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Impact of Puruṣārthas in modern life: An observation

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Abstract

The purpose or goal of life is called 'Puruṣārtha' by the Hindu scriptures. The word 'Puruṣārtha' consists of two words, namely 'puruṣa', means self and 'Artha', means aim or goal. The "Puruṣārthas", that have been advocated by the Hindu scriptures from the very early times are four, viz. Dharma, Artha, Kāma and Moksha. The first of the goals is dharma. The word "Dharma" has been understood variously as duty, faith, religion, righteousness, sacred law, justice, ethics, morality and soon. The second most important goal of life is "Artha". Artha means wealth. Hinduism recognizes the importance of material wealth for the over all happiness and well being of an individual. "Kāma" in its narrow sense denotes to sexual desire, but in its broader sense it stands for all sensual pleasure. The ultimate goal of human life is "Moksha". "Moksha" means self-realization which is the state of the complete cessation of all sufferings. In the modern world, the society it self progresses through the use of huge technological methods, forgetting the final destination of our life. Today, the ancient concept of Puruṣārthas in Mahābhārata, has been changed in its reality to practice. The traditional meaning of Puruṣārthas has been diluted today. In this paper, I attempt to explore the impact of Puruṣārthas in Modern life.

Key words: Puruṣārthas, Dharma, Artha, Kāma, Moksha, Mahābhārat

Introduction

Puruṣārthas means with the purpose for which a person strives for. It implies our goals or purpose of life. Puruṣārtha is exceptionally significant that our goals or purpose of life should be very very clear. Puruṣārtha is just like a weapon by which the human beings protect their lives and control themselves. It is eternal. It means an object of human pursuit. It is so contextual in present India as well as the modern India. Leterally speaking puruṣārtha means those actions which are proper and correct. It is a key concept in Hinduism. It refers to the four proper goals or aims of a human life. The four puruṣārthas are Dharma (righteousness), Artha (prosperity), Kāma (pleasure, love) and Moksha (liberation). Puruṣārthas are necessary and sufficient for a fulfilling and happy life [1].

Puruṣārtha is a composite sanskrit word. The term comprises two words – 'puruṣa' and 'Artha'. The word 'puruṣa' means "human being", "Soul" as well as "Universal principle and soul of the universe". The word 'Artha' means not only wealth or value, but also purpose or objective. So, the word "Puruṣārtha" etymologically denotes to the aim or purpose in life [2]. The puruṣārthas are elaborated upon extensively in the Mahābhārata, the epic Indian poem that contains The Bhagavadgīta, and are interwoven with yogic philosophy at the deepest levels. Each one of the puruṣārthas has many scriptures dedicated to it (the Kāma Sūtra, the Dharma Shāstras, and the Artha Shāstras, among others). Puruṣārthas are also known as the Caturvarga [3]. In Mahābhārat it is also mentioned that the ultimate aim of life is to attain moksha in the path of Dharma.

Any discussion of traditional Indian thought about man and society usually revolves around the notions designated by such terms as varṇa, āśrama and puruṣārtha. It is also generally assumed that the three are so intimately related to each other that each cannot be understood without the other. But even amongst these, the notion of puruṣārtha is perhaps more fundamental as it defines those ultimate goals of human life which give meaning and significance to it [4]. All four puruṣārthas are important, but in cases of conflict, Dharma is considered more important than Artha or Kāma in Hindu Philosophy. Moksha is considered the ultimate ideal of human life. Ancient Indian literature emphasizes that dharma is foremost. If Dharma is ignored, Artha and Kāma profit and pleasure respectively lead to social chaos.

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The Gautam Dharmashāstra ^[5], Apastamba Dharmasūtra ^[6] and Yājñavalkya Smṛti ^[7] as examples, all suggest that Dharma comes first and is more important than artha and Kāma. Kāma Sūtra states artha is more important and should precede Kāma, while dharma is more important and should precede Kāma, while dharma is more important and should precede both Kāma and Artha. Kautilya's Arthashastra, argues that Artha is the foundation for the other two. Without prosperity and security in society or at individual level, both moral life and sensuality become difficult. According to Kautilya, Poverty breeds vice and hate, while prosperity breeds virtues and love. Kautilya also thought that all three are mutually connected, and one should not cease enjoying life, nor virtuous behavior, nor pursuit of wealth creation. Moksha is considered in Hinduism as the parama-puruṣārtha or ultimate goal of human life ^[8].

Dharma: The first of the goals is dharma. The word Dharma is derived from the Sanskrit root 'dhṛi' which means to hold together or to preserve. Dharma includes the religious duties, moral rights and duties of each individual, as well as behaviors that enable social order, right conduct and those that are virtuous. Dharma is a concept of central importance in Indian Philosophy and religion ^[9]. 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 so called because it protects all. Dharma is for the welfare of mankind. It protects and preserves all human beings. Hence, Hindu view of Dharma is that it is the force of power which protects man from all kinds of dangers. Manusmṛti states dharma is four footed in the Krita age and loses one leg in each successive age. Dharma exists in all planes, in all aspects and at all levels of creation. In the context of human life, dharma consists of all that an individual undertakes in harmony with divine injunctions and his own sense of morality and justice. The sources of dharma are the vedas, the vedangas, the sūtra literature of which the most important are the Dharmashāstras and scriptures namely the Bhagavadgīta. In ancient India Dharmashāstras played an important role in guiding people on the path of dharma. As a matter of fact, though the concept of dharma evolved in ancient India, its has been an eternal companion of human life. In fact, the world needs a better and clearer understanding of this concept no other time period than the present day.

In the modern world carried away by the mechanical way of living people don't think about dharma, understand dharma and live according to dharma just as they don't care for Nature, Culture and Art, which is the root cause for all the problems they are facing and suffering today. Dharma is not an old fashioned religious tradition or blind belief based on caste just as human culture is also believed to be. But on the contrary, it is a reality that people who live according to dharma, never fail in anything in the world. Person of dharma realizes the self, understands one's nature, develops it with education and trainings to the best one can, does all works as perfectly as possible with a broad ambition and lives a full life with success in the world ^[10]. The correct interpretation of the concept of Dharma, its various implications, is the key to an adequate understanding and appreciation of the entire Indian tradition in philosophy. However it is noteworthy that technological progress in modern times has made immense material development on the one hand while gradual degradation of values on the other, leading to varied individual, social, religious atrocities. In an age, where

secularism and freedom are upheld as ideals and religion is often ignored, the traditional view of Dharma appears as a dynamic force for reinstating the value-system. Dharma is this sense high lights the living spirit of globalization. Our great epic Mahābhārata too mentions Dharma as that which holds together the people of the universe. Dharma, in this wider sense, is the world order or the code of laws that bind human beings together. Dharma, if properly applied, thus provides the form of human life, thereby ushering in universal peace and harmony as the fruits of dharma.

Artha: Artha is the second goal of human life in Indian philosophy. Artha means the economic and the material aspects of life. Artha applies to both an individual and a government. In an individual's context, artha includes wealth, career, activity to make a living, financial security and economic prosperity ^[11]. Hinduism recognizes the importance of material wealth for the over all happiness and well being of an individual. A house holder requires wealth, because he has to perform many duties to uphold dharma and take care of the needs of his family and society. A person should not seek wealth for wealth sake but to uphold dharma and help the members of his family and society achieve their goals. Wealth is not an impediment to self-realization, but attachment to wealth is. Artha does give security and material pleasure and above all it gives us a comfortable feeling. As it provides us what we want, we usually run after it day and night, without any thought as to how much is enough.

Desire for wealth is different from greed for wealth. Selfless desire for wealth is preferable to selfish desire for wealth. Money and wealth are a form of divine energy. Aiming for wealth is a virtue, but greed is not. Money plays a very important role in life but is never a complete answer to the problem of providing complete security. According to Sri Aurobindo, we have negative attitude mostly about wealth because hostile and negative forces want us believe so and there-by prevent its use for righteous reasons.

We can't think of life without money. If we were not so insecure then there would not have been any thoughtless desperation. Money is not only a means to some security, but it is also a means for getting enjoyments, comforts of life. Nevertheless, every person must be taught the art of acquiring money to have a certain sense of physical safety. Hopefully this can be in a way which is compatible to the person's nature and beneficial to the society. The problem of human tendencies is however, that as soon as the base level is achieved one finds new avenues of insecurities, because money can never completely answer the problem of providing security. As soon as one gets it, one worries how to protect this hard earned money it self., i.e. one remains insecure. Put a stop to the whole thing when you feel you are secure enough. After all does money give you everything you have worked for ? The task of Artha remains and hopefully progresses to gaining that which is beyond the material level which makes us safe and secure. Keep inquiring into yourself until you become really secure within.

Kāma: The third Puruṣārtha is Kāma, referring to pleasure. Kāma has to do with the fulfilment of desires in the world. Kāma in a broader sense means desire and in a narrow sense sexual desire. Kāma refers to the art of enjoying pleasures ^[12]. Having acquired some money, having got some security the next step for everyone is to use this money for your comforts, enjoy yourself and enjoy fulfilling your duties and responsibilities. Both Hinduism and Buddhism consider

desire as the root cause of human suffering. Bhagavadgīta states desire leads delusion and bondage to the cycle of births and deaths. Desires are in various forms- to be wealthy, powerful, sexual needs, recognition, service, etc.

The Kāma Puruṣārtha advocates that one's desires in this life time need to be fulfilled, albeit in a state of awareness and without harming any one in the process. For a person to evolve spiritually and to reach the ultimate destination, the barrier of desires needs to be crossed. This can be done either by fulfilling the desires, or by sublimating or transcending them. Gavin Flood explains Kāma as "love" without violating dharma (moral responsibility), artha (material prosperity) and one's journey towards moksha (spiritual liberation). Suppressing of desires is certainly not recommended because it is like a fully coiled spring that is held down by force, it can erupt unpredictably causing undesirable consequences. As one becomes aware of their desires and one goes about fulfilling them in awareness and without judgement, one soon reaches the stage of being able to sublimate them.

Moksha: The fourth Puruṣārtha is called Moksha, literally it means liberation. Moksha is one of the basic themes of Hindu philosophy. Moksha means liberation, realization of the self and is the ultimate destination of this human birth^[13]. The beliefs of the Hindu Religion hold that true liberation occurs when the individual soul recognizes itself with the source of all phenomenal existence known as Brahman. Moksha is the stage of inner realization that the individual self is the same as the supreme self. It is the experience of the cosmos within one's self. The Upanishads, Bhagavadgīta, Mahābhārat and the Rāmāyana also emphasize on the personal, devotional type of Moksha which is achieved through the practice of Bhakti yoga. The pursuit of moksha however is the most important of all aims and can begin at anytime. The other aims are preparatory for this final aim. However, in most cases, though not correctly, moksha becomes an important pursuit in the old age during vānaprastha or the age of retirement. Within Moksha, there lies the ultimate peace, the ultimate knowledge, the ultimate enlightenment and the ultimate paradise. In Hinduism self-realization is the key to obtain Moksha. Moksha is both a puruṣārtha and a paramārtha which is important not only for men but also for the divine beings. Moksha actually means absence of moha or delusion. A person achieves liberation when he increases the quality of sattva, suppressing rajas and tamas and over comes his desire for sense objects by detachment, self control, surrender to God and offering of one's actions to God.

An understanding and balance of the Puruṣārthas is important to our individual and collective life as we move forward into the future. The way that the world is currently moving in is towards the blind imitation of western society- where the tendencies to pursue the values of Kāma and Artha at the expense of any sense of Dharma is very high, and is even endangering our planet. Life without a concept of Dharma has not created any lasting sense of happiness in the people who live like this. On an individual level, pursuing Kāma and Artha alone can never truly lead to a feeling of lasting satisfaction, because it is their nature to multiply their desire the more they are indulged in yet when permeated with the idea of Dharma, their pursuit is transformed into something noble, beautiful and of a more enduring value. The pursuing of Moksha or inner spiritual endeavour is still alive in some sections of Hindu society and in fact has even been rediscovered by the west, through an influx of many Hindu and Buddhist teachers into the west, some of whom have vast

followings. But the quest for Moksha and its value as the highest goal of human life is not understood amongst most Hindus, nor widely taught. The tendency amongst spiritual aspirants to have a disdain and lack of meaningful involvement in society still exists. A study of Puruṣārthas and application of them today offer many possibilities through which we can create a grander, more beautiful and more meaningful existence.

Conclusion

These four basic Puruṣārthas are very important to nurture in every human life for the growth and progress as well as the welfare of human civilization in the context of 21st century. Modern men are burdened with frustration and anger in spite of having all that should make them happy. In this situation, it will be wise for them to try to acquire a good understanding of life and its purpose, because human life without purpose is meaningless. In this age 'dharma' means an exaggerated exposition of aristocracy. At present, each and every man has become hollow man. They are materialistically over-nourished, but spiritually mal-nourished. They are the denizen of their self-constructed wasteland. Now –a-days 'artha' makes the man forget to give importance upon man who begs for food or money. The term 'Kāma' in the modern society has been transformed into the narrow sense of sexuality or bodily pleasure. Their epicurean selves or hedonistic selves are alive, spiritual selves are totally blind. 'Moksha' represents here only to get rid-off all crises-economical crisis, crisis of comfort, crisis of enjoyment or mirth and merriment. Man gets deviated or derailed from the right course of living. The man begins to take part in the immoral and amoral activities misguided by the hubris or bad soul. Whereby I feel if this ancient wisdom can be used and garbed in modern ways, it can definitely help us to find 'peace of mind' which is the birth-right of every human being.

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