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IS THERE A CONFLICT AMONG THE PURUSHARTHAS IN THE LIFE OF A HINDU?

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Abstract

The Hindu tradition has been acknowledged in the world with its emphasis on the Varna system, Ashram system, and the Purushartha- a lifestyle system which is based on a distilled knowledge of a mental fermentation of centuries. The Purusharthas which lay emphasis on Dharma (righteousness), Arth (Material possessions), Kaam (fulfillment of desires) and Moksha (Salvation) are the blue print of every Hindu's life. The first three appear to be on similar track, but the fourth appears to be in opposition of the other three. The paper tries to locate whether this is true and whether there is a hierarchy among them?

Keywords: Artha, Dharma, Kaam, Moksha, Brahminical, Shraminic, Nibbana

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IS THERE A CONFLICT AMONG THE PURUSHARTHAS IN THE LIFE OF A HINDU?

- Deepa Chaturvedi

In Hinduism, the Purushartha are the canonical four aims of human (read Hindu) life. The four together present a pattern of consummate life of Hindus by aiming to satisfy their physical, material, spiritual and emotional needs. In the hierarchical order, from the lowest to the highest, these goals are:

- ❖ Kama- Pleasure or love
- ❖ Artha-Wealth
- ❖ Dharma-Righteousness or Morality
- ❖ Moksha-Liberation from the cycle of rebirth or Reincarnation.

The most interesting methodological problems associated with the theory of Purusharthas is their mutual relationship. It is now generally accepted that to the trivarga of the “temporal” Purusharthas of Artha, Dharma, and Kaam; Moksha was added later to be called caturvarga. Historically, it has been established that, Moksha received canonical recognition later than the other three but as mentioned earlier became one of the most pronounced of the four values- so much so that the scholars started to believe that Hinduism regarded the world as an illusion. It is difficult to say how true is this assertion regarding Hinduism but one thing is for sure that due to the addition of Moksha, the six schools of philosophical thought which came into being to advocate its cause- out of them the Vedanta philosophy became the mark of identification for Hinduism and even today it is a predominant area of study in the academic circles. And as Zaehner(1962, p.7) puts it “it is true to say that there is and , except in the very earliest period, always has been a double tension within the Hindu religion- the striving after liberation from this world which all admit to be the final goal of man on the one hand and man’s obligation to do what is right in this world on the other, the tension between Moksha and Dharma”.

As we have already noted that Zimmer grouped the world- oriented values of Dharma, Artha, Kaam under 'philosophies of time' and Moksha under the head 'philosophies of eternity'(Zimmer, 1961, pp.87).

It was this addition of Moksha to the prevalent and already existing canon of three, the triad- Dharma, Artha, and, Kaam that divided the concerns of the Hindu thought into two clear-cut divisions of this-worldly and other-worldly and created a unique problem of its kind. This gave birth to an interesting debate as to what is the actual flavor of Hindu tradition- the worldly or transcendental? It is now contestable whether Dharma with its combination of Artha or Kaam are of prominence to Indian psyche or whether the thirst for liberation is the end of all worldly efforts. In fact, the big difficulty has been not only determining the relationship of the triad led by Dharma with Moksha but in fact today scholarship finds it a complex task to interpret and explain the term Dharma which is so historically and culturally loaded and has over the years acquired such variety of interpretations that to bracket the term in a strict definition is difficult. To put it in Zaehner's (1962,p.13) words " For this Dharma, though it may be 'subtle' and 'difficult to know' is what gives Hinduism in all its phases its peculiar bitter-sweet flavor- the flavor of self- forgetfulness and renunciation certainly, but the flavor too of a thirst for righteousness in an unrighteous world and a constant yearning for truth wherever it may be found".

This sort of a mixed reaction demands even more that we try to get to the root of this problem- to Swami Vivekananda's (Vivekananda 1970,5:454-55) lament that " the Buddha" ruined us" by over emphasizing the pursuit of Moksha. He asks " Why this attempt to compel the whole world to follow the same path to Moksha.. What does Buddha prescribe for the man who neither wants Moksha nor is fit to receive it- Nothing! Either you must have Moksha or you are doomed to destruction- these are the only two ways held forth by them, and there is no middle course. You are tied hand and foot in the matter of trying for anything other than Moksha- There is no way shown how you may enjoy the world a little for a time.... It is only the Vedic religion which considers ways and means and lays down rules for the fourfold attainment of man, comprising Dharma, Artha, Kaam and Moksha."

It is undoubtedly true that Vivekananda did echo the thought of a common Hindu and also some radicals who believe that Buddha and his theory of Nirvana- and subsequently the adoption of the Dhamma by rulers like Ashoka, sounded a death knell for Indian politics and culture as due to the renunciate policy India became weak and a victim of foreign rule. Not only this, from the Hindu viewpoint and understanding of life, there was an open debate and an urge to hold the Purusharthas in a balanced and harmonious inter-dependence.

According to Sharma (p.233) "To exaggerate the supremacy of Moksha or to understand it in the wrong way is to lose the understanding of value that is distinctly Hindu. It is clear that all the Purusharthas were equally significant and were thought of as a four dimensional attainment or pursuit of something that was worthy of attainment and was good".

How much truth is there in Vivekananda's assertions is difficult to locate and assert, but was the emphasis on anti ritualism and renunciation a natural outcome of a yearning to free life from excessive ritualism and violence. In the words of Dr Flood (Lipner, 1997,p.22) "Shramanism emphasized the authority of individual experience and rejected the violence involved in the sacrifice." The Buddha in fact gave equal respect to both the householder tradition and the renunciate one though emphasizing the fact that the family and material wealth do act as obstacles in the path of Nibbana. And further, though the impact of the Buddha's teachings on the contemporary society could not be neglected, as Dr Flood (Lipner,1997,p.23) agrees that " the trivarga of Dharma, Artha and Kaam represents a Brahminical ideology and the adding of Moksha to form the caturvarga represents the incorporation of a non- Brahminical worldview, possibly associated with the Ksatriya aristocracy and possibly with other non- Brahminical segments of early Indian society". These sections of the society were probably those which were interacting closely with Brahminism and reacting to it's over indulgent, over ritualistic, excessively worldly emphasis.

So precisely it would do scholarship a lot good if we were to see it just as an incorporation or reaction but not an impact “that ruined us” in Vivekananda’s terms.

The controversy about the precedence of the values though is very old. A very clear exposition of the importance of all the three is to be seen in the writings of Vatsyayan and Kautilya. Vatsyayan (Kaam Sutra, 2.14) readily appreciated the relative value of each of the goals. Profit, he emphasized is more important than pleasure or desire, social success more important than success in love, and Dharma more important than success and wealth.

Kautilya opined in Arthashastra 1.7.3:

Dharmarthavirodhena Kaamu seveta, na nihsukhah syat. Samaü va trivargam anyonyanubaddham. Eko hy atyasevito dharmarthakamanam atmanam itarau ca pidayati...

One should enjoy equally the group of three which are mutually connected. Indeed, if one of them is pursued, this harms either virtuous behaviour, wealth or pleasure [viz. the one that is being pursued] as well as the other two.

Kautilya advocated that the values were “ mutually connected” (anyonyanubaddham), which meant that the Purusharthas were inseparably bound to each other. They were not mutually exclusive, that is the fulfillment of one did not mean the exclusion of the other, but they were mutually propagatory i.e the righteous fulfillment of one made it easier to take up the other.

But perhaps Dumont appears to have avoided taking into account this principle or idea of mutuality (anyonya-anubaddham) as he in Homo Hierarchicus (pp.271-74), first sees a separation in its entirety between Moksha and the rest of the three,i.e the triad, he sees the existence of a hierarchical relationship. According to him Dharma, Artha and Kaam represent a hierarchy of ends- moral universalism, calculating egotism, and immediate satisfaction respectively. He asserts that each is accorded legitimacy. He furthers his opinion saying that at the same time, each is opposed to the other, though not absolutely. A hierarchical opposition exists when an “inferior” goal is pursued only when a “superior”

goal does not intervene. Thus, in case of conflict, Kaam should yield to Artha and Artha to Dharma..If this rule were followed, the triad would work as a system of hierarchical opposition. However, between the triad and the Moksha, no positive relationship is possible, as the latter requires the radical renunciation of the former. In the end, any attempt to bring together the four into a system will only mask the heterogeneity that exists between Moksha and the rest.

But Dumont's view again appears to be a little off the track. It reflects a short-sighted view of the life of a normal Hindu who not in a life but in the duration of a single day lives the three Purusharthas and lives them successfully. To counter explain Dumont's view, it would not be out of place to assert in the words of R Sundar Rajan (1979-80, p.343) that it is the "simultaneity" of Purusharthas that distinguish us as human. He asserts that to sunder and segregate one from the other is to deny and negate it as a Purushartha. In a pertinent example he explains that Kaam, for example without the influence of the other three would be an animal impulse, but with their influence, it would be a form of being human. What makes Kaam an important human value is its mediation by the rest of the three too. This understanding of their mutuality perhaps inspired Mircea Eliade (1988, p.345) to term the Purusharthas as "integrative" where he emphasized that an integrated life involves and entails the pursuit of all the four goals.

The views of Rajan here again find an echo in Eliade's when he says that while each Purushartha enjoys its own "specific autonomy", each is at the same time " oriented" to the others; and it is this relationship to the other that makes each one of them a distinctly human orientation.

It would not be out of context here to discuss Vivekananda's views about Shankara. He says (Vivekananda 1970,5:454-55) " Shankara and Ramanuja firmly re-established the Eternal Vedic Religion, harmonizing and balancing in due proportions Dharma , Artha, Kaam and Moksha. Thus the nation was brought to the way of regaining its lost life."

But to a general understanding this is not the case. The big divide which emerged with the emergence of the Shramanic tradition was further broadened by Shankara's emphasis on making liberation a goal which always and everywhere was to be segregated, would require an absolute "uninvolvement" in and with the social, economic and other processes to which the seeker found himself or herself totally involved and attached. So if it was Buddha who started the process of disintegration in the comprehensive life of a Hindu, it was Shankara who added to the confusion by calling the world Maya or illusion.

This disharmonization though remained limited to the Intelligentsia and it would be difficult to locate how it affected the common people. This misinterpretation which became the underlying factor of a totally one-sided description of Hindu thought process as escapist still remains a part of modern scholarly debate.

For example, AK Ramanujan (M. Marriott ed. 1990, pp.51,54) supports what he terms a theory of "successive encompassment" to explain the internal relationship of the Purusharthas. For him Dharma, Artha, and Kaam form "concentric nests" (sheaths or kosas) formed from the centre-the individual. There being cocentric nests they became relational in their values. And here again hierarchy is envisaged as the individual has to practice and follow them in succession. Moksha according to Ramanuja however, is not a part of the system of nests, is absolutely segregated as it is a "release from all relation". He calls Moksha a pure isolation, a complete heedless status, Kaivalyam.

For according to him Sannyasa (the final stage in life) is the one which "cremates" all one's past and present relations thereby again emphasizing the great divide. But this does not seem to be the entire truth and could be challenged with the following example which explains this great confusion about Hinduism's adjustment with house holder tradition and the world renouncer tradition as well as the trivarga of Dharma, Artha, Kaam on one hand and Moksha on the other. The example is of Raja Janak who is popularly known as "Videha" which means body-less i.e. beyond physical bonds. Now this may sound as an absurd contradiction that a king who is known to be the richest one of the Oriental world, enjoying

all luxuries of the world and in a physical body of a man is called Videha or body-less. But in the general Hindu terms it is easily explicable. The Ashtavakra Gita, or the Ashtavakra Samhita elucidates this fact very interestingly in the discourse between the Perfect Master Ashtavakra and Janak. John Richards in his translation of the book explains that Janak was the only one to have been born a Royal and to remain one throughout his life whilst dispensing the duties of king and perfect saint simultaneously. Janak was unattached. That is why he is known by another name as Videha (bodiless) because he had no consciousness of the body-attended worldly affairs in attached manner. Though he lived in the world, he would roam about like a jivanmukta (liberated in this very life).

In Vachanamrut Vadtal 20, Swami Narayan Bhagwan gives the example of Janak: “ Janak Videhi followed the path of pravruttee (involved in worldly activities) and yet he was undisturbed.” Swami Narayan further explains-“ one’s senses may be directed outwards and one may be on the path of pravruttee, but if in one’s heart one has a firm understanding like that of Janak, then he will in no way become disturbed by lust, anger, etc”.

A story regarding Janak well elucidates this fact. Once a Brahmin, who wondered why Janak was praised so highly, visited Mithila. When he asked Janak, the king told the Brahmin to travel around entire Mithila with his guardsman. But the condition was that the Brahmin was to place a pot of oil on his head and the guardsman was instructed to cut off the Brahmin’s head even if a single drop fell. The Brahmin traveled around the city constantly paying attention only to the pot of oil. When the Brahmin returned, Janak asked him what sights he had enjoyed in Mithila? The Brahmin replied that he had noticed nothing- his focus had not ventured anywhere besides the pot of oil. Janak explained that he ruled the kingdom in a similar fashion. He said he lived as if there is a sword on top of his throne, held only by a single hair. If he would waver in his focus on God, he will be destroyed.

In Vachanamrut Gadhada First 38, Swaminarayan explains “ Householder devotees should behave like Janak Raja, who said “ Although my city of Mithila is burning, nothing of mine is burning (Mahabharata Shanti Parva, Moksha Dharma, 18/40). A household devotee with this type of understanding, even though he may possess a house, is a true devotee”.

Lamenting the same Pandurang Vaman Kane , the author of the very authentic and monumental work “ History of the Dharmasastra”, expresses the need to rethink the whole theory of Purusharthas. Within the Indian Intelligentsia there is a deep yearning to go beyond this negative attitude which has been developed, sustained and fostered by the so called “disharmonisers”. Scholars like Kane are not satisfied with only restating and reiterating what has already been said for the last two millennia about the relationship of the trivarga or the triad to the whole concept of Nirvana or Moksha. And a great scholar of even great conviction and intellectual authority like Kane’s (1977, pp.1620-32) plea needs to be catered to, who says that the unfortunate, radical separation of the spiritual life from the economic well being ,political astuteness and ethical living had cost Indian Civilization dearly. He rues the fact that Indian Intellectuals were too uselessly occupied in “ mental gymnastics” about Logic, Vedanta, Poetics and other philosophical subjects. After the master works by Manu, Vatsyayan and Kautilya, discussions on the country’s political and economic system, its defects and the means of removing them almost came to a stand still. And the acharyas on whom he puts the maximum blame started placing “ too much emphasis on other worldliness and Vedanta” and mightily neglected the all pervasive essence of active human life by not placing “ equal or greater emphasis” on it. And that is precisely why scholars like him would want and endorse a rethinking which includes a new understanding of the meaning inherent in the theory of the Purusharthas.

As Crawford (1974, p.209) points out “ On the basis of the study of our doctrine of the four Purusharthas we find that Hindu ethics is a rich compendium of elements of life which less imaginative systems have deemed exclusive and antagonistic. It’s complex anthropology permits it to blend activism with renunciation, and the empirical with the spiritual. Its view of man is not only holistic but optimistic. As in the case of the Ashrama-Dharma , Varna Dharma, and the Purusharthas are based on ‘the principle of the progressive realization of

the spirit'. And it calls for an effort to unearth this progressive realization and the end alone.

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