of Sanskrit poetry, nor is it ever used in Buddhist literature.

Interestingly, however, the word “Hindu” is often used in Persian literature, but its meaning there is usually the same as that for which we understand the terms *dasyu* or *dāsa* in the Vedas. Sometimes it also has the meaning “black”. Amazingly, then, with the passage of time those people adapted that term for themselves which had been used to insult them.

Is the Hindu dharm that is believed in today the same as what was here three or four thousand years ago? Before Muslims began calling the inhabitants of this area Hindu, what did the term “dharm” mean? And finally, just what is this thing called Hindu dharm? That is, just as Jesus founded Christianity, the Prophet Muhammad founded Islam, and Guru Gobind Singh founded contemporary Sikhism, did someone found Hindu dharm?

In India only the great teachers Buddh and Mahāvīr used the term “dharm” to express the idea conveyed by the English word “religion” or the Arabic word “dīn”. Not even Ram or Krishna founded any “dharm”. Ram is the ideal of political victory and ethical self-restraint, but he started no philosophical school, nor did he give any sermons on religion or morality. Krishna was a great scholar, philosopher and thinker, and by

means of the Gita he gave the world an eternal philosophy, but he was the founder of no dharm.

In the Gita he says it is better to die in one's own dharm, but the meaning of "dharm" there is not a mazhab, a religion, it means "what one is supposed to be doing". In commenting on that verse Adi Shankar cites the verse just before that, 3.34, which says that one should avoid falling under the influence of those who teach passion and anger. Shankaracharya (not today's litigious fellow who goes by that name, the first one) goes on in that commentary to mention verse 2.62, where Krishna's ideas become clearer. There Krishna criticizes the sensualist, saying that in such a person desire takes root, desire is the basis of anger, anger gives rise to delusion, delusion destroys the power of memory. When memory is gone, a man is no longer able to distinguish between right and wrong, and when a man is unable to do that, he is destroyed. Here Krishna does not use the term dharm to mean "religion", it means selfless activity. Then, in the very next verse, 3.36, Arjun asks why man sins. Notice that he does not ask what dharm is, for he understands what that term means, and that is not what the word "religion" denotes.

The foundations of dharm are laid down in the five great dharm sutras. In addition to them the works of Āpastamb, Gautam, Hiraṇyakeśī, Baudhāyan and Vashishth are fundamental for a complete understanding of dharm and karm. But isn't it startling that the Black Yajurveda, which was not recognized as authoritative in the Vedic tradition, is considered a basic and authoritative text by both Āpastamb and Baudhāyan. The Hiraṇyakeśī Dharm Sutra is considered to be the work of blonde-haired inhabitants of Konkan who had come from Egypt and later became brahmans.

Only Baudhāyan and Vashishth are completely within the Vedic tradition, and neither of them characterized dharm as a religion. They thought of it as behaviour and mental predisposition. In fact, no work in the field of dharm shastra specifically mentions anything akin to faith.

Islam and Christianity command the faithful to believe in one God and one Ultimate Messenger. Neither of those commands is in any dharm sutra, not even in the *Manusmriti*. No dharm sutra, smriti text or grihya sutra says it is necessary to believe in one God, one Ultimate Messenger, one Avatar or one Divine. Nor did the writers of those texts even consider that such a necessity could be possible or desirable. It needs to be remembered that when Krishna uses the term "dharm" in the Gita,

Shankaracharya understands it to mean selfless activity, not religion, and all the dharm sutras refuse to establish dharm in a faith in one God and one Ultimate Messenger. Vashishth even restricts the meaning of dharm to those activities based on the Vedas. For him it is not necessary to worship any god or divine incarnation.

While interpreting the concept of dharm, the *Manusmriti* says that it has four defining characteristics—the Vedas, the Smritis, the behaviour of the good, and the contentment of the soul. None of those four includes a faith in one God or the worship of one divine incarnation.

Among the six philosophies, the Vaisheshikas define dharm as the nature or character of substances. Kaṇād wrote a detailed discussion on the relationships of cause and effect in the material world, and the first sutra of his work is: *athāto dharmam vyākhyāsyāmaḥ* (now I shall discuss dharm). And the next sutra is often quoted: *yato 'bhyudayaniḥśreyasasiddhiḥ sa dharmah*, the general meaning of which is usually stated to be that dharm is that which brings about prosperity in the world and release from it. That explanation does much violence to the text. In the fourth sutra Kaṇād himself gives a detailed explanation of the second sutra, in which he says, “There are six padārthas (categories)—dravya (substance), which arises from specific qualities called dharm, guṇa (universal qualities), karm (motion), sāmānya (universality), viśeṣa (individual attributes) and samavāya (necessary relation). One obtains absolute superiority when one knows the homogeneity (sādharmya) and the heterogeneity (vaidharmya) of those categories.”

Here dharm means the characteristics of an individual substance. It does not mean religion. It has to do with the nature of the material world, not the spiritual world. Vaisheshik philosophy is a detailed discussion of that nature. It is unfortunate that later generations used the Vaisheshik's understanding of reality, their logic and their intellectual system as if it were a commentary on some religion or mazhab.

At a time when the Vedas were considered to be the foundation of dharm, Krishna wrote clearly in the Gita (2.45): *traiguṇya viṣayā vedā nis-traiguṇyo bhavārjuna*. (The Vedas are worldly, Arjun. Do not fall into such worldliness.)

If we are to take Krishna at his word, that the Vedas are worldly and man should try to go beyond them, then it does not make any sense to bring the Vedas into any discussion about dharm in the dharm sutras. Āpastamb provides another reason for not bringing the Vedas into such a

discussion. He himself believed the Vedas to be the basis of dharm, but among the ten dharmacharyas he considered ideal is Kautsa, who spoke out against the Vedas. Kautsa always maintained the Vedas had nothing important or spiritual in them.

Of the six founders of our major philosophical systems, only Jaimini, of the Purva Mimamsa system, is fully in the tradition of the Vedas.

So we see that a Hindu dharm was never set forth, nor, unlike in Islam and Christianity, did anyone ever maintain that it was invariably necessary for Hindus to believe in one Book, one God, and one Avatar.

Another difference is worth considering. In Christianity and Islam one set of laws is given for the entire society, for all classes. The dharm shastras, on the other hand, prohibit women, shudras and tribals from those activities that could improve their lives. One law exists for the wealthy and prosperous, and another for the poor and wretched.

Among those for whom the dharm sutras were originally written, the avantgarde thinkers always maintained independence of thought and never allowed themselves to be enslaved to them. And not only did the writers of the Upanishads, the original philosophers such as Kapil, thinkers such as Buddh, and scholars such as Shankar criticize the dharm sutras as they did other texts, they criticized the Vedas, too.

In comparison with that, it is shameful that some people, denying our profound ancient philosophical tradition, in the name of Hindu Revival imitate Christianity and Islam and try to tie down our society to one Book and one God.