

Aashrama Dharma and its Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

It is supposed that man should maintain a disciplined as well as duty-bound life to have spiritual ascent and also for the attainment of the ultimate goal of mankind. With this aim, our ancestors have thought of four aashrama dharmas, namely, brahmacarya, gaarhastha, baanaprastha and sanyaasa aashramas for the four stages of life. In the article along with the exposition of the purpose and duties linked to the aashramas the relevance of it in the present society has been discussed. Paying back of various rnas are taken into account. It has been pointed out that if the ideals behind the aashramas will be taken into account and be practically employed with modifications then we can realize the far sight of our ancestors to appreciate reinstating the aashrama orders in a new fashion.

Keywords: *Gaarhstha aashrama, Deva rna, Pitr rna*

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Introduction

In our literature, it is supposed that man is the finest creation who can think of his progress and for that, it is necessary to know what can give proper shape to his spiritual aspirations. It is considered that in the early days' man was trained to gradually dispel his ego-sense and remove his selfish desires in a slow process. Since the last goal is the stage of full detachment to obtain *moksa*, which is the stage of perfection, one must be acquainted with the method of refraining from the various attachments in a systematic and planned life. It is supposed that man should maintain a disciplined as well as duty-bound life to have spiritual ascent and also for the attainment of the ultimate goal of mankind.

While discussing the duties of a being it becomes necessary to discuss the duties referring to different stages of life. Our ancient seers have also planned about it. The planning has been done in passing through four stages within the life span of a man which is named *aashramas*. Each stage is considered to be a preparatory stage for the next stage. So each stage has its specific duties to cover the stage. The four *aashramas* are named *brahmacharya aashrama*, *gaarhastha aashrama*, *baanaprastha aashrama* and *sanyaasa aashrama*. 'Aashrama' literally understood as the place of rest following the meaning of the two components like 'aa' and 'shrama'. But when it is expressed as the *aashrama dharma*, here 'aashrama' refers to a stage of life and dharma refers to the duty of the stage. The four stages mentioned earlier are normally translated as celibacy, householder, forest dweller and renunciation respectively.

In the use of the term *aashrama dharma*, it is obvious that referring to the term dharma, the duty of the stage should be treated as a moral imperative. The duty is treated as 'ought to be done by the individual referring to its stage. So what an individual 'ought to do' and 'what ought not to do' is decided to refer to the concerned stage of life. The basic division into four stages seems to have been done on the physico-psychic state of the individual and the values of individual life. This division applies to all human beings irrespective of their *varnas*. Praharaj writes that "The initial stages are preparatory for *vairagya* and last one is the stage of cultivating proper *vairagya*. In this way the four *asrama dharmas* are treated as the preparatory for the spiritual ascent of man."¹ Let us have a look regarding the duties of the various *aashramas*.

Brahmacharya Aashrama

Just after the child-hood, it is felt to be essential to learn a disciplined life so that a sound foundation can be given for the whole of life. So there was the practice

of sending the child to some hermitage (*aashrama*) where he is expected to learn a disciplined life from a *guru* (teacher). For this reason, the hermitage was also considered as *gurukula aashrama*. It is the first *aashrama dharma* where the duty is fixed to obtain knowledge on some field, to practice a disciplined life and to make preparation for the next phase of life that is the household period of life. The instance of Satyakama and Jabala certifies the practice of *gurukula aashrama* as has been found in the *Chandogya Upanisad*. Thus, acquisition of knowledge and to lead a regulated life happens to be the primary duty to be performed by someone at this state of *aashrama dharma*.

The learner in the *brahmacarya aashrama* state is usually called *brahmacari*. The term *brahmacari* is used in one sense that the agent should exercise his all-around restraint in his lifestyle and concentrate more on expertising himself in some profession. There is also another technical understanding of the term *brahmacaari* basing on the statement *Brahmani carati iti brahmachaari*. One who concentrates his thought on Brahman and remains engrossed in the idea of Brahman is considered as *brahmacaari*. This definition is primarily applicable for the *braahmin* learners because he is expected to obtain the knowledge of the Brahman as the primary goal of his life. Some scholars think that only *braahmins* and *ksatriyas* were in the practice of going to *gurukula aashramas*. But whatever it may be the stage of acquiring something regarding some profession is essential for the children of all the four *varnas*. So *aashrama dharma* is not restricted to *gurukula aashramas* only. Everyone, either *braahmin* or *ksatriya* or *vaisya* or *sudra* has to undergo the process of training in obtaining knowledge on some profession. It is the state of *brahmacari* for him. It is the state of man-making where a brahmin is to be steeped in ancient wisdom, a *ksatriya* is to obtain some knowledge on *rajadharma* along with the rigorous training on fighting methodologies, a *vaisya* is to obtain the knowledge on the economy and commerce and a *sudra* is to obtain knowledge on exercising best possible labor to yield best possible crops and food materials. Of course, it is widely opined that *sudras* were not going to *gurukula aashramas* for their training. This is a state where the child is to make himself perfect both on the physical and mental front to face his household stage without facing any difficulty.

Here a question may be raised that is it relevant in the present scenario to think about the *gurukula aashramas* and *brahmacharya aashramas*? Since *gurukulas* are not available no doubt one may not think it to be relevant in the present scenario. But it may be taken into consideration that *gurukula aashramas* are found to be abolished. But wherever *Gurukula* model of schools is present the result of success is found to be remarkably high. Deep attention can be given at the

initial stage of students to bring out highly disciplined students which are highly needed. In the present day society, there is no dearth of intelligent students but a huge lacking of disciplined students.

Gaarhastha aashrama

The period follows to *brahmacarya aashrama* is *gaarhastha aashrama*. It is quite oblivious that after the completion of the period of training one has to become a responsible citizen of the community and also of the family. He has to earn for his lively hood and also go for the family to continue the process of the survival of the race. It is the stage of cultivating a love for the members of the family and also the members of society. It is needed that a being should perform all such duties by which he can be treated as an ideal member of his community. He has to serve the community using his *varna dharma* and share the responsibility of the house at *gaarhastha aashrama* stage where the being has the full opportunity to perform the duties of his *varnadharma*. Because at the stage of *brahmacaari* he spends the time in the acquisition of knowledge, so he has no opportunity to serve the family and society and also to perform the duties of his *varnadharma*. Of course in his training period he is usually given the knowledge by his *varna dharma*. In the two other stages of life, the performance of the duty as per *varna dharma* is the continuation of the inertia of the *gaarhastha dharma* stage.

In ancient literature like *Brahadaranyaka Upanisad* it has been said that man withdrawing himself from social responsibilities is not appreciated by gods also. It shows that the family and social life had received the scriptural sanction also. It is also found that in many of the religious ceremonies the necessity of the wife to be the part of the ceremony has been treated as essential. Thus there was clear encouragement to go for family life after the *brahmacaari* state.

It is seen that from a moral perspective the duties of a being in the *gaarhastha aashrama* state happens to be most significant. Because at this state the being gets the opportunity to pay back the *rnas* (debts) he has incurred as a human being.

It is supposed that a man has three basic debts which he has incurred because of his existence as a species on the earth and also being a part of Nature. For our existence we are dependent upon Sun, Air, Fire, Rain, etc. in the sense we need air, water, etc. from nature without which we cannot exist. In our tradition, Surya, Agni, Baayu, Baruna (controller of rain) are treated as deities or *devatas* and it is supposed that man is indebted before their deities which he has to pay back. This debt is considered *deva rna*. Similarly, it is also supposed that man has to pay back *pitṛ rnas* (debt of the father) and *rsi rnas* (debt of the teachers or the ideal monks).

Paying back *deva rna* would be possible by performing or associating in *yajnas* or sacrificial acts. Paying back of *pitṛ rna* is possible by associating in begetting children for the continuation of progeny and taking care of the parent in their old days. Similarly paying back the *ṛṣi rnas* is possible with the help of further dissemination of knowledge. It is also the duty of a being to associate himself in handing over the cultural legacy to posterity. The most suitable time for paying back the various debts is the period of *gaarhastha aashrama*.

The paying back of the debts comes under the duties of a household being. For paying back debts within the duty of a household being five-fold *yajnas* are also suggested in our tradition. Those five-fold *yajnas* are namely, *bhuta yajna*, *manusya yajna*, *deva yajna*, *pitṛ yajna* and *brahma yajna*. The *bhuta yajna* stands for the duty of a householder to words all living being creatures of the planet including the plants. A householder must protect the environment and also be sympathetic towards the animal kingdom. *Bhuta yajna* is very much essential for the preservation of the planet. A householder is not allowed to become selfish to look after his own family and also for the comfort of himself and his family he is not allowed to interrogate nature in any manner. Thus the responsibility of a householder is quite significant. It starts with the *bhuta yajna*, that is, his duties for the animals and plants. It is quite significant that the householder has to treat all the beings irrespective of caste, creed and color, equally. All men should be equal to him. This is what is known as *manusya yajna*. The *Manusya yajna* stands for service and sacrifice for mankind. *Deva yajna* is to extend proper regard for the deities. The *pitṛ yajna* stands for the performance of the rites and ritual as a token of regard to the ancestors and to extend reference to the ancestors through such activities. The *Brahma yajna* is performed by householders in obtaining knowledge on various *puranas* or holy texts. All the *yajnas* refer to some duty of the householders in various fronts of their life. The man is not only going for some earning to provide food and comfort to his family members. Man has to build up his character in such a manner that the family, community and the nation will be benefited. In this way, the activities of *gaarhastha aashrama* become an acid test for the disciplined living taught to him in his *brahmacaari* stage. Mohanty rightly comments that “It is noteworthy that these five different *yajnas* have a two-fold meaning in ancient days, they were practiced in form of rites, rituals or religious sacraments, though the purport or principles of the *yajnas* are trans-religious and transcultural. One finds that in *gaarhasthya* stage, dharma involves a synthesis of the personal and the social.”²

It may be pointed out here that in this twenty-first century talking about *rnas* and the performance of *yajnas* appear to be laughable or absurd. It was there in the

practice in those days which does not appear to be relevant in this modern society. But it is important to think about what does *deva rna* stands for? It is the sense of acknowledgment of using nature for our living. Nature provides us our bare necessities. We use and forget. This is our modernity. They were treating them (various aspects of nature) to be lords and taking care of them. If we find some *yajnas*, which were performed by them are unnecessary, we may leave those acts. But the attitude of 'paying back' should not be thrown out. If it will be thrown out man will come up as a selfish being. The environmentalists are suggesting not to become selfish in respect of our attitude towards nature. It is high time to learn something from our own culture. From this standpoint both the stages of learning and earning (*brahmacarya* and *gaarhastha*) are important.

Vaanaprastha Aashrama

A person after discharging the duties and obligations to his family, community and nature he has to entrust the responsibility to his successor and then prepare himself to reduce his attachments towards worldly affairs and prepare himself to concentrate only on social well-being. It is a state of realization that discharging the obligations for the family is not the only goal of his life. He has to achieve some higher goal. He has to purify himself to proceed towards renunciation. At this stage, a man tries to dissuade himself from personal achievements and proceeds towards spiritual living. In this sense, it is a purely preparatory stage for the final state of renunciation. It is seen that very often there has been difficulty in the attainment of this stage in a perfect manner. In that case for them, the final state becomes an impossible one. But those who succeed in achieving the earlier states can take an attempt to proceed to the final stage, which is known as *sanyaasa aashrama*.

Sanyaasa Aashrama

This *asrama* is considered the final and highest stage of human life. It is because at this stage one has the opportunity to know his relationship with the ultimate reality. It is the stage of an anchorite. Here one realizes the '*satyasya satyam*' for which it is treated as the goal of human life. Very few people succeed to reach this stage because many people fail to cross the *vanaprastha ashrama* stage successfully. It is a stage of pure renunciation which is not possible for everyone.

Once again the same question of the relevance of *aashramas* may be raised in respect of the other three. Superficially considering the *aashramas* appear to be unnecessary and may be treated as old treasures. But if we have concern for the present-day society and its precarious condition then we can utilize those old treasures with modifications. The present-day man has no concern for paying back

anything to their parents, what to think of to gods and gurus. That is why many old-age hermitages are coming up. Court decisions are coming up against harassing old parents. It is because we are not trained by our culture. Social setups are changing. The old schemes will not be befitting in the changed setup. But that does not mean to give the culture completely. There is the necessity to put the old wine in new bottles. The motto of *gaarhstha aashrama* is to shoulder the responsibility of the family (which includes children and parents) as a pious duty. If it will be observed then maximum family/social problems will evaporate. The current practice is mostly a mechanical one. In such a case, two other *aashramas* will remain in dream states. If the ideas behind the *aashramas* will be taken into account and be practically employed with modifications then we can realize the far sight of our ancestors to appreciate reinstating the *aashrama* orders in a new fashion.

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