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Puruṣārtha: The way of life

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Abstract:

The doctrine of 'Puruṣārtha' has played an important role in Indian philosophy. The term 'Puruṣārtha' literally means the end or goal to be aimed at or desired by man or 'Puruṣārtha' literally signifies 'what is sought by man.' So that it may be taken as equivalent to a human end or purpose. It may also be taken to mean the end or goal that is actually aimed at or desired by men. Human life is meaningless without any purpose, all human needs to have a purpose in life towards which our actions can be directed. The theory of Puruṣārtha determines the values according to which human actions are to be performed or avoided. According to Indian ethical thought, the Puruṣārthas are four viz., Dharma (duty), Artha (wealth/ prosperity), Kāma (pleasure) and Mokṣa (liberation).

Keywords: Puruṣārtha, Dharma, Artha, Kāma, Mokṣa, Ethics

Introduction: Puruṣārtha is a composite Sanskrit word from 'Puruṣa' and 'Artha'. 'Puruṣa' means person or human being and 'Artha' means aim or end or purpose or object of desire. So, the word 'Puruṣārtha' means the aim or purpose of life / object of human pursuit. The theory of Puruṣārtha determines the values according to which human actions are to be performed or avoided. What is mean by the word 'Puruṣārtha'? It is translated by M. Hiriyanna as a human value consciously pursued an object of desire.¹ Literally speaking, Puruṣārtha means those actions which are proper and correct. The aim of life of an individual is determined by the doctrine of Puruṣārtha.

It is clear that the doctrine of Puruṣārtha is the basis of human life and it is to be regarded as basis on which the life of a man directs. According to Indian ethical thought, the aim of human life or the Puruṣārthas are four viz., Dharma (duty), Artha (wealth/ prosperity), Kāma (pleasure) and Mokṣa (liberation). These four objectives are served as pointers in our life. It points to the goals in life. The Puruṣārthas helps us to create a meaningful balanced life. Every human being has four proper goals that are necessary and sufficient for a fulfilling and happy life. In Indian philosophy or ethics Dharma is explained first because it

¹M. Hiriyanna, The Quest After Perfection, pp. 22 & 103.

is considered more important than Artha and Kāma. Mokṣa is considered the ultimate goal of human life. Dharma is always held higher than artha and kāma, in the attainment of mokṣa only dharma can help. According to Hiriyanna, Puruṣārtha is not very different from value. Value which he calls 'ista' presupposes the 'means' of its fulfilment.² There are two types of values, intrinsic and instrumental. Of the two spiritual values, Dharma is instrumental and Mokṣa is intrinsic; and of the other two values artha is instrumental and kāma is intrinsic. As Sharma says, 'Artha, Kāma and Dharma are instrumental values, but at the same time essential methods for the attainment of Mokṣa.'³

Though the number of Puruṣārthas are generally taken to be four but most scholars hold that originally only Dharma, Artha and Kāma are included in the theory of Puruṣārthas, these three combined together are called as Trivarga and that the concept of Mokṣa is a latter addition and commonly referred as Chaturvarga. I am going to present these four Puruṣārthas in general.

Dharma: The first aim or goal is Dharma. The word Dharma derived from the Sanskrit root 'dhr', meaning 'uphold, support, sustains'. So, the meaning would be 'that which upholds and sustains.' Dharma is a concept of central importance in Indian philosophy. It has multiple meanings. It is difficult to provide a single concise definition for dharma. Dharma's meaning has changed over the ages from the Vedic period up to the present day. In various contexts the word dharma may mean: law, justice, morality, ethics, duty, religion etc.

But here we do not understand Dharma as a particular religion, namely, Hindu, Islam or Christian. In the context of Dharma, mostly in our Vedic philosophy whenever we referred that is Bhagavata Gita or any Sāstras when we say dharma, Dharma is referred as duty. So, it is nothing to do with religion at all. So, everybody is got dharma. For example, a student has got his duty or dharma to study to gain knowledge. So, it is very basic that every person in the world has got a particular dharma or duty to perform. In Bhagavat Gitā, Lord Krishna while addresses Arjuna, he says,

“sva-dharmam api cāvekṣya na vikampitum arhasi
dharmyād dhi yuddhāc chreyo 'nyat kṣatriyasya na vidyate” (BG. 2.31)⁴

So, according to Bhagavat Gita, even considering your personal dharma as well, it is not right for you to hesitate. There is nothing better for a warrior than a fight based on dharma. The Gita also states-

“atha cet tvam imam dharyam saṅgrāmam na kariṣyasi
tataḥ sva-dharmam kīrtim ca hitvā pāpam avāpsyasi” (BG. 2.33)⁵

Krishna tells Arjuna that it is Arjuna's dharma to fight. Therefore, if he fails in his duty he will sin.

²M.Hiriyanna, The Quest after Perfection, p.21.

³I. C. Sharma. Ethical Philosophies of India. George Allen & Unwin LTD. London, p. 93.

⁴Bhagavad-gītā As It Is (English), The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, p.103.

⁵Ibid., p.105.

Dharma in another important sense refers the moral order. Right from the Ṛg-vēdic age, Indian thinkers conceived a well-established order both in the cosmos and in the moral world. The Cosmic Order when manifests in man become Moral Order. Dharma inherited the sense of Moral Order from ṛta and expresses the fundamental ethical commitment of Indian thought to the notion of unitary order in physical and moral aspects of the reality. Dharma as the independent moral order, when truly conformed to, would help one to keep one's own dharma and thus gains him welfare.⁶

Dharma maintains the social fabric, its stability and harmony. By providing a set of norms it helps society move in a disciplined and harmonious manner. It provides a clear distinction between what is right and what is wrong. So, for the smooth working of the society, the observance of the norms set by dharma is necessary. Naturally, artha and kāma are also to be pursued under the overall supervision and guidance of dharma. Without Dharma, artha and kāma become self-destructive.

In this reason, Dharma Puruṣārtha is given the most priority in the four Puruṣārthas.

Artha: After the concept of Dharma, now go on to consider Artha, the second Puruṣārtha. What does Artha, signify? As referred to in our general discussion of Puruṣārthas, artha refers to economic and material well-being. Every normal human being aims it. Artha includes everything; it includes all kinds of wealth including: money, wealth, career, financial security, career, health etc. This is a goal which every normal human being aims at. Attaining Artha will lead to the experience of pleasure and happiness. The proper pursuit of artha is considered an important aim of human life.

Artha provides the foundation for Dharma and Kāma. Without artha (money) both moral life and sensuality become difficult. Indian philosophers recognize the importance of material wealth for the overall happiness and wellbeing of an individual. Every human being requires artha (wealth), because he has to perform many duties to uphold his and his family's dharma. Also, people need wealth or money to meet their basic necessities. Money is not only a means of security, but it is also a means for getting comforts of life. To live life happily as a common person, we need money but this money must be acquired by honest way only. We can't think of life without money. So, it is true that, money is of course essential to man. But it should be earned in a rightful and honest way.

The satisfaction of sensuous desires is a necessary part of normal human life, but for that also artha is necessary. So artha is a Puruṣārtha both in the sense that people actually aim at it, and also in the sense that under certain legitimate bounds they ought to aim at it.⁷

Artha provides the foundation for dharma and kāma. A person may have the intention to uphold the dharma but if he has no money, he would not be able to perform his duties and fulfil his dharma.

⁶I. Ravi, Foundations of Indian Ethic, p. 58.

⁷K.N.Tiwari, Classical Indian Ethical Thought, p.201.

Kāma: After attaining Artha, man seeks to attain Kāma. Kāma is the third Puruṣārtha, referring to pleasure. The term actually means desire, but in the sense of Puruṣārthas, it means sensuous enjoyment. Kāma has to do with the fulfilment of desires in the world. A life without pleasure and enjoyment is a life without meaning. Kāma relates to pleasure, which can be sensuality, but is also art, music, beauty, love, intimacy, affection and kindness. It is a total sensory experience that includes the discovery of object, learning about the object, emotional connection, process of enjoyment and the resulting feeling of wellbeing before, during and after the experience. Having acquired some money (artha), having got some security the next step for everyone is to use this money for our comforts, enjoy ourselves and enjoy fulfilling our 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. But according to Cārvāka philosophy, kāma is the highest good or highest virtue. According to them,

Wealth is a means of pleasure. It ought to be acquired for the sake of pleasure. Pleasure is an intrinsic value. Wealth is an instrumental value. Pleasure and wealth both constitute the human good. This is the view of the authors of Nītiśāstra and Kāmaśāstra. It is accepted by the Cārvākas, who deny the other-worldly good. Virtue consists in the enjoyment of sensual pleasure due to the gratification of desires. It is the highest virtue. Supreme happiness springs from the gratification of desires.⁸

So, according to Cārvāka philosophy, kāma is the highest goal of human life. But other schools of Indian philosophy do not accept this view. The Kāma Puruṣārtha advocates that one's desires in this life time need to be fulfilled, it can be sensuous pleasure, mental pleasure getting through satisfaction of the work etc.

The inclusion of kāma within Puruṣārthas actually shows the sensitiveness of the Indian thinkers towards one of the very basic needs of human life. After all, human beings are also in one sense animals- of course, very elevated sort of animals. So, for a balanced development of human life, it is necessary that animal appetites of man are also satisfied. If such desires and appetites are suppressed, there is a possibility of abnormality to develop and man will not be fit for higher pursuits. So, by including kāma under Puruṣārtha, the Indian thinkers have recognised the need for human beings to aim at the satisfaction of animal appetites. For proper and well-rounded development of man satisfaction of such appetites may be legitimate.⁹

Everyone feels money (artha) is the most important part in the attainment of the pleasures of life. So, many regarded artha as a means and kāma as an end. But now there are some questions raised that, how is this money (artha) acquired? How well money (artha) is utilised in our life? The answer of these questions is, to follow his own Dharma.

⁸ J. Sinha, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p.76.

⁹ K.N.Tiwari, *Classical Indian Ethical Thought*, p.201.

Mokṣa: The fourth Puruṣārtha is called Mokṣa, regarded as the highest Puruṣārtha, literally it means liberation. Etymologically mokṣa means to get ‘rid of’ or ‘release’. It is commonly understood as liberation. It refers to freedom from the cycle of birth and death. Mokṣa is also regarded as paramārtha, means the final, the ultimate end or the final purpose. It is also said to be a state of bliss.

The attainment of Mokṣa is not possible without fulfilling the above three. Kāma and artha have been allowed as pursuable goals, but they are not the final goals. They have been allowed in the Indian tradition only insofar as their attainment helps man to develop a normal and balanced life so that he may prepare himself with a sound body and mind for higher spiritual end like mokṣa. This is why kāma and artha have been advised to be pursued always under the yoke of dharma and the pursuance of kāma and artha under the yoke of dharma prepares man for the pursuance of the highest goal, which is known by the various names of Mokṣa, Kaivalya, Nirvāna, spiritual freedom, self-realisation etc.¹⁰

It is not that on death mokṣa is attained. Indian tradition separates mokṣa into two, such as, jivanmukti and videhamukti. Jivanmukti literally means liberation in this life, which includes liberation from fears and ignorance or anything that is false knowledge. Videhamukti literally means liberation after death.

The idea of liberation (mokṣa) is common to all systems of Indian philosophy. Only the Cārvāka materialist does not believe in it.

Mokṣa has been conceived variously under various systems of Indian thought, but certain ideas about it are common. It is a spiritual goal after attainment of which one can get rid of all kinds of suffering as well as from the cycle of birth and rebirth, which is at the root of all sufferings.¹¹

The Cārvākas are materialistic; do not believe in any existence of God nor in any ethical discipline. According to them, death is ultimate end and pleasure is the only object of human life. They regard dependence as bondage and independence as release or mokṣa. Buddhist philosophy regards complete cessation of suffering as Nirvāna. Buddha has suggested his eight-fold path for cessation of suffering. These are (i) Samyakdṛṣṭi (right views) (ii) Samyaksankalpa (right resolve) (iii) Samyakovāk (right speech) (iv) Samyakkarmānta (right conduct) (v) Samyakājīva (right livelihood) (vi) Samyavyāyāma (right effort) (vii) Samyaksmti (right mindfulness) (viii) Samyaksamādhi (right concentration). The Jaina considers that one attains Mokṣa through right view (Samyak darśana), right knowledge (Samyak jñāna) and right character (Samyak cāritra); also known as Triratna.

The Nyāya and the Vaiśeṣikā look upon the existence of the self in its natural condition as liberation. The word apavarga is used in Nyāya philosophy to mean a state of liberation.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 203.

¹¹ K.N.Tiwari, Classical Indian Ethical Thought, pp.203-204.

It consists in absolute cessation of pain. It consists in complete destruction of the qualities of the soul, cognition, pleasure, pain, desire, aversion, volition, impression, merit and demerit.¹² The naiyayikas believe that the bondage of the world is due to false knowledge. The false knowledge is the root cause of bondage. Liberation (mokṣa) comes through true knowledge of the self and all other objects of experience (tattva-jñāna). To get rid of bondage, the soul must stop all actions.

According to Sāṃkhya philosophy, Mokṣa is the absence of Trividha Dukha (threefold suffering). Mokṣa is the complete cessation of all sufferings, freedom from all pain. The word kaivalya is used in sāmkhya philosophy to mean a state of liberation. The Yoga also considers complete isolation (kaivalya) of the self from the mind (buddhi) and its modes and dispositions as release. In the state of release the self-abides in its essential nature, and realizes its intrinsic nature.¹³

The Mimāṃsa considers complete destruction of merit and demerit and absolute extinction of pain as mokṣa. According to them, Aatmajnan is necessary for attaining mokṣa. An individual attain liberation from pain or from the cycle of birth and death by means of Aatmajnan and performance of his own duties and also to perform rituals as prescribed in the Vedas.

According to the Advaita Vedāntist Shankar, Mokṣa is self-realization of one's own true form which is eternal and which cannot be seen because of maya or avidya. According to Advaita Vedāntist mokṣa is achieved by removing maya or avidya. Radhakrishnan commenting on Shankar's view of avidya & mokṣa, he writes, 'Mokṣa is a matter of direct realization of something which is existent from eternity, though it is hidden from our view when the limitations are removed the soul is liberated.'¹⁴

So, according to Indian ethical thought, Mokṣa is the highest goal of our life, attainable only by the individual himself, with the help and guidance of dharma. Mokṣa as the last end or Puruṣārtha signifies that its attainment is impossible without first fulfilling the obligations of the other three.

Conclusion: The above four Puruṣārthas are recognised by Indian tradition. These four Puruṣārthas are incomparable to each other. Each of them has its own importance, all are equally important. Dharma is always held higher than Artha and Kāma. Infact, dharma is that which helps man to fulfil the obligations of artha and kāma directed to the ultimate end of mokṣa. In the attainment of mokṣa only dharma can help, provided that it has been cultivated through artha and kāma. Mokṣa is the last and highest end of every human being.

These four basic Puruṣārthas are very important in every human life. They are the pillars of a happy and fulfilling life. Puruṣārthas are the values which ought to be aimed at by everybody, although in normal living hardly anybody ever thinks about it. If this ancient

¹²J.Sinha, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p.15.

¹³J. Sinha, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p.15.

¹⁴S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol-II, p.593.

wisdom can be used and applied in our life, it can definitely help us to achieve ‘peace of mind’. Hence it is clear that, the four Puruṣārthas are most important for the development of inner and outer life of every human being.

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