



THE MODERN INTERPRETATION OF VEDIC PHILOSOPHY (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE OF ĀŚRAMA SYSTEM)

Dr. KAVITA BHATT

PDF (Woman) UGC, Deptt. Of Philosophy, HNB Garhwal University,
Srinagar (Garhwal), Uttarakhand

These days, man is enjoying the luxurious lifestyle, as the gift of scientific innovations; but it leads toward materialistic approach. It is also a cause for degrading discipline. As a matter of fact, Vedic Philosophy is source of discipline for mankind without boundaries of cast, community, religion, country. *Āśrama*, as the disciplinary system paves a path of ultimate wellbeing for everybody. It is a way not only for individual well-being, but social too, but these days human-being has no systematic lifestyle, which resulting as degradation of harmonious duty system. As a result, there is a crisis of values and discipline at individual and social level. While, *Āśrama Vyavasthā* presents systematic guidelines for every person at each stage of life. There are four *Āśramas* namely *Brahmācārya*, *Gṛhastha*, *Vāṇprastha* and *San yāsa*. There is special division of duties like study, family responsibilities (to earn money, marriage and reproduction), social duties, and spiritual wellbeing for every stage of life called *Āśrama*, but there is a need to reinterpret these in modern scenario to upgrade the individual discipline and social harmony.

In this paper we shall try to interpret above four *Āśramas* with new dimensions of discipline. For the purpose, we have a plan to divide the whole paper in three parts. We shall try to explain the Vedic view of *Āśrama*, the various duties as explained for these four by Vedas and the relevance of this systematic division of life in modern perspective respectively in first, second and third part of our research paper. Let us move toward first part of the paper.

Part I

Vedic View of *Āśrama* system

First of all, it is necessary to draw a frame of Vedic literature for the proper understanding of *Āśrama Vyavasthā*s directed by the same. In words of S.N. Dasgupta, "...the same generic name "*Veda*" or "*Śruti*" (from "*Śru*" to hear); for *Veda* in its wider sense is not the name of any particular book, but of the literature of a particular epoch extending over a long period, say two thousand years or so. As this literature presents the total achievements of the Indian people in different directions for such a long period, it must of necessity be of a diversified character. If we roughly classify this huge literature from the points of view of age, languages, and subject matter, we can point out four different types, namely the *Sam hitā* or collection of verses (*sam* together, *hita* put) , *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āranyakas* ("forest treatises") and the *Upaniśadas*. All these literatures, both prose and verse, were looked upon as so holy that in early times it was thought almost a sacrilege to write them; they were therefore learnt by heart, by the *Brahmaṇas* from the mouth of their preceptors and were hence called "*Śruti*" (literally anything heard)."



We may see the construction of *Saṅskṛt* word *Āśrama* = *Ā* + *śrama* + *Ghaṇḍya* means the hermitage or the resting place of a seer or monk, placed in a deep forest, where he would practice Meditation-Yoga for self-realization. It would be practiced either alone or with a company of fallows for the achieving of the same. In ancient Indian culture, the *Āśram* dotted the forests all over and characterized the lives of people who retired from active life, practicing severe penances and austerities including self-mortification. The word has a particular meaning in the sense of duty for human being called *Āśrama-dharma* according to *Vedic* society. It envisages resting places in the forest of human life for people to achieve their liberation from the cycle of births, by adhering to a code of conduct and a map of life. Its principal aim is to inculcate divine centered living and encourage people to uphold *Vedic Dharma*, as they pursue the chief aims of human life, namely *Dharma* (religion), *Artha* (wealth), *Kāma* (pleasures) and *Mokṣha* (salvation), in the course of their journey upon earth, without neglecting their obligatory duties and without sacrificing their spiritual ideals and human values.

It recognizes four *Āśramas* or stages in the life of a human being. They are *Brahmacārya* (stage of studentship), *Gṛhastha* (the stage of a householder), *Vānaprastha* (stage of a forest dweller) and *Saṅyāsa* (stage of renunciation). 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. 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 *Āśramas* as successive stages in the life of an individual was a later development in *Vedic* society. The *Vedic Dharma* originally upheld the concept of *Eka-Āśrama* or one *Āśrama* 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 *Dharmaśāstras* (Hindu law books) found favor with the idea of four *Āśramas* 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.



Part II

The Various Duties as explained for these four stages of life

1. *Brahmacārya* (stage of studentship)

It is the first stage in the life of a person on the path of the *Vedic Dharma*. It usually begins with his initiation (*Upanayana*) ceremony that marks his new birth as a twice born. *Brahmacārya* means activity concerning *Brahman*. Technically speaking any-one who is in pursuit of *Brahman* or on the path of *Brahma* is a *Brahmacārī*. However, in ancient India it was used to denote a student who was receiving specialized knowledge and vocational training from a teacher about his caste based occupation and practiced celibacy and self-restraint during the course of his education, in order to conserve his energies and remain focused on his immediate goal of mastering his subjects. The students practiced celibacy and self-restraint as a part of their obligatory learning, following the example of *Brahmā*, the creator god, who was associated with the qualities of celibacy and chastity. Secondly, they lived in the company of a teacher who was regarded as *Brahman* in human form. Since in either case they followed the ideals of *Brahma* or *Brahman*, they were referred to as *Brahmacārī* followers of *Brahmā* or *Brāhmaṇa*.

With some exceptions here and there, these rules were followed by students belonging to all the three upper castes.

- a. Obedience to the teacher, entire family members and other elders in society.
- b. Take a bath daily, purification of mind-body, offer libations of water to gods, sages, ancestors, and spirits and pour fuel into sacred fire, study of holy scriptures and recite the verses till the mastery.
- c. A student is not allowed to cooking of own food. It is the duty to go out daily and beg for food, only from the people of merit, who are knowledgeable in the Vedas, righteous and not committed to the mortal sins.
- d. Practice of self-restraint; get away from honey, meat, perfumes, garlands, spices, women and acidic food. Make a refrain from singing, dancing and playing musical instruments.
- e. Cultivation of virtues by controlling of sensual desires, anger, and greed. Avoidance of injury to living creatures, gambling, idle disputes, backbiting, lying, looking at the touching woman and hurting others.

The above said stage of life was spent almost entirely in the *Gurukulas* with the purpose of mastery of the Vedas and other scriptures and acquiring the knowledge of *Brahma* through cultivation of virtues. Besides, sublimation of sexual energy was considered essential to develop the faculties of the mind in a student such as memory and comprehension and make him worthy of higher learning. After successful completion of their education, by mastering either all the Vedas or at least one of them, the students were permitted by their teachers to leave them and return to their homes. The student's return to home was usually marked with a ceremony in which he presented his master with a gift such as a field, gold, a cow, a horse, a parasol and shoes, a seat, grain, (even) vegetables, or whatever was pleasing to the teacher. The next stage called *Grhastha* (the stage of a householder).



2. *Gṛhasṭha*(the stage of a householder)

The stage of *Gṛhasṭha* begins when a student returns home after successful completion of his education, without breaking rules, and takes a ritual bath. The ritual bath marks the beginning of his life as a *Snātaka*, which marks the period of transition from a student to a responsible young adult, ready to assume full responsibilities as a householder. In ancient times the *Snātaka Brāhmaṇa*, who just completed their education but were not yet married or initiated into household duties, enjoyed good reputation. The following duties are prescribed for a householder.

- i. The performance of various daily, monthly and annual sacrifices called *Brahmayājyan*, *Devayājyan*, *Pitṛyājyan*, *Bhūtayājyan* and *Manuśyayājyan*: *i.e.* sacrifice to Brahman, gods, ancestors, lower creatures and human beings respectively. The offering of food and water to all of these daily as per personal capacity.
- ii. Invitation and services to guests and obligatory duties as householder during the day, month and year as per social standing.
- iii. To opt the right profession as per the choice, according the *Varṇa* without deep attachment of physical desires.
- iv. Respect towards the teacher, parents and others.
- v. Look after his wife, keep her happy, and she in turn should support him in the discharge of his obligatory duties, remaining patient, self-controlled, and chaste and never doing anything that might displease him, whether he was alive or dead.

The life of a householder places enormous responsibility on people, making them work for their temporal and spiritual goals, without sacrificing their higher aims and without succumbing to the temptations of materialistic life, living in a society that regards personal possession as a mark of one's success and achievement. It is like walking on a unsafe path, where the chances of faltering are higher and the consequences of karmic sin greater. The *Bhagavadgītā* therefore rightly advises people to perform their obligatory duties with a sense of sacrifice and as an offering to God, accepting Him as the Real Doer and without seeking the fruit of their actions. *Vānaprastha* is the next stage for a person.

3. *Vānaprastha* (stage of a forest dweller)

Vānaprastha is the life as a forest dweller. According to Manu, when a householder sees his wrinkled skin, white hair, and grandsons, it is time for him to retire into a forest, to begin a life of detachment and gradual withdrawal from the distractions and attractions of the external world, either by entrusting his children to his wife, after making provision for their sustenance, or accompanied by her, leaving behind all his possessions. Technically this is the stage of retirement. It distinguishes him from a *Saṅyāsī* his use of sacrificial fire, which he carries along with him into the forest, and his performance of the five daily sacrifices. During this phase, he is



advised to practice austerities and remain celibate. The life of a forest dweller is difficult and challenging because it makes a great demand on the part of an individual, who is accustomed to a certain way of life and comforts, to make necessary adjustments in order to fit him into a life of hardship and suffering. The following rules are prescribed for a forest dweller. We may write down these duties as below:

- i. He may live in a dwelling place of a hermitage. Take pure food: fruits, herbs etc. only to exist, wear tattered garments, hair should be unclipped.
- ii. Give alms according to his ability, and honor those who come to his hermitage by offering them water and fruits etc.
- iii. He should be alert while privately reciting the Vedas, patient in the face of hardships, friendly towards all, stable in his mind, generous in giving gifts without ever accepting them, and show compassion towards all living creatures.
- iv. He should eat vegetables that grow on dry land or in water, flowers, roots, and fruits produced by trees and oils extracted from forest-fruits. He should avoid honey, flesh, and mushrooms growing on the ground or elsewhere and certain fruit and vegetables. He should also avoid food produced by cultivation or grown in a village, however hungry he may be. He may eat anything that is cooked or ripened by time. After collecting his food, he may eat it either in the day only or in the night only, but not more than once. After eating food, he should promptly clean the vessel in which he collected or prepared the food. He may store food sufficient up to six months.
- v. He is also expected to trained himself physically and mentally by various exercises and making his austerities harsher and harsher day by day. He may either roll about on the ground, or stand during the day on tiptoe or alternately stand and sit down. In summer he should expose himself to the heat, during the rainy season live under the open sky, and in winter be dressed in wet clothes. In addition to the austerities, he must study the various sacred texts contained in the Upanishads.

As the time passes by, a person who is leading the life of a forest dweller should gradually turn himself into a complete ascetic so that he begins his fourth and final phase as a *Saṅyāsī* or renouncer.

4. *Saṅyāsa* (stage of renunciation).

This is the last stage of life of a person; in which one is advised to live like a mendicant or an ascetic, renouncing everything, including the sacrificial fire and the five daily sacrifices. It is difficult to say when exactly the *Vānaprastha* ends and the *Saṅyāsa* begins because a person is advised to transform himself gradually from a forest dweller into a fully fledged ascetic by increasing his austerities and making them harsher and harsher to the point where he becomes indifferent to the vicissitudes of life. However what distinguishes the two phases is the use of fire. A person who enters the phase of *Saṅyāsa* is advised to perform a special ceremony and withdraw the sacrificial fire into himself so that he himself becomes an embodiment of fire that



manifests itself as a radiant spiritual energy (tapas). During this phase a *Saṅyāsī*s advised to become completely detached from all worldly activities and possession and become a wanderer, subsisting on alms, controlling himself and not hurting any animal. He should beg only once in a day, in a place where no kitchen smokes is seen, and subsist on meager food, just to keep himself alive. By eating little, and by standing and sitting in solitude, he is advised to restrain his senses from the sense objects. By the restraining his senses, by the destruction of love and hatred, and by abstaining from injuring the creatures, he should make himself fit for immortality. He should contemplate upon death, transmigration of men, conditions of after life, and possibilities of future lives and so on. By deep meditation, he has to recognize the subtle nature of the supreme Soul and its presence in all beings, both the highest and the lowest. He should conduct himself in such a way that no harm is done to other beings, either intentionally or unintentionally. According to *Manusmṛti*, "By not injuring any creatures, by detaching the senses from objects of enjoyment, by the rites prescribed in the Veda, and by rigorously practicing austerities," he has to overcome the dualities of life, such as pain and pleasure, love and hatred, joy and sorrow and attain freedom from the circle of births and deaths.

Part III

Relevance of *Āśrama Dharmain* Modern Perspective: Efficiency, deficiency and Suggestions

These four stages symbolically represent the divinity in the following manner:

<i>Brahmā</i>	<i>Brahmacārya</i>
<i>Viṣṇu</i>	<i>Gṛhastha</i>
<i>Ṣiva</i>	<i>Vānaprastha</i>
<i>Īṣwara (Saguna Brahman)</i>	<i>Saṅyāsa</i>

The four parts of the Vedas also can be compared to these four stages as shown below:

<i>Saṅhitās</i>	<i>Brahmacārya</i>
<i>Brāhmanas</i>	<i>Gṛhastha</i>
<i>Āraṅyakas</i>	<i>Vānaprastha</i>
<i>Upaniṣadas (Vedānta)</i>	<i>Saṅyāsa</i>

The Four stages of human life are also meant to deal with the imbalance of the qualities of *Prakṛti*, namely *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*, which is responsible for the delusion of the soul. In each stage of life, a particular quality of nature becomes predominant thereby giving us an opportunity to deal with it appropriately.

Develop <i>Sattva</i>	<i>Brahmacārya</i>
Control <i>Rajas</i>	<i>Gṛhastha</i>
Control <i>Tamas</i>	<i>Vānaprastha</i>
Overcome the effects of qualities	<i>Saṅyāsa</i>



The following details describe; how a person can observe these four stages in the present day world.

- Brahmaçarya***
(As Student) Study and acquire some degree, skill or expertise in some field that is in harmony with a person's inner disposition.
- Gṛhastha***
(As householder) Marry, rear children, performance of responsibilities towards parents, wife, children, relations, friends, organization, society and world in general. Treat all life as sacred and be philanthropic.
- Vānaprastha***
(As a retiree) Evaluation and revision of personal merit of life. A thought process should be run about the obligatory duties towards family and relatives? Is the person in position to slowdown, to withdraw and spend more time in mentally satisfying and spiritually uplifting tasks? It should be remember that it is not an escape but a kind of obligatory retirement for a higher cause.
- Saṅyāsa***
(The last phase) This is the phase of complete withdrawal. A person has seen it all and enjoyed the whole life. It is time to be relaxed. The person can reminisce, and look at life as if in a film and draw into self-attention and thoughts. It is time to wake up the God in you.

Conclusion

It is also difficult to say how strictly the model of life represented by the four *Āśramas* was followed in *Vedic* society. We have literary evidence to suggest that in most cases the first two phases of life were followed in letter and spirit, namely that of a student and householder, while we are not certain of the remaining two. Mentioned below are some additional points about the *Āśrama-dharma* which are not discussed above.

Firstly, the *Āśrama-dharma* was primarily meant for the practice of men only. Women had no independent role other than as partners of their husbands. Thus a young girl, married at the age of six or seven to an old man of 30, was supposed to partner with her husband in the performance of his obligatory duties as a householder, although she was a child and the male children of her age were in the *Gurukulas*, going through the stage of *Brahmaçarya*. By the time she was ready to take up family responsibilities as an adult, her husband might already be old enough to qualify for the life of a forest dweller.

Secondly, the *Āśrama-dharma* was meant for the three upper castes only. Since their obligatory duties varied, except in respect of the study of the Vedas, some of the rules and practices concerning each *Āśrama*, especially *Brahmaçarya* and *Gṛhastha* varied from caste to caste. The lower castes and those who remained outside the vedic fold were completely exempt from it. Thus the *Āśrama* meant very little for a large population of ancient India.



Thirdly, the practice of *Āśrama-dharma* might not have been exclusive to Vedic tradition. Some religious groups in ancient India such as the *Jinas*, the *Ajīvikas* and the followers of early schools of Saivism followed the tradition of preparing the young aspirants in the *Gurukulas*. They also encouraged their followers to retire into forests and practice severe austerities, after fulfilling their obligations as lay followers.

Finally, the *Āśrama-dharmawas* an ideal vision based on certain *Vedic* ideals and philosophical notions. If we set aside the caste based prejudices and elements of orthodoxy referred in the law books and look afresh at the overall concept and the broader framework of life it envisages from a spiritual, moral and social point of view, we find the four stages of human life to be a perfect fit for any life style and in any age. It can be as useful today as it was thousands of years ago. In western societies, it is common for old people to work well into their 70s in order to support their life styles. Governments are forced to spend huge amounts of money on social security and in providing health care for the old and the retired. In the eastern societies young people, caught up in the wheels of economic development, are accused of falling moral standards and ignoring their parents. Part of the problem stems from the fact that people want to extend their lives as householders and do not want to withdraw from life or reduce their necessities or control their desires. They cannot overcome their attachment with the attractions of life or the comforts it seems to offer. Since the resources are limited and the population is constantly increasing, any system can only support so many people it is designed to. If people refuse to retire and new people keep adding up, it would put severe strain upon our resources and bring our systems to a grinding halt. The present crisis in the US healthcare system is one good example. If people withdraw from active life after a certain age and prepare themselves for their afterlives by practicing austerities, reducing their wants and desires and contemplating upon God and higher spiritual ideals, it would do a great deal of good to society in the long run.

Reference books:

1. *Manusmṛti*
2. *Śrimadbhagavadgītā*
3. Apte, Vaman Shivram, Sanskrit-Hindi Dictionary, Ashoka Prakashan, Delhi, 2012, pg. 167
4. Pandey, Dr. Vraj Kumar, Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophy, Anmol Publication, New Delhi, 2007
5. Dasgupta, S.N., A History of Indian Philosophy vol. I, MLBD, Delhi, first Indian Edition 1975, pg.12
6. Mishra, Srigangadhar, translator Dr. Gaurishankar Mishra, Vedic evam Vedottar Bhartiya Sanskriti, Chaukhambha Surbharati Prakashan, Varanasi, 2010