

## The Ancient Indian Ideal of Duty by Annie Besant

A Lecture delivered at the Anniversary Meeting  
of the Shînivâna Mandiram, Bangalore, in 1910

Published in 1917

Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Chennai [Madras] India  
The Theosophist Office, Adyar, Madras. India

FRIENDS,

[Page 1] Among all the religions of the world, there is none which has so bound up in itself the private life of the individual with the public life of the nation and the State, as the religion of the Sanātana Dharma, which has laid down at once a polity and a social organisation, of which the foundations are eternally true and which only needs today new applications to meet the new needs of life. I want, if I can, this evening very briefly to show you how an Institution such as you have here, based on the fundamental ideas of the Sanātana Dharma, trying to apply itself to modern needs, is one which is really based on truth, not only here, but everywhere else; and just in proportion as you of this ancient faith can realise its value and live its truth, so the whole world will look to India for guidance, so the whole world will become grateful to India as the preserver of the life of religion. I am not specially concerned with the small details of the Sanātana Dharma. It is the broad outlines that I want to remind you of, in order [Page 2] that you may realise the answer which they contain to the pressing needs of our day. First of all you will notice — when you compare the fundamental idea of the Sanātana Dharma with that of modern Western life — that two ideals are held up by the one and by the other, of which the Eastern is the idea of *duty*, and the Western of rights. Now, on the difference between those two fundamental conceptions of human organisation, of national life, the whole of the future will turn.

As you know, the fundamental thought of the people of the East has been the thought embodied in that one word "DHARMA". Every man has his Dharma. But what does Dharma mean? It means the obligations into which every man is born, the obligations which surround him from the moment of his birth. The obligations to the family, the obligations to the community, the obligations to the nation — these are the Dharma into which every human being comes by the gateway of birth. It is not an arbitrary thing but a natural one. It is not a thing which is created, but it is a thing which comes out of the long course of evolution. And out of that fundamental idea of Dharma comes the thought that the first thing in human life which makes it possible is the fact that that obligation is recognised and righteously discharged. When the baby is born into the family, helpless, unable to feed itself, lying there without strength, without ability, naked, feeble, what is it that preserves the life of the babe? It is the duty of the mother and of the father, the duty of the elder to [Page 3] the younger, the sense of obligation which surrounds, helps, guards and preserves the babe through the years of childhood and of youth: out of that discharge of duty to the child, grows the obligation of the child to the family and the community. The elders guard the child in infancy. The child in its manhood must repay the obligations in its turn. Thus you come to the idea of Manu of the debts which every man is bound to pay; the debt to the Devas for giving him the whole of the natural advantages, the whole of the gifts of nature by which alone life is possible; the debt to the ancestors whose labours he has inherited, and by the fruits of whose progress his life is rendered possible today; his debt to the human beings around him; to the animals below him; his debt to the Sages of the past, all these he comes into; they make the obligations into which he is born, which he must pay back by the

useful life of the man, the father and the citizen. Out of that idea of human duty, out of that recognition of human obligation, out of the realisation that we are beings on whom duty has a claim — out of that grows the stability and the orderly progress of human society.

Now, in the West, another idea grew up, which is really less than two centuries old — it is the idea that the human being is not a part of an organisation but is an isolated individual, that he stands alone and apart, and that the fact of birth clothes him with certain rights. The "declaration of the rights of man", the famous historic phrase, sums up in a single [Page 4] statement that modern idea of human and national life. According to that, society is not based on a common obligation; it is based on the inherent rights of the individual which he may enforce by any means in his power. Law is only binding because people have accepted it and consented to it, and not because it is based on nature and expresses the Divine Will. Kings, according to this, rule not by the grace of God, but only by the acceptance of the people. Everything is based on the idea of the right of the individual, which he only yields partially in order that he may enjoy the remainder the more fully. His interests are antagonistic to the interests of others, instead of being common and universally binding upon all. This idea has grown and spread during the last 150 years. The result has been continual struggle, disturbance and difficulty. The assembly of the nation is no longer the representative of the nation as a whole, but merely of a body of interests, one conflicting with the other. The members of the modern Houses of Legislature do not represent the common interests of the whole nation, and so you have the modern struggle, the modern turmoil, the modern quarrels, and the danger of the dissolution of the modern civilisation.

But strangely enough, there has come in the West a reinforcement of the Eastern ideal. Science has grown up and science has studied nature. Instead of manufacturing paper constitutions and imaginary rights of man, science has declared that human beings, like all other things, are the result of evolution, and [Page 5] that individuality is subordinate to the common good, and the benefit of a part is subordinate to the good of the whole. Science is again declaring that society is an organism, and not a body of people based on an imaginary contract. Science is declaring, again, one life, as religion has always been declaring it; and just as Hinduism has proclaimed the one Life, the universal Spirit, and *therefore* the solidarity of man, so is modern science declaring one life and one consciousness in all, and therefore that society is a growing organism, in which every one has duties growing out of his life in the social unity. Thus, from the West is coming the reinforcement of the ancient theory of Dharma of the East, and it is for the East to proclaim now the predominance, the superiority of an organisation that demands from every man discharge of duty, and realises that on that discharge alone the whole well-being of society depends. But that is not the only vitalising influence which the Sanātana Dharma exercises on the world. It proclaims also the necessity of *Order*.

There again, Western science is beginning to strengthen Eastern religion. Science also proclaims Law and Order as the essential conditions of progress. Science has discovered that only by order is it possible for humanity to evolve. Of all the codes of human life that have ever been given to the world, that code which is known by the name of Manu — the great Lawgiver — is the most orderly and the most perfect in its arrangement. Here is another gift that you have in your hands to give to the Western world. [Page 6]

After the idea of Dharma, what are the next ideas that come forward in the Hindû polity ? The next idea is that all mankind is divided into two enormous groups: one walking on the path of pursuit, the Pravrtti Mārga — the path of going forth; and the other those that turn their faces homeward, that are treading the Nivrtti Mārga. How does this apply to human life ? It shows us that the ordinary life of man, the

common life of every day, is but a part of the divinely ordained evolution by which the progress of humanity is governed; and on the path of going forth, the Pravrtti Mārga, are laid down the rightful objects of all human effort. First comes the Dharma that I have spoken of, the duty that guides and limits; and then Artha — possessions in the widest sense, all that the world has to give and all that man is able to possess. Man, according to Hindû Dharma, is not to be an ascetic while he is treading the Pravrtti Mārga. He is told, on the contrary, that the enjoyment of possessions, the gathering of wealth, progress in worldly matters, all belong rightfully and usefully to that path of pursuit. Those who know the Hindû Dharma will realise that this is so, and that in modern India much confusion has arisen, with the result that this teaching is for the most part forgotten. Modern India has talked too much of the path of return — the Nivrtti Mārga — quite forgetting that that is the path for the few, while the path of forthgoing is the path for the many. They forget that Manu laid down for his children the pursuit of possessions and the enjoyment of pleasure. Artha and Kāma are the objects of [Page 7] the path of pursuit, limited and guided by Dharma. How much more wise was the ancient Lawgiver than are many of our modern teachers, those who would have every man an ascetic, those who declare that renunciation is the only rightful path of human life. Manu, the Lawgiver, is the wisest of the Divine rulers of man, and Manu realised that for national prosperity, effort and enjoyment were needed; that it was right that those who were evolving should evolve their faculties by effort and by enjoyment, and so possessions and pleasure were made part of the path of forthgoing. And the great masses of the people were pointed to that, as the path by which progress was to be made. Only when a man has trodden that path, only when he has developed high intelligence, only when he has developed unselfishness and the pure love of God, then is he ready to turn his face homeward and tread the path of renunciation. Then it is that Bhakti, the Love of God, takes the place of Kāma — the love of the objects of desire. Then it is that the Siddhis and the powers that they give, take the place of the worldly possessions, which are to be used only for the benefit of man and not for the gain of the possessor. Then it is that, instead of the outward law of Dharma imposing duty from without, there comes mukti, the freedom of the Self made manifest, who needs no law from without, because he realises his divinity, and, forsaking all Dharma, he becomes one with the Supreme Being and the Divine Will is his. Such is the course of human life according to Manu, balanced, rational and useful for [Page 8] all. No asceticism, premature and therefore useless, but the full development of faculties; only when these have been developed may come the turning home, the treading of the path to liberation. Step by step, in orderly and progressive fashion, Manu bids man tread the path of human life.

The last of the great principles given by Manu for the evolution of man is what is called the Varna-āshrama: varna, the stage of the human soul, the ego, the division of men into classes according to their characteristics; and āshrama, the stages of the individual life through which each should repeatedly pass.

Now, much is said for and against caste — something in its favour by those who know the turmoil of classes in the West, something against it by those in India who feel its barriers rather than its value, and resent the privileges claimed by some because duty has been forgotten by these while only privileges are claimed. And yet, rightly looked at, that fourfold division brings a detailed answer to the problems of human life afore-mentioned. What is the first problem that is pressing on every nation? That of the education of the young. There is not an assembly in the world, from the Parliament of Great Britain to the Legislative Council of the Viceroy, and down to the smallest Municipality that has to guide the welfare of a part of the community — there is not one that is not standing puzzled and bewildered before the great problem of the education of the people. How should that be solved? There is one way — though no public leader yet has suggested [Page 9] it — that has within it the power of solution, and that is by the recognition of real castes, and among them the caste of teachers. Your Dharma as Brāhmanas — those of you who are Brāhmanas — is not the gathering of wealth and the holding of places of power, but the

gathering of knowledge and the imparting of that knowledge to the people. If the Brāhmanas would only do that duty as Brāhmanas, then there would be no educational problems in India today. But the Brāhmanas, instead of doing their duty by imparting instruction, are busy in administering justice — which is properly the function of the Kshatriya; they are busy gathering wealth — which is properly the duty of the Vaishya. Worldly men rebel against the Brāhmana because he has forgotten his duty and no longer fills his proper position in the State. If we had true Brāhmanas in India, all educational problems would be solved; for there would be Brāhmanas in every village, and every village would have its teachers, and then education would be given as duty, as in the older time, and not for money as at present. You may say that this is a very fine idea, but how are you going to persuade your Brāhmana caste to give up all power and make itself available to promote the welfare of the people? I don't expect to get it from the grown-up men, those who are middle-aged and mature, those who are old and hardened by the life of the world, and I am sure no words of mine would move them to have recourse to the path of renunciation which is the path of the Brāhmana. But I have hope in the younger men of India, who are [Page 10] growing up today in schools and colleges. I have hope in those sons of India who are vowing themselves to the public weal, and are ready to labour for the public good. I believe that we shall see growing up a new Brāhmana caste, a caste which will be known by quality more than by birth, and by characteristics more than by outward marks, a class that will see the glory of sacrifice, a class that will realise the happiness of renunciation; these young men, full of enthusiasm, full of passionate devotion, who have in them the passion of self-devotion, which ought to be the mark of a Brāhmana, in these is my hope; and I believe that we shall find actually growing up in India an order of young men who, between the time when college life ends and the householder life begins, will give themselves up to some years of service for the welfare of the nation, and give that service to the masses of the people in order to elevate, guide and inspire them. It is on the young men of India that I place my hope for the redemption of the masses of India from ignorance and degradation.

And so, when it is realised that the problems of government, the problems of legislation, the problems of the administration of justice, the problems of the army, and of the navy, and of the police, are all problems that belong to the old ideal of Manu of the Kshatriya caste, when it is realised that the Kshatriyas are the defenders and guardians of the nation, that it is on them that the burden of guiding the nation should fall as a matter of duty, then we shall [Page 11] have growing up a caste of Kshatriyas educated for their work, and capable of performing it most efficiently. Then we shall see disappearing all discontent, arising from the oppression of the people by any of those who carry on the nation's working today. For instance, let me speak of the police. These are fundamentally a part of the great Kshatriya caste by their office. We know how many complaints are made in India against men taken from the lower grades of society, who are invested with authority they are constantly tempted to misuse. If we realise that for public service training in youth is necessary; if we realise that those who are to take the varied offices in the State, even the lowest of them, should be trained for those offices in youth; if it were understood that when a man joins the police, he should have been trained for his responsibilities previously; if it is only realised that he should have been trained here as the police are trained in England; if it were only realised that for purposes of public service he should be the friend of the common people; how different would be the feelings of people in India towards the police, and how willing would be the help given by the ordinary citizen whenever he was asked for it in the name of the law! It is when you realise the functions necessary for the well-being of a community, that you realise the wisdom of the ancient Lawgiver — how he made the functions separate in order that each class might discharge the same well. The teacher was one class; the warrior, the protector, another; the [Page 12] merchant a third class, the makers of wealth, in order that thereby the nation as a whole might prosper.

Looking for a moment at modern India, such a sketch as I am giving to you now seems an impossible Utopia. But nothing is impossible; for thought creates action, and that which a man thinks, inevitably comes to pass. We want to hold up the old ideal; not to force any man to follow it, if he does not see it to be admirable. We hold it up, that all men may see it. It will gradually dominate the public mind and bring about its realisation. When we are able to re-form a caste of teachers, a caste of legislators and administrators of justice, a caste of those who organise industry and accumulate wealth, a class of manual labourers who follow a particular craft or a particular art which is needed for the welfare of the people — all equally honourable and equally necessary, and all equally essential to the nation's welfare, and when the old idea of duty returns and each knows his duty and does it, then shall we again make the golden age, and a happier day shall break upon our earth. For this is what the West is looking for today. It realises its own turmoil; its own dislocation. It realises that constant struggle cannot be the natural and the fitting state of man. It is gradually despairing of the feasibility of its methods, and is looking elsewhere for light. Where should the light come from ? From the East, where the Sun is ever shining, where the laws of the Great Lawgiver were given to all his Âryan children, not only to those who settled in India, but to those who [Page 13] wandered westward and lost their way back to their father's home. So, here in India, this ideal can again be restored, adapted to modern ways, flexible as it was in the older time. If, as in the past, men's qualities were regarded as well as their family, then family would take its rightful place as one of the factors in human evolution, which is largely dependent on physical heredity; but today the ego that comes into any particular body is often unsuitable; because Dharma has been neglected, there is confusion of caste today. Because the higher castes have not done their duty, physical heredity is no longer a guide to caste as it was in the older days, and yet physical heredity is a law of nature and cannot wisely be ignored in national life. Sometimes men wonder how all the sub-castes have sprung up. They have often sprung up by natural differentiation in the quality of the physical body, which follows a special occupation of brain or hand. There is no "caste" in England, but you know that in Lancashire, the spinners and weavers of cotton cloths have grown up so much in families that employers of labour give larger wages to a boy or girl coming from a weaving family than they will give to a similar boy or girl coming from some part of the country where weaving is not a hereditary occupation. That is the way in which nature works. That is the justification of family trades. Only it has grown far too rigid here in India, and intermarriage and inter-dining also are forbidden between sub-castes. This is of course one of the things that will [Page 14] have to disappear; for though physical heredity gives variety to the community as a whole, yet it is not necessary constantly to intermarry too closely, and thus weaken that strength which you desire to maintain.

Complicated are the questions of national life, and complicated are the problems to be dealt with. But it is in that ancient Law, in the Sanātana Dharma, that answers to the modern problems are to be found. But remember that, according to Manu himself, when circumstances change, the old principles are to be adapted to those changed conditions; for which reason customs should be kept flexible, instead of being inflexible as they are in the India of today. Much lies in the hands of the educators of the young. All those who follow the ancient rules should bring up the young to work for the reform of India, to make her what she should be, flexible, elastic, adapting herself to the needs of modern life; but in all they should hold firm to the fundamental principles, for these are the conditions of national prosperity. They hold, as I said, the solution of national problems.

Now at the end I go back to the place from which I started.

It is your duty as Hindûs, as citizens, to help every effort in your midst which is based on the old

principles, and which tries to adapt them to the changed conditions of human life. Stretch out your hand in help to all efforts for human improvement; strengthen those of your fellow-citizens whom you find able to guide the young and help the old along the path that combines modern progress with the ancient wisdom.