



Sanatan Dharma: The Eternal Path of Righteousness and Human Evolution

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Abstract. Sanatan Dharma, often regarded as the eternal and universal spiritual tradition, transcends conventional religious boundaries. Rooted in cosmic principles and moral righteousness, it serves as the foundation of Hindu Dharma while influencing numerous philosophical and spiritual traditions. Sanatan Dharma is eternal or everlasting righteousness that guides righteous living. Unlike rigid belief systems, it evolves based on one's stage in life and responsibilities, allowing for both material and spiritual growth. A true follower of Sanatan Dharma finds a perfect balance between worldly duties and inner realization. This manuscript explores the essence of Sanatan Dharma, its fundamental principles, and its distinction from Hindu Dharma. Drawing insights from ancient scriptures such as the Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, and Vedas, as well as the perspectives of eminent thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya, this study examines the manifestation of divinity through Dharma. Furthermore, we present that balance is the foundational basis of all religions and a key to the journey of human excellence. By analyzing its adaptability in contemporary contexts, the paper underscores how Sanatan Dharma continues to serve as a guiding force for ethical living, spiritual evolution, and societal harmony.

Keywords. Sanatan Dharma, Hindu Dharma, Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, Righteousness, Spiritual Evolution, Religion, Ethics, Self-Realization

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1 Introduction

Evolution is intrinsic to man's nature; it is his very soul. Those who take themselves for granted remain unfulfilled, while those who believe they are born complete remain unevolved. Man is unique in that he is born with potential rather than completion. Unlike animals, which come into the world fully formed, man is born incomplete. While animals move solely on a horizontal plane, their existence confined to a singular dimension, man alone has the capacity to ascend vertically.

Man is born as a larva, possessing the inherent potential to transform. If he remains in this state, he stagnates—rooted in one place, stuck at one stage, without evolving into a caterpillar. The journey of growth is continuous; it does not halt until man evolves into a butterfly, allowing the vertical dimension to manifest within him. This vertical progression signifies true manhood—the awakening of divinity within.

Swami Vivekananda defines this vertical ascent as religion—the realization of one's higher self. In a letter to his disciples, he states: "Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man. ... Religion is the manifestation of divinity already in man". From this perspective, understanding religion becomes essential, as it is regarded as the manifestation of divinity inherent in man, marking his vertical progression.

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Dharma, commonly translated into English as "religion," is a Sanskrit term deeply rooted in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, embodying profound spiritual, philosophical, and ethical principles. It encompasses moral law, duty, righteousness, and the eternal path of truth. However, the term Sanatan in Sanskrit means eternal, timeless, or everlasting. Sanatan

Dharma, therefore, signifies the eternal and unchanging righteousness that governs ethical and righteous living. "Right" in this context refers to actions aligned with truth, justice, and one's duty—varying based on one's role, responsibilities, and circumstances. Bhagavad Gita, unfolds as a divine dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, where Krishna expounds on the essence of Dharma. In the Gita, Dharma is not confined to religious obligations but transcends them, encompassing righteousness, moral duty, and the fundamental responsibilities of life. This journey toward Dharma ultimately leads to becoming a Yogi—one who walks steadfastly on the path of righteousness, seeking inner truth, self-realization, and divine consciousness.

The present manuscript aims to explore the essence of Dharma by defining its fundamental duty and self-reflective realization within the context of Sanatan Dharma. It seeks to compare and contrast the significance, origin, and scope of belief between Sanatan Dharma and Hindu Dharma, while analyzing perspectives of eminent thinkers, including Swami Vivekananda, regarding the manifestation of divinity through Dharma. Furthermore, this study examines the balance between material responsibilities toward oneself and others versus spiritual growth, investigating how Dharma serves as the foundation of various religions and philosophies, fostering unity in diversity. It also delves into the eternal and adaptable nature of Sanatan Dharma, assessing its relevance in contemporary society and the moral framework it upholds.

2 Literature Review

Sanatana Dharma, often used interchangeably with Hinduism, possesses an extraordinary history enriched by intricately woven scriptures and profound philosophies. One of the most significant texts in Hindu philosophy, the Bhagavad Gita, serves as a fundamental guide to understanding the principles of Dharma and the process of self-realization. Various commentaries and translations, such as A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami's Bhagavad Gita As It Is (1968) [1], have expanded the scope of this sacred text, offering

diverse perspectives to both traditional and contemporary readers.

Alongside the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads serve as a cornerstone of Hindu metaphysics. Eknath Easwaran's *The Upanishads* (2009) [2] and Swami Sivananda's *The Principal Upanishads* (2008) [3] provide deeper insights into the principles of Dharma and self-knowledge. These foundational texts, coupled with meditative philosophical practices, delve into the pursuit of ultimate truth and self-inquiry.

The Vedas, among the oldest and most authoritative scriptures in Hinduism, encapsulate the multifaceted reality of Indian civilization, reflecting its rich cultural heritage. The linguistic, ritualistic, and philosophical dimensions of these scriptures are explored in works such as Barend A. Van Nooten's *Rig Veda: A Metrically Restored Text* (1994) [4] and Devi Chand's *The Yajurveda: A Study* (1980) [5].

Scholars and seekers exploring the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of Hinduism may find Stephen Knapp's *The Heart of Hinduism: The Eastern Path to Freedom, Empowerment, and Illumination* (2005) [6] particularly insightful, as it elucidates the relevance of Hindu teachings in modern society. Similarly, Dr. David Frawley's *What is Hinduism?: A Guide for the Global Mind* (2018) [7] and Manoj Singh's *Sanatana Dharma: Vaidik Gateway to the Century* (2021) [8] examine various aspects of Sanatana Dharma, including Karma, Dharma, Yoga, and Meditation. These works seamlessly integrate ancient wisdom with contemporary realities, demonstrating the continued applicability of Hindu philosophy today.

Eknath Easwaran's translation of *The Bhagavad Gita* (2007) [9] is widely acclaimed for its clarity and depth, making the text more accessible to readers. Complementing these works, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (2007) [10] presents a comprehensive collection of writings on Sanatana Dharma, emphasizing its role in social progress and spiritual self-development.

3 Sanatan Dharma and Selected Interpretations

In his article, Makrand Paranjape [11] outlines key characteristics of Sanatani Parampara, using the term "Sanatani" to describe this tradition. He highlights the following aspects:

1. It has no specific point of origin and no definitive conclusion.
2. It is pluralistic without being relativistic, acknowledging the unity of truth while allowing for diverse expressions and interpretations.
3. It has no single central text, prophet, founder, or institutional authority. Instead, it remains a dynamic space for differences and debates, though not necessarily for conflict or opposition.
4. Its fundamental tendency is to sacralize the world and everything within it. This inclination is so strong that even secularism is transformed into a sacred principle, and rationality itself is sanctified, despite being a tool for desacralization. This tendency prevents it from becoming exploitative, not only toward other human groups but also toward non-human life.

Paranjape refers to the categorical imperative of Sanatani as its principle of non-exclusivity. However, he distinguishes non-exclusivity from mere inclusivity. He introduces the concept of a Co-Sanatani, a person who shares the same foundational principles as a Sanatani.

Nandan Kandant [12] describes Sanatan Dharma as an evolutionary framework that enables humanity to expand its consciousness and progress toward higher states of existence, ultimately achieving completeness.

Sanatan Dharma is often mistakenly equated with Hindu religion. The key distinctions between the two are as follows:

Feature	Sanatan Dharma	Hindu Dharma
Origin	Eternal, based on cosmic principles	Rooted in geographical and cultural evolution
Scope	Universal and timeless	Primarily associated with Indian traditions
Focus	Spirituality, righteousness, and cosmic order	Religious practices, deities, customs, and rituals
Flexibility	Fundamental and unchanging	Adaptable and diverse
Recognition	Considered the core of all religions	Encompasses a broad spectrum of sects and beliefs

Table 1: Comparison between Sanatan Dharma and Hindu Dharma

Sanatan Dharma can be understood as the eternal spiritual truth that underlies Hindu Dharma. Hindu Dharma, in contrast, represents a more practical and evolving manifestation of these eternal principles, shaped by cultural, historical, and traditional influences. While all Hindus adhere to some aspects of Sanatan Dharma, not all elements of Hindu Dharma are necessarily eternal.

4 Sanatan Dharma in the Eyes of Leaders and Saints

Swami Vivekananda

In the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, Swami Vivekananda presented Hinduism as the universal religion, rooted in the eternal principles of Sanatan Dharma. He quoted the Bhagavad Gita and the Vedas, demonstrating that Sanatan Dharma teaches unity in diversity:

“I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance.”

He described Sanatan Dharma as the eternal truth beyond sects and dogmas:

“Sanatan Dharma is based on the realization of the soul’s oneness with Brahman. This is not a belief, but a fact to be realized.”

Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Volume 1, Lecture on “The Vedanta Philosophy” [10]

He warned against blindly following rituals and called for a return to the original Vedantic spirit of Sanatan Dharma:

“Religion in India must be made practical. The way to reach God is by serving mankind.”

Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Volume 3, “The Future of India” [10]

In a letter written to Alasinga Perumal in 1894, Vivekananda [13] described Sanatan Dharma as a way of life:

“Sanatan Dharma is not bound by a single book or prophet, but by eternal principles guiding humanity.”

Sri Aurobindo

In his book *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, Sri Aurobindo described Sanatan Dharma as the essence of Indian civilization and warned against Western materialism:

“Sanatan Dharma is not just a set of beliefs, but the very law of our being.”

Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya

Shriram Sharma Acharya viewed Sanatan Dharma as eternal and scientific. He emphasized that spirituality and science are not separate and that Sanatan Dharma is rooted in universal laws:

“Sanatan Dharma is the divine science of life, teaching us how to live in harmony with the universe.”

He saw Gayatri Mantra and Yagya as core spiritual practices to purify the mind and environment:

“Gayatri is the mother of knowledge, and Yagya is the process of divine transformation.”

He called Sanatan Dharma the Path of Self-Realization and Social Service. He merged spirituality with Karma Yoga, stating that true Dharma is to serve humanity and uplift society. He taught that Dharma is not just about rituals but about righteous living (Sadvichar, Sadachar, and Sewa):

“Sanatan Dharma is not limited to worship; it is about purifying thoughts, actions, and society.”

In his book *Sanatan Dharma Darshan* [14], he explained how Sanatan Dharma is a path of wisdom, science, and spirituality, not blind faith but a spiritual science.

According to Shriram Sharma, the four pillars of Sanatan Dharma are:

1. Gayatri (Wisdom & Purity of Thought)
2. Yagya (Selfless Action & Environmental Purity)
3. Sewa (Service to Humanity)
4. Swadhyaya (Self-Study & Self-Discipline)

The movement started by him, *Vichar Kranti Abhiyan* (Thought Revolution Movement), aimed to purify thoughts, actions, and social systems using Sanatan Dharma.

Mahatma Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi saw Sanatan Dharma as the Path of Truth (Satya) and Non-Violence (Ahimsa) [15]. He believed its essence lies in living truthfully and practicing non-violence in thought, word, and deed:

“Sanatan Dharma teaches that truth is God. One who follows truth with faith and patience is truly religious.”

He considered the Bhagavad Gita the highest scripture of Sanatan Dharma, calling it his “spiritual dictionary”:

“The Gita is not just a scripture but a manual for life, teaching how to serve without expectation.”

Gandhi viewed Sanatan Dharma as a Dharma beyond caste, rituals, and sectarian divisions:

“The religion of my forefathers is Sanatan Dharma, but it is not confined to Hindus alone. It embraces all.”

In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), he described the teachings of Sanatan Dharma as self-rule (Swaraj) through self-discipline:

“Sanatan Dharma does not mean blind traditions but the eternal principles of truth and duty.”

In his book *My Experiments with Truth*, he shared his experiences practicing the principles of Sanatan Dharma. He often said:

“Sanatan Dharma teaches unity, not division.”

Principles of Sanatana Dharma in Today's Era

In the current era of rapid change, technology has permeated nearly every aspect of human life. An ancient adage once stated, “Love people and use things,” but today, it has reversed to “Use people and love things.” Thus, the principles and practices of Sanatana Dharma are more relevant now than ever before.

Swami Vivekananda emphasized three fundamental qualities that make both individuals and nations great:

- Conviction in the power of goodness
- Absence of jealousy and suspicion
- Helping all who strive to do good

These are some of the simple yet profound practices of Sanatana Dharma. The Bhagavad Gita teaches that Dharma is not rigid; it evolves according to one's stage in life and responsibilities. A true seeker must balance material duties with spiritual growth.

The term “right” in the definition of Dharma should be understood as synonymous with “equanimity.” According to the Gita, this equanimity is called Yog:

योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय।
सिद्ध्यसिद्ध्योः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग
उच्यते॥ 2.48॥

Be steadfast in the performance of your duty, O Arjuna, abandoning attachment to success and failure. Such equanimity is called Yog [1].

Equanimity enables us to accept all circumstances with serenity. Shree Krishna praises it as Yog. A true Yogi accepts fame and infamy, success and failure, pleasure and pain with equanimity, seeing them as part of divine will.

In *Sanskriti Sanjeevani*, a book by Sri Ram Sharma Acharya, the concept of balance is described as *Samatvam* (equanimity). A holistic system is not about choosing one extreme over another but integrating both material life and spiritual wisdom. This balance is central to many traditions. For instance, Buddhism's *Ash-tangika Marg* (Eightfold Path) emphasizes:

- Right Vision
- Right Meditation
- Right Mindfulness
- Right Effort
- Right Means of Livelihood
- Right Conduct
- Right Speech
- Right Resolve

The term *Samma* in Buddhist scriptures, often translated as “right,” means “perfect balance.” This balance is the essence of righteousness, a common foundation across all religions. With no exaggeration, one can infer that all religions share the same fundamental roots, named Sanatana.

In a lecture on education, Dr. Mohan Bhagwat (RSS) highlighted significant global challenges arising from imbalances [16]:

- Global versus Local – Overemphasis on global trends can marginalize local traditions, and vice versa. Global and local perspectives often seem contradictory.
- Traditional versus Modern – A perpetual conflict exists between tradition and modernization, creating generational gaps. Elders adhere to traditions, while youth demand modernization.
- Foresightedness versus Shortsightedness – Some prioritize long-term vision, while others focus only on the present, dismissing the future as unpredictable.
- Competitiveness versus Equanimity – While the world speaks of unity and equanimity, individuals and nations remain in constant competition.
- Knowledge Exposure versus Knowledge Assimilation – The flood of information in the digital age creates confusion between acquiring more knowledge and utilizing existing wisdom.

- Spirituality versus Materialism – Spirituality is vital for avoiding chaos, yet materialistic desires pull individuals away from its essence, creating an ongoing struggle between the two.

All these challenges demand balance. A person who attains perfect balance is complete. This same balance, termed *Samatvam* in the Gita, transforms an individual into a Yogi—a complete being. The root cause of today’s global issues is extremism, which breeds ego and leads to chaos.

A French author suggests three ways to avoid this chaos [16]:

- Awareness of moral concerns
- Spirituality
- Ethical living

These are not abstract ideals but scientific principles of Sanatana Dharma—principles of transformation through spiritual wisdom, leading to individual, societal, and national completeness. The problem today lies in rigidly adhering to “my thoughts” or “my principles.” Sanatana Dharma, by contrast, embraces flexibility and inclusivity.

Balance does not mean compromising on life’s principles; rather, it signifies making sacrifices to lead a purposeful life. Progress is essential for human beings. A saint once answered a question about the fundamental difference between animals and humans: “An animal can remain where it is tomorrow, but a human being must take a step forward every day.” This daily step symbolizes true human growth.

In today’s world of technological advancements, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become indispensable. While AI represents the pinnacle of modern science, even its creators fear its misuse. This underscores the necessity of spiritual wisdom alongside material progress—highlighting the continued relevance of Sanatana Dharma’s principles.

5 Conclusion

Sanatan Dharma, as explored in this study, represents an eternal and universal framework that transcends cultural and religious boundaries. Unlike Hindu Dharma, which evolves through historical and societal influences, Sanatan Dharma remains rooted in cosmic principles, guiding humanity toward self-realization and higher states of consciousness. Thinkers such as Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya emphasize its role in manifesting divinity within individuals and fostering unity amidst diversity. The distinction between Sanatan and Hindu Dharma highlights the former’s foundational nature as an enduring spiritual truth, while the latter serves as its dynamic, culturally embedded expression. Ultimately, the study reaffirms that Sanatan Dharma is not merely a set of religious beliefs but a holistic philosophy that integrates moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions, offering a timeless path toward inner growth and societal harmony.

Compliance with ethical standards Note required.

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