

CONCEPT OF PURUSHARTHA AND ASHRAMA

The Indological approach to the Indian society directly brings us to analyse and to understand the Varnashrama-dharma and the Purushartha system which is the foundation of Hindu social order. The traditional Hindu social organization is based on Varnashrama- dharma and Purushartha. It deals with individuals and society in all its comprehensiveness. An individual must contribute his best. But his role is not the end of his doings. He is not just be sacrificed for the social order. He must have also his inner fulfillment. The way to it is by Purushartha. Purusasukta hymn of rigveda compares Society as a giant organism having Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaish and Sudra as its head, arms, trunk and feet respectively; each Varna being functional like each organ, and all make together the society as the organs make the organism. All like the organs perform the co-equal functions, “It is expressly stated in the text that no part of the whole may claim exclusive importance and superiority over the others; collaboration and exchange of services are the essence of this organismic theory. The various organs of the projected Purusha body- image are related in structural consistency”.

Purushartha and Ashrama Vyavastha are closely linked with each other. These help in the conduct of human activities leading towards Moksha. Thus Ashrama and Purushartha systems run parallel to each other.

Theory of Purushartha

Purushartha is a sanskrit word meaning “the object of human pursuit” or “goals of man”. “Purusharthate Purushartha”, means the efforts made by the individual to achieve the aims, goals and ultimate values of life. Purushartha refers to the four proper goals or amis of a human life. It comprises the concept of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. According to Prof. K.M’ Kapadia “there are four Purusharthas or aims of life- Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. He is of the opinion that, ‘the theory of Purushartha thus seeks to co-ordinate material desires and spiritual life. It also tries to satisfy the sex of instinct in man his love of power and property, his thirst for an artistic and cultural life, his hunger for reunion with paramatman. It comprehends life as a whole, its hopes and aspirations, its acquisitions and enjoyment, its sublimation and spiritualization”.

Dharma: It is honest and upright conduct or righteous action.

Artha: A righteous and honest pursuit of economic activity.

Kama: It is the fulfillment of one’s normal desires.

Moksha: It is liberation, which is absorption of the self into eternal bliss.

Depending upon one’s deed (karma) one is able to reach the stage of moksha or liberation. The stage of moksha depicts the end of the cycle of birth and rebirth which is called Samsar. Moksha is considered to be the ultimate goal for any human. After this dharma takes priority over artha or kama. The word Dharma is derived from the Sanskrit root ‘dhri’ which means to hold together or to preserve. Hence, the social implication of Dharma as a principle to maintain the stability of the society is brought out in various classical Hindu texts. Dharma is for the welfare of mankind. It protects and preserves all human beings. K.M Kapadia is of the view that Dharma provides a link between Artha and Kama. Artha (the economic and the material aspects of life) is desirable because it unfolds the spirituality of man only when he is not economically starved. A man has to maintain a household and perform the Dharma as a householder. Hence, Artha is necessary for the maintenance of life and the maintenance of Dharma. On the other hand, Kama refers to the basic impulses and desires of man and it may also be used in a broader sense to include the motivation of man which is socially acquired. Hence, due importance is also given on Artha and Kama. These, when pursued in accordance with Dharma are the right functions of a man. These four goals can be

seen in the context of the four stages of life (Ashrama) with each one relating to a different stage and the goals associated with it.

Theory of Ashrama

The ashrama are regarded as resting stages during one's journey on the way to final liberation which is the ultimate aim of life. The four stages of Ashrama were: Brahamacharya, Grahastha, Vanaprastha and Sanyas.

Brahamacharya:

1. Concerns stage of student
2. In the ancient ages the pupil had to live with his teacher and dialogue got to the tents of teachings and this stage of learning was known as Brahamacharya-ashrama.
3. In this phase one acquires the knowledge of Dharma

Grahastha:

1. Stage of married man, the house holder
2. During this Ashrama, one pursue artha (wealth) and kama (legitimate desires)

Vanaprastha:

1. Stage that of a retired life in the forest after abandoning the home preparatory to complete renouncement of worldly relations.
2. The individuals now gives up his fields of artha and kama by leaving his near and dear ones, his family, his village and by abandoning his belongings and possessions.
3. This is the time to pre-occupy oneself with the fourth Purusartha Moksha.

Sanyas:

1. Complete renunciation of worldly relations and attachments
2. In the last stage, the individual free from all obligation, has to help himself in the search of the true knowledge and being of the self.
3. An individual brings himself face to face with the final aim of all existence namely Moksha in the last stage.

From a theological point of view, the ashramas offer an incredible opportunity to people to live in accordance with the highest ideals of human life, irrespective of their age and the occupation and work for their salvation. Manu believed that nothing in the world was ever done by a man without desires and that the best way to fulfill them was by practicing dharma and discharging one's obligatory duties. He declared that he who persisted in discharging his prescribed duties would not only attain immortality but also the fulfillment of all his desires even in his present life (Manusmriti 2.5). Its chief weakness is its adherence to caste based duties, obsession with the superiority of the priestly class and the exclusion of a large section of people who do not belong to the upper three castes because of their birth.

The concept of four ashramas as successive stages in the life of an individual was a later development in vedic society. The vedic dharma originally upheld the concept of ekashramam or one ashrama for the rest of one's life based on one's most dominant goal or aspirations. Of the four, the life of a householder was considered to be the most appropriate and auspicious. However as time went by, the Dharmashastras (Hindu law books) found favor with the idea of four ashramas as the successive stages in the lives of twice born castes whereby one could live life in accordance with one's goals and aspirations and also preserve the institutions of family, caste and society. It was probably an attempt to preserve vedic society by discouraging people from abandoning their homes and family responsibilities at a very young age in their lives and becoming ascetics.