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Dharma and Kama: Coexistence or Precedence?

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Abstract

The zeitgeist, on a considerably large scale, a few thousand years back in India was that of Epicurean-Hedonism governed by an ineluctable Dharma. This is the true face of Hinduism, which has been falsely, since, Prof Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's time, believed/misconceived to be an escapist, otherworldly religion, trying for Moksha or Salvation, running away from worldly pleasure. The fact is that it was incumbent on a Sanatani to experience life in all its varieties – physical, intellectual, spiritual, and any other conception that one may find. Unfortunately, a selective and partial view of such thinkers and their philosophies as Shankracharya's Advaita was taken by the intellectuals of the West to be the guiding philosophy of India. The paper here tries to establish this truth, i.e., out of the Trivarga too, emphasis has always been on *Kaam* and then on *Artha*.

Keywords: Brahminical, Swadharna, Ashramic, Trimurti.

Relationship among the *Purusharthas* of the *Trivarga*

The debate between the householder – and the renunciant tradition does bring into focus the tension between the *Trivarga Purusharthas* (Dharma, Artha, Kaam) on the one hand and Moksha on the other. However, here it would be interesting to see what kind of relationship exists among the three of the same group. Vatsyayan and Manu laid equal emphasis on all three but let us here see how the contest would shape up between Artha and Kaam on the one hand and Dharma on the other. It is generally believed concerning the Trivarga that Dharma is the power that controls the excessive or probably wrong indulgence in, or pursuit of, profit and pleasure. As Dr. Gavin Flood opines, "When profit and pleasure are pursued

alone, outside of Dharma, they lead to social chaos” (Lipner 16). This inevitably raises the question, “What is Dharma?” It is difficult to determine in a universally acceptable manner what exactly Dharma is, not the least because of its immense connotations and implications. The generally accepted view is that it is moral or ethical righteousness, but that could well be relative – about the vagaries of time and place. It is pertinent to state that even Dharma is not immutable, for the *“Shanti Parva”* states that what was Adharma (in one age) may become Dharma in another and that Dharma and Adharma are both subject to the limitations of country/place and time” (Kane 1629-30). Furthermore, the *Vishnu Purana* says “Even Dharma may be abandoned, if it is opposed to public opinion and if it is not conducive to the happiness of society” (Balasubramania 45). And again, at the end of the *Mahabharata* it is said, “With uplifted arms I cry from the housetops, but none hears me. It is from Dharma that Artha and Kaam result: why then is Dharma not followed? The *Manusmriti* says (4.176): “Let every individual avoid.... Those acts of Dharma which are opposed to and hurt the feelings of the general public, lead not to joy even in afterlife”.

Now the considerable debate is if Dharma is not something stable, universal and all-pervading, if it changes with time and place, then what guides our urge to procure Artha and Kaam? Here a common-sense view of the word Dharma will probably work, which means actions that are socially acceptable and generally considered to be correct and not sinful or evil. Arjuna’s claim in the *Mahabharata* that “Dharma and Kaam are the limbs of Artha”(Balasubramania 20) makes us rethink the supremacy of Dharma in the Trivarga. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that classical Hinduism gave significant, not to say central, importance to the worldly values of Artha and Kaam. The abstract values of Dharma and Moksha were perhaps introduced to act as instruments of control as an open and unrestricted permission/license to accumulate wealth and indulgence in physical pleasure would mean doom for any civilised society. In fact, not only for this reason but for yet another and more significant reason for making all three equally important was perhaps a mundane version of the cosmic *rta*: Dharma also stands for duty. This would be a wise balancing act on the part of the law-givers. Giving equal importance to the three entailed equal

dedication to each of the three, thereby, mutually canceling excess, and helping in the creation of equilibrium in the practice of the three. Moreover, for those who were still left with the energy to indulge in excess, for them the rod of social censure or Dharma was there to correct. Not only this, Dharma was not an all-comprehensive law, for example, the prostitutes who were a respectable and acceptable part of the society, did have nothing to do with common Dharma and followed the dictums of their self-styled Dharma of social decorum and propriety. Furthermore, therefore it could be concluded in the words of K M Pannikar who quotes a verse from the *Mahabharata* which says that “while life in pursuit of Artha and Kaam, to the neglect of Dharma, should be shunned by man, a life which neglects Artha and Kaam could not also be considered as the right way”(Burton and Arbuthnot 44).

It could therefore be valid to say that an acceptance of Artha and Kaam as we understand them and accept them was the foundation on which the society was built. Moreover, Dharma was the individual consciousness of the universal good that translated itself into a social law, to be followed by everyone for the general good of the community. It can be reasonable to say that Dharma is placed at the top of the *Purushartha* pyramid because it is the guiding and shaping factor of all behavior. The Dharma of the *Brahamcharin* is not that of the *Grihastha* nor vice versa.

Place of Kaam:

Dharmāvīruddho bhuteṇu kāmo'smi.

“I am that desire in all beings not opposed to Dharma” (The Gita 7:11). The term Kaam has been variously used as desire, pleasure, enjoyment, wish, will, attachment, longing, and love in the Gita according to Dermot Killingley (Lipner 67). It also subsumes aesthetic sense. In the Hindu tradition, physical love (Kaam) is an entirely acceptable and legitimate purpose of life. Unlike other major traditions of the world, Hinduism is a celebration of the body, and it is a very celebrated purpose of life as it demonstrates that important strand in Brahminical ideology which is generally regarded to be positive towards the body, its requirements, and sexuality. Sex is not considered to be intrinsically or inherently sinful and there is all

liberty to explore, practice, and express it within boundaries of propriety and legitimacy which are outlined by societal norms of accepted dignified behavior.

A look at the system of the Ashram explains how all these stages are characterised by a focus on sexuality. Dr. Flood says that “All these stages are characterised by different regimens of the body, particularly the control of diet and sexuality. The first and last ashrams are explicitly celibate, celibacy is a defining characteristic of Brahmacharya, the central ascetic idea being that sexual power contained in semen can be redirected to a spiritual end and, indeed be stored in the head” (65). This meant not only control but internalisation of the whole concept of control, which made it easier for the individual, especially the one practicing Vanaprastha and Sanyaas ashram to control, transcend and transform sexual power for the end of the highest goal of attaining liberation. Not only this, the householder was free to experience and experiment with their sexuality as a welcome goal of life (Kamartha). Furthermore, to propagate this concept of the legitimacy of sex, extensive literature concerning it was produced like the Kaam Shashtras, and the most notable text on this subject is Vatsyayana’s *Kama Sutra*. Though Kaam Sutra is mainly concerned with sex, modern scholarship adds an aesthetic dimension to it as a whole, not just the human sensuous inclinations and predispositions.

Nagaraja Rao describes Kaam as a “desire for all things in general”, only the desire for liberation is excluded from this term” (22). He therefore argues that it is wrong to translate Kaam as sensual desire, though formally, sexual desire has been closely connected with Kaam – that is Kaam can mean both sex in the narrow sense and the world of sensual enjoyment in its much broader sense and connotation. Another example that brings out the Hindu tradition’s explicit preference for Kaam comes from the *Mahabharatha* (Zaehner 114-115). When the Pandava brothers sat down with the wise Vidura and discussed which of the three legitimate pursuits of man was the highest.... In the discussion that ensued, Bhima boldly declared that satisfaction of desire (Kaam) was the first duty of man. Speaking in the spirit of the Vedic hymn, which saw in desire the source and origin of all things, he said that without the desire to achieve, all achievement is impossible. “How had the great sages of old won

through to liberation? They had desired it and through the fervor of their desire, they had won the prize. Desire is the secret of all success, whether material or spiritual and only a hypocrite could deny it” (41-42).

The trend did continue till the Islamic invasion although hints of change could be perceived in the Shamanic tradition. Nevertheless, the major advocate of this tradition, the Buddha, also did not consider family life inferior to that of a renunciant or a monk, though it was accepted that family ties and bonds do serve as obstacles in the way of Nibbana as mentioned earlier. Kaam was a regular subject of contemplation and study and the culture in due course of time produced the *Kaam Sutra* which seems to have become a classic immediately. Though we do not have various commentaries written on it other than Kokkaka's, it can be safely said that Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* acquired the position of an authoritative text which no later writer has ever ventured to question according to K. M. Panikkar. Introducing the translation by Richard Burton Pannikar tells us that “The *Kaam Sutra* was composed according to the precepts of the Holy Writ, for the benefit of the world by Vatsyayana, while leading the life of a religious student and wholly engaged in the contemplation of the deity” (43) – a fact which is corroborated by Biardeau (47-48) who tells us that Vatsyayana wrote this work when he had attained the state of ‘renouncer’ perhaps at Benaras, in other words at an advanced stage when he expected nothing other than liberation, Moksha. He further makes the most pertinent remark that echoes the entire ethos of Hindu tradition when he says “How could a treatise so full of wisdom have been written by anyone other than a renouncer who had crossed over to the far shore of human passions? This according to Pannikar (43) might sound strange, not to say blasphemous to Westerners but in India, Vatsyayana's claim to reverence was never questioned and he is always referred to as Maharshi or the Great Seer-another point that explains the assimilation of purely physical worldly existence with the concept of meditation and liberation. This could not be put in better words than Biardeau when he says, “But it is Kaam that constitutes the most remarkable case. Though its theory is presented in only one text, the notion of Kaam is omnipresent in Indian speculation and gives rise to

philosophical-religious doctrines and practices in which it has a central role" (46).

Kaam was to be explicitly stated in a treatise and if it was necessary, it was because Dharma to technical rules – man and woman cannot make love to each other in the same way as the mating of beasts as is given to be understood as the scope of the book according to Biardeau (48). The treatise includes every type of desire that the term Kaam highlights, every object of desire, and all sorts of sensory as well as sensual satisfaction. As W. G. Archer says "Indians did not shrink from 'the physical fact'. Sex, they believed, could be the finest thing in life. They knew that sex with anyone and everyone was not possible. They conceded that the other considerations must sometimes operate. They recognised morals. However, this did not affect their main contention. *Sex was life at its most intense and, confronted, by this intensity, other values lost much of their force*"(40). Moreover, therefore it is not a great surprise that Vatsyayana wrote of the subject at the sunset of his life – a subject to be analysed and essayed with utter abandonment, to be the most thought about and talked about when most free.

Though Vatsyayana tried to color the carnal desire with propriety, duty, and Dharma (he seemed to reject pure carnal desire) these qualifications probably got forgotten in the way of writing the treatise. It would not be out of context to mention here that Biardeau says that "The treatise of kama goes even beyond this, forgetting its dharmic checks and acting as if they did not exist at all" (49).

Furthermore, this is why Archer paying tribute to the translation says "Sex is there and whether right, wise or prudent, life is nothing if it is not enjoyed. For this reason, he constantly reverts to skill, technique, and knowledge. He analyses in detail the physical conditions on which sexual rapture depends. He emphasises the need for variety. He lists the most intricate of small refinements. How extensive was this stock of Indian knowledge, how careful had been its analysis, how erudite its codification had not been realised before" (41).

The translation of the *Kama Sutra*, completely changed, transformed, and revolutionised the world's understanding of Indian culture and especially the Western approach towards Indian thought.

Sex had been so central and so natural to Indian life and thought, that it got reflected in the entire range of culture whether it be art, poetry, or religion. Sex was the primary thought, the basic concern of an average Hindu's life so much so that Archer says that it would not be an exaggeration to say "that from this classic translation in 1883, the modern understanding of Indian art and culture derives" (Burton and Arbuthnot 41). And as Doniger and Kakkar assert "The sexual fantasy in the *Kaam Sutra* is the culmination of centuries of erotic meditations every bit as complex as the parallel ascetic meditations of the literature of the Upanishads and their commentaries"(Xxvii).

Kaam as sex, occupied, and still occupies, an important place in the Hindu Society. Moreover, pleasure for both men and women were deemed to be equally natural and important. Women were supposed to be a procreator and be blessed with sons to carry on the husbands' lineage. However, it should not be understood that women were treated only for use in bringing the next generation into the world. Their desire was also kept in complete cognizance. As Biardeau (47) says that she could be a procreator "only if there is a mutual attraction between the spouses" (for example, Manu, III, 60-61). Thus, the reproductive function is subordinated to the satisfaction of desire, there are a multitude of myths which tend to show this and which even give the initiative in desire to the woman. As Doniger and Kakkar assert

"The *Kaam Sutra* can be viewed as an account of a war of independence that took place in India some 2000 years ago. The first aim of this struggle was the rescue of erotic pleasure from the crude purposefulness of sexual desire, from its biological function of reproduction alone" (Intro xxxix).

Nevertheless, as we know from *Kaam Sutra* and *Arthasastra* that love was the first duty of a woman, her "svadharma" but at the same time, this svadharma was summed up as a formula that said "to serve her husband as her principal god" and get her fulfillment in return. However, if this presents itself to be a contradiction, it appears to be a superficial one after one reads the *Kaam Sutra* as it deals with sex and celebrates the fact that women have the desire, initiative, and existence of their own. The whole treatise is fraught with lessons for women to make themselves more presentable, agreeable, and desirable to men. This might sound provocative to the feminist

movements but it is an open truth that a majority of women's life is dedicated to seeking partners and vice versa, as Biardeau says "There is no human being who does not desire another human being" (44), so if *Kaam Sutra* says that all women, including unmarried girls, must study at least the practice of Kaam – can there be anything more modern in its approach towards women?

Moreover, if taken from this point of view one would not be surprised at the space given to prostitutes in the treatise. They were required to be well-versed in the matters of sex, in theory and practice. The knowledge of all entertaining arts for the satisfaction of her clients was to be expected of her like parlor games, languages, cock-fighting, architecture, etc. Also, as the common worldly household women were expected to win over their prospective husbands by the use of flowers, ointments, perfumes, needlework, cuisine, music, song, and dance.

Additionally, the most interesting aspect of sexual desire and union could have highly symbolic connotations. As K. M. Pannikar tells us "The Hindu view of Salvation being that of the union of the individual soul with the universal, the utter merging of one in the other, the union of man and woman in which the duality is lost becomes in the Hindu view the perfect symbol of liberation"(46). Similarly, it is interesting to note that in Judaism, the union of the Creator with the Matronit is central to creation. The Matronit is described as being always ready for the cosmic sexual act, and this parallel has been explored by many writers (Patai 1977).

The worship of the Shiv Linga (phallus) situated in the vagina (yoni) and the beginning of the *Hymn To the Devi* by Shankaracharya which says "Shiva is capable of creation only when united with Shakti: Otherwise, he is only inert matter" and Lord Krishna's statement in the Gita, "I am the Kaam that procreates" is proof enough to tell us how conspicuous has been Sex for Indian tradition. Thus, it is agreeable when Pannikar says that "when this was the orthodox attitude of Hinduism to the man-woman relationship-as the human counterpart of the cosmic union between matter and energy which creates the world – it is but natural that Hindu thinkers had none of the inhibitions of western writers in studying matters relating to sex" (46). There is probably no culture in the world where sex is

treated with such deference, reverence, and objectivity and not as something obscene and taboo. Though what happened to the culture after the Islamic invasion and British occupation is obvious. The fissure in the comprehensive Hindu life that had appeared with the advance of shamanic traditions got widened with time and the picture of true India as celebrating Sex and pleasure derived thereof, was replaced by something as untrue as the view that Hinduism cared more for liberation and believed the world to be an illusion. Nothing can be farther away from the truth as Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* tells us that no tradition has celebrated sex so openly and made it a part of its day-to-day existence.

The tradition upheld not only sexual gratification as of prime importance to human life, but the modernity of our ancient culture owes to the fact that this gratification was deemed equally important for men as well as women.

Therefore, it is pertinent to discuss Lipner's view that "Although the work is the product of men for the gratification of men, its aim is not to titillate (in this it succeeds), nor are women treated merely as sexual objects. Lovers from both sexes are expected to show sensitivity and understanding towards their partners"(163). Now, a part of this view is contestable again on the same grounds that the work was not meant only for the gratification of men. It was to be taken as the generation of a social order which was to induce satisfaction for all – men and women alike – as the second part of the statement explains. This social order of equanimity/equality then extended to religious rituals where men and women were treated equally importantly – For instance the householder (especially from the higher castes) is supposed to pay three debts. Flood explains that the first was "the debt of Vedic study as a celibate or brahmacharin – student to the rishi or the sages, to pay the debt to the Gods (deva) and perform rituals as a householder, and the debt to be paid to the ancestors (pitr) by begetting a son to make funeral offerings"(Lipner 13). Now begetting the son made the Grihastha ashram the most important one and this is why the Dharma Shastras favour the life of a householder. Manus explicitly states that, "of the four stages, the householder is the best because the householder supports the others and his activity is the supreme good" (Flood 64).

Here it would be pertinent to relate the story of the celibate Shankaracharya who defeated his opponent, the well-known Ritualist or Purva Mimamsaka, Mandana Mishra. However, before the contest could get over, Bharati, Mandan's wife challenged him thinking she would defeat the great celibate on his knowledge of sex. Shankara had heard about a king who had dropped dead on a hunting expedition at which his attendant queens had fainted. Shankara by his superior yogic powers entered with his soul into the king's corpse, while his body remained in a state of suspended animation in his disciple's secret care. Shankara then enjoyed sexual bliss and later decided to return to his own body. Retaining his celibacy and amply conversant in the art of sex, was able to defeat Bharati (Lipner 166). This shows that somebody of the stature of Shankara also was not considered to be complete in knowledge without the knowledge of sex.

As Lipner then asserts "We are interested in the relevant lesson that lurks beneath the surface, which is that it is indispensable, even for a celibate, to appreciate the place of Kaam (and not only its sexual connotations) in a well-ordered society. Such Kaam is not to be just made a part of life in a cathartic or therapeutic manner, but on the contrary, it is to be embraced, for repression, in the absence of sublimation will lead to unhealthy consequences, spiritual and otherwise." He furthers his argument saying "that of course the pursuit of Kaam is not the highest goal and it is fraught with spiritual danger. Nevertheless, for the ordinary person, its outright rejection is even more dangerous spiritually, while its ordered pursuit is conducive to spiritual progress" (165). As the focus of Hindu tradition is on Artha and Kaam and as they are an important base in the life of a householder, they are vital to the very health of the society and religious existence according to Lipner but for them "the society falters and the religious enterprise as a whole grinds to a halt" (165). Not only this, the sole school of Indian materialism, Carvaka, out of the four purusharthas, rejects Dharma (virtue) and Moksha (spiritual freedom). Its prevalence and vibrance since the very beginning of philosophising in the tradition speaks volumes about the popularity of the view of Hindu materialism which gave high importance to the erotic.

They welcome only wealth (Artha) and pleasure (Kaam) as the rational ends of man and out of the two wealth is made subsidiary to the achievement of pleasure as pleasure is considered to be the *summum bonum* of life. According to the present pleasures of Artha and Kaam should not be given up in the hope of future benefit or gain, attained through sanyasa or liberation. They emphasise the enjoyment of the tangible rather than the unseen, intangible rewards of liberation. The famous maxims which explain the character of the Carvaka philosophy such as “Rather a pigeon today than a peacock tomorrow”, or “A sure piece of shell is better than a doubtful piece of gold” (Mahadevan 66) reveal the true character of Hindu hedonistic tradition. This ideology of the Carvaka could not be completely ignored as a tempered version of it – something guided by Dharma and socially acceptable norms, the pleasure which is bounded, which is limited by the dictates of propriety is possibly the most acceptable way of defining Hinduism.

This makes it clear that sense and sensual experience is not only indispensable, a necessary element in the Hindu life but is an inevitable step towards the grand goal of liberation – the religious vision of a Hindu. An ethical or dharmic presence of Artha and Kaam is ideal to embrace and as Lipner puts it, “It is distinctive of Hindu savants to teach that in general one can best appreciate the innate spiritual limitations of worldly goals by first passing through the critical fires of the dharmic pursuit of Artha and Kaam” (165). Thus, because of its unique, open, and unabashed consideration of sex, in a society led by Acharyas, the presence of *Kamasutra* bewilders us. We find it difficult to digest that culture some two thousand years back should have been so modern as Doniger and Kakkar say “The *Kamasutra* has attained its classic status because it is at the bottom about essential, unchangeable human attributes – lust, love, shyness, rejection, seduction, manipulation – and it is fascinating for us to see ourselves mirrored in it even as we learn deeply intimate things about a culture that could well be described as long ago and in a galaxy far away” (Ixviii).

Kaam was a generally accepted important value and its recognition is celebrated by Vatsyayana who says “Because a man and woman depend upon one another in sex, it requires a method, and this method is learned from Kama Sutra”(Doniger and Kakkar 9).

Therefore, with this view of giving Kaam priority over all other values, we could explore the Hindu tradition in a different light. Opposed to a hardcore philosophising in abstract matters, the culture's efforts have been to carve out a beautiful worldly existence, which undoubtedly finds itself torn between celebration and abstinence but creates a unique blend as Burton (1) emotes "The burning heat of the Indian Sun, the fabulous luxuriance of the vegetation, the enchanted poetry of moonlit nights permeated by the perfume of lotus flowers, and, not least, the distinctive role the Indian people have always played, the role of unworldly dreamers, philosophers, impractical romantics-all combine to make the Indian a real virtuoso in love." (Doniger and Kakkar Intro xxxix).

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