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THE SHASHI THAROOR COLUMN

## Reclaiming *dharma*

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'If we can bring dharma into our national life, it must be to uphold, rather than at the expense of, our pluralist Indianness.'

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**HIGH POINT: In pursuit of the essence of life. - PHOTO: PTI**

MY January columns on the lessons of the Mahabharata for today's India have sparked some lively reactions from this newspaper's knowledgeable readers. Space does not permit me to refer to all of the correspondence I have received, but one letter, from the retired Director-General of Police of Tripura State, Mr. B.J.K. Tampi, makes a challenging point about the meaning of *dharma*. "In Hindi," he writes, "*dharma* means only faith or religion. But in Sanskrit the word has a pre-eminently secular meaning of social ethics covering law-abiding conduct."

Fair enough: in fact, in an afterword to my **The Great Indian Novel** in 1989, I listed a whole series of meanings that have been ascribed to the term "*dharma*", an untranslatable Sanskrit term that is, nonetheless, cheerfully defined as an unitalicised entry in many an English dictionary. (**The Chambers Twentieth-Century Dictionary** defines it as "the righteousness that underlies the

law".) I agree with Mr. Tampi that no one-word translation ("faith", "religion", "law"), can convey the full range of meaning implicit in the term. "English has no equivalent for *dharmā*," writes P. Lal, defining *dharmā* as "code of good conduct, pattern of noble living, religious rules and observance". In his "The Speaking Tree", Richard Lannoy actually defines *dharmā* in nine different ways in different contexts. These include moral law, spiritual order, sacred law, righteousness, and even the sweeping "the totality of social, ethical and spiritual harmony." Indeed, *dharmā* in its classic sense embraces the total cosmic responsibility of both God and Man. My late friend Ansar Husain Khan, author of the polemical **Rediscovery of India**, suggested that *dharmā* is most simply defined as "that by which we live". Yes — and "that" brings me to my point, and to Mr. Tampi's.

"In fact the four ends of human life," Mr. Tampi goes on, "*dharmā*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*, are always mentioned in that order. The purport is that the pursuit of wealth and pleasure should be within the parameters of *dharmā* and *moksha* (the final emancipation of the soul from rebirth through religious practices)." Mr. Tampi adds, citing Swami Ranganathananda: "the excessive Indian fear of rebirth has led to the neglect of true worldly *dharmā* for the sake of an other-worldly *moksha*. It has made men unfit both in the worldly (secular) and spiritual spheres." Now I have never met the good Mr. Tampi, whose theological learning is all the more impressive in a policeman, but his analysis gladdens my secular heart. The fact is that, despite having done so much to attract the opprobrium of the Hindutva brigade, I do believe that *dharmā* can be the key to bridging the present gap between the religious and the secular in India. The social scientist T.N. Madan has argued that the increasing secularisation of modern Indian life is responsible for the rise of fundamentalism, since "it is the marginalisation of faith, which is what secularism is, that permits the perversion of religion. There are no fundamentalists or revivalists in traditional society." The implication is that secularism has deprived Indians of their moral underpinnings — the meaning that faith gives to life — and religious extremism has risen as an almost inevitable anti-thesis to the secular project. The only way out of this dilemma is for Hindus to return to the tolerant, holistic, just, pluralist *dharmā* articulated so effectively by Swami Vivekananda, which embraces both worldly and spiritual duty.

### 'Religious' and 'Secular'

After all, as Mr. Tampi points out, the Hindu's secular pursuit of material happiness is not meant to be divorced from his obedience to the ethical and religious tenets of his faith. So the distinction between "religious" and "secular" is an artificial one: there is no such compartmentalisation in Hinduism. The secularism avowed by successive Indian governments, as Prof. R.S. Misra of Benares Hindu University has argued, is based on *dharmā-nirpekshata* ("keeping apart from *dharmā*"), whereas an authentically Indian ethic would ensure that secular objectives are infused with *dharmā*.

I should stress that I find this view persuasive but incomplete. Yes, *dharmā* is essential in the pursuit of material well-being, public order and good governance; but this should not mean turning public policy over to *sants* and *sadhus*, nor excluding any section of Indian society from its rightful place in the Indian sun. If we can bring *dharmā* into our national life, it must be to uphold, rather than at the expense of, our pluralist Indianness. Hinduism has always acknowledged the existence of opposites (and reconciled them): pain and pleasure, success and failure, creation and destruction, life and death are all manifestations of the duality inherent in human existence. These pairings are not contradictory but complementary; they are aspects of the same overarching reality. So also with the secular and the sacred: a Hindu's life must involve both. To acknowledge this would both absorb and deflect the

Hindu resurgence.

I too am proud of my Hinduism; I do not want to cede its verities to fanatics. To discriminate against another, to attack another, to kill another, to destroy another's place of worship, on the basis of his faith is not part of Hindu *dharma*, as it was not part of Vivekananda's. It is time to go back to these fundamentals of Hinduism. It is time to take Hindu *dharma* back from the fundamentalists.

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