

The Relevance of Varṇāśrama Dharma in Contemporary Society: An Indian Philosophical Perspective

Dr. Anupama D. Mujumdar

Associate Professor and Head, Department of Philosophy
MES's D.G. Ruparel College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Mumbai
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Abstract

In ancient Indian philosophy, Varṇāśrama Dharma was considered the foundation of Hindu social life. It emphasizes performing one's duties according to one's class and stage in life. Dharma is derived from the Sanskrit root dhṛ, meaning “to sustain,” “to uphold,” or “to support.” It refers to that which upholds and sustains human society. Thus, it supports both individual and social life. Everyone in society is expected to adhere to Dharma, which in turn maintains peace and harmony. Varṇa refers to the four social classes. They are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. This division into four classes is based on qualities (guṇas) and duties (karma). Āśrama refers to the four stages of human life. They are Brahmacharya, Gṛhastha, Vānaprastha, and Sannyāsa. A reference to Varṇa appears as early as the Rig Veda. The Bhagavad Gita also emphasizes the importance of Varṇa in individual and social life, while Sāṃkhya philosophy describes the role of the three guṇas, namely sattva, rajas, and tamas, in the formation of the Varṇa system. In ancient society, the Varṇa system was based on guṇa and karma, but later it degenerated into a rigid caste system based on birth. However, in the contemporary world, the relevance of Varṇāśrama Dharma cannot be denied. It serves as a guiding principle for choosing one's occupation and performing one's duties.

Keywords: Varṇa, Āśrama, Guṇa, Dharma, Sāṃkhya, Bhagavad Gita



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Introduction

In today's globalized world, where science and technology hold the upper hand, especially with the advent of Artificial Intelligence, human beings have drifted apart from their own nature. They are living a confused, stressful life. There is no clarity about the aim, purpose, and goal of life. In such a scenario, Varṇāśrama Dharma, a concept in Indian philosophy that emphasizes the relationship between the individual and society, serves as a guiding force. It enables one to distinguish between Dharma and Adharma, guiding individuals to follow an ethical path. The Varṇā system provides insight into how one's inherent abilities and aptitudes enable one to choose an appropriate occupation that best suits them. The āśrama system provides systematic guidance on the duties at different stages of life. This enables one to lead a purposeful life.

Dharma

In ancient times, Dharma was an important aspect of Indian philosophy. Dharma is derived from the Sanskrit word 'dharma', which means 'to sustain' or 'to uphold.' Thus, Dharma is that which holds and sustains human society. It is regarded as the foundation of social and moral order and provides a framework for individuals to live harmoniously and ethically. The concept of Dharma has evolved from the Vedic concept of Ṛta. Ṛta is primarily the cosmic order that governs the universe and moral order in human society. Dharma encompasses specific duties and moral obligations associated with one's role in society. Thus, it is that which guides human conduct. It is Dharma that gives human life

meaning, purpose, and direction. It enables individuals to act responsibly and ethically in society. It is ethically significant in the context of Varṇāśramadharma.

Varṇadharma

Ancient Indian society was divided into four classes called Varṇa. This classification was not based on birth but on an individual's capabilities. This division was necessary for the smooth functioning of society. Various Hindu scriptures, such as the Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita, the Manusmriti, and the Puranas, mention Varṇa dharma.

However, the earliest reference appears in the Purusha Sukta hymn of the Rig Veda (10.90.12). Here, the four varnas are described as emerging from the body of the primeval Purusha. It is said that the Brahmin originated from the mouth of that Virata Purusha, and the Kshatriya from his arms; the Vaishya is born from his thighs, and the Shudra from his feet. The mouth symbolizes wisdom, the arms strength, the thighs commerce, and the feet labor. In Vedic times, society was divided into four major classes based on occupation and individual aptitude. No occupation was superior or inferior. Just as the different parts of the body are equally important for the functioning of the body, so also the different classes in society are equally important for the functioning of society. As society grew, some chose the occupation of acquiring knowledge and imparting it to the younger generation. They came to be known as Brahmins. Those who were physically strong chose to protect society and maintain law and order. They formed the class of Kshatriyas. Some others chose occupations in agriculture, farming, trade, and commerce. They were the Vaishyas. Still others who could not fit into any

of the occupations took to serving others. They were the Shudras. Thus, during the Vedic period, varna referred to the four classes, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. This division of labor was based on a person's abilities and aptitudes.

Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita is an integral part of Indian philosophy. It addresses questions about duty, morality, spiritual freedom, and human existence. Although nishkamakarma yoga is the central teaching of the Bhagavad Gita, the concept of Varṇāśrama Dharma also occupies an important place. In Chapter 4, verse 13, the Lord says,

चातुर्वर्ण्यमयासृष्टुगुणकर्मविभागशः।

This means, “The fourfold classification of the people on the basis of Guṇa (qualities) and Karma (expected duties) was made by Me for the welfare of the people” (4.13).

Here, what is emphasized is the guṇa, or aptitude, possessed by the individual, and karma, or action performed. Originally, this classification was based on qualities and duties rather than hereditary caste distinctions. Thus, the four classes were established on the basis of qualities and the karma performed. This is mentioned in Chapter 18, verse 41.

ब्राह्मणक्षत्रियविशःशूद्राणांचपरन्तप

कर्माणिप्रविभक्तानिस्वभावप्रभवेर्गुणैः ॥

which means, “The duties of the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras are distributed according to their qualities, in accordance with their guṇas (and not by birth)” (18.41).

Thus, the Lord explains that all people have different abilities based on guṇas, which constitute their personalities, and therefore different professional duties are suitable for them.

The Concept of Guṇa

The concept of Guna is derived from the Sāṃkhya school of Indian philosophy. Sāṃkhya is dualistic. It brings everything into two categories: Purusha and Prakriti. Prakriti is the universal principle from which the world, with its diversity, evolves. This Prakriti is composed of three guṇas: sattva, rajas, and tamas. Sattva is the principle of balance and harmony, peace, creativity, and inspiration. Rajas is the principle of activity, while tamas literally means darkness and is the principle of inertia. Every individual is a combination of the three guṇas. These guṇas determine the nature (Svabhāva) of an individual, and nature determines his actions (karma). Thus, an individual's behavior is determined by the guṇas. The guṇas influence individuals' choices of roles that correspond to their natural dispositions and inner qualities. For example, individuals dominated by sattva are generally inclined toward intellectual, reflective, or spiritual vocations, while those in whom rajas predominates often perform effectively in active, administrative, or leadership-centered roles. This is how the four classes were created.

Āśrama Dharma

The Āśrama system divided an individual's life into four stages. They were Brahmacharya (student life), Gṛhastha (householder life), Vānaprastha (retired or hermit stage), and Sannyāsa (renunciation). This system emphasizes the harmony between personal growth and social responsibility. Each stage has its own duties, values, and way of life, guiding the individual's physical, moral, social, and spiritual evolution in relation to both society and the self.

1. Brahmacharya is the first stage of life. It usually begins in the seventh year and extends till the age of twenty. During this period, all the students lived in gurukuls with their gurus under one roof. They learn both sacred and secular sciences. They lead a hard, austere life of self-discipline.
2. Gr̥hastha (Householder Life): In the Gr̥hastha stage, an individual was expected to get married and raise his family by earning through righteous means. During this stage, individuals fulfill responsibilities as spouses, parents, and members of the community by raising children, pursuing occupations, and contributing to social and religious welfare.
3. Vānaprastha (Hermit Stage): In the Vānaprastha stage, the householder was supposed to hand over the responsibilities of the family to his children and retire to the forest with his wife. He was supposed to live a life of contemplation and simplicity by withdrawing from all attachments.
4. Sannyāsa (Renunciation): This is a stage where one is expected to give up all worldly attachments and pursue the path of liberation. This stage is dedicated to meditation and contemplation on the higher truth to attain liberation.

Relevance of Varṇāśrama Dharma

A question that arises here is, “Is it practically relevant today to follow the Varṇāśrama Dharma?” Can today's generation look to Varṇāśrama Dharma as a guiding principle? Although the traditional structure of society has drastically changed over time, Varṇāśrama Dharma is still practiced today. Even today, we find individuals performing duties according to

the different qualities and aptitudes they possess. This leads to cooperation, harmony, and balance in society. This aligns with the original system, which was based on guṇa (qualities) and karma (actions), rather than birth.

The Āśrama system provides a framework for an individual's development as he passes through different stages of life. Although the structure and duration of each Āśrama have changed. It still provides relevant insight. It guides individuals in the duties and responsibilities they need to fulfill at each stage of life. It also emphasizes societal duties. Personal good is not separate from social good. The four stages are progressive. In the first Brahmacharya stage, one focuses on personal growth. In the second Gr̥hastha stage, the focus is on material progress. In the third stage of Vānaprastha, one needs to develop detachment from all things and start the spiritual journey. Finally, in the fourth stage of Sannyāsa, one is already on the path of spirituality. Thus, the four stages of life encourage one to strive for balance between personal growth, material pursuits, and spiritual growth. It emphasizes adherence to dharma (duty) and social responsibility in all stages of life. Thus, Varṇāśrama Dharma fosters freedom of choice, equality, human dignity, and inner peace.

Conclusion

In Indian philosophical thought, the Varṇāśrama Dharma is a model of how life can be well-organized. It provides a framework for organizing both individual life and social order. It is based on the assumption that not all men are equally gifted or talented and that every individual in society must be provided with equal opportunities. In the varṇa system, individuals were given opportunities to perform

their duties in accordance with their innate qualities and dispositions. No varṇa was considered hierarchically superior or inferior to the other. Every varṇa contributed equally to social welfare. The importance of varṇa is also emphasized in the Bhagavat Gita. It emphasizes performing karma in accordance with one's inherent nature, determined by the three guṇas. The Sāṃkhya philosophy explains how the three guṇas are responsible for the diversity of human behavior and dispositions. This diversity is reflected in the varṇa system, leading to unity. Thus, differences in the nature, talents, and dispositions of individuals are complementary and necessary for the smooth functioning of society. Every individual's abilities and tendencies are important because they contribute to society's well-being. However, over time, the varṇa system degenerated into a rigid, hereditary caste system. The varṇa system was no longer based on abilities and aptitudes; birth became the criterion for determining varṇa. This gave rise to the distinction between "higher" and "lower" castes, leading to widespread social discrimination and inequality. The Āśrama system offers insight into how life can be best lived by adhering to dharma. Dharma serves as a guiding force for the individual as they evolve through different stages of life. These stages contribute to personal and spiritual development. Thus, it is evident that Varṇāśrama Dharma was, and remains, the very foundation of individual and social life. It sought to integrate the material, social, moral, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of human life. Even today, it

continues to offer valuable insights into various aspects of human life. Thus, the concepts of varṇa and Āśrama guide the individual on the journey of self-development and spiritual realization. It encourages ethical living, self-discipline, peace, harmony, individual and social responsibility, and spiritual growth.

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