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SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ASHRAMA SYSTEM : LESSONS FROM INDIAN KNOWLEDGE TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the Ashrama system stands as a foundational element within the Indian societal structure yet finds limited discourse within contemporary society. This article delves into the enduring relevance of the ancient Hindu ashrama system in modern society. Analysing the four life stages – Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sanyasa, the study navigates their philosophical underpinnings and their applicability in today's intricate societal landscape. It highlights that each ashrama is relevant to a person's development, individual faculties and society. The article elucidates how the ashrama system offers a holistic framework for personal growth, duty, and spiritual evolution by examining the intersection of tradition and contemporary challenges. Through a balanced synthesis of ancient wisdom and present-day realities, this exploration sheds light on the ashrama system's potential to inspire purposeful living in the modern age.

Keywords : Indian society, Dharma, Hindu social organisation, Life stages, Spiritual evolution, Duty, Responsibility.

Introduction

Ancient India had well developed social system. The resilience of this system enabled Indian society to endure numerous upheavals from various sources and at different junctures. An understanding of ancient India's social structure can be gleaned from critical sources such as the *Manu Smriti* (मनुस्मृति)¹, *Dharma Shastras* (धर्मशास्त्राणि)², *Kautilya's Arthashastra* (कौटिल्यस्य अर्थशास्त्र)³ and *Vedas* (वेदाः) and *Upanishads* (उपनिषदः)⁴. These sources collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of ashrama dharma and its significance in the philosophical and ethical framework of Indian culture, thereby becoming essential authorities for discussing it. Ashrama dharma, also known as the “stages of life” or “phases of life”, is a concept in Indian philosophy that outlines an individual's different life stages and corresponding duties.

The Hindu society, deeply rooted in antiquity, poses challenges in comprehensively discussing its social principles due to their evolution over time. Nevertheless,

certain principles have endured and persisted to this day, as elaborated upon later in this paper. However, the current focus is on the 'ashrama system' (आश्रम व्यवस्था), which stipulates a lifespan of 100 years for each individual. This centenary span is divided into four distinct ashramas, each spanning 25 years. The initial phase is known as *Brahmacharya* (ब्रह्मचर्य), during which one is expected to dedicate themselves to extensive learning, abstain from marriage and sensual gratification, maintain robust health, and strive to remain ailment-free. The subsequent stage is *Grihastha* (गृहस्थ), characterised by married life, ethical accumulation of wealth, responsible parenthood, and engagement with worldly affairs. Following this, the *Vanaprastha* (वनप्रस्थ) phase entails a gradual withdrawal from worldly involvements without shirking existing responsibilities, avoiding the assumption of new obligations. Finally, the fourth ashrama is *Sanyasa* (सन्यास), marked by detachment from worldly affections. Individuals in this stage concentrate on purifying their inner selves and souls while

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disseminating religious teachings to those engrossed in worldly pursuits (Olivelle, 2016).

Origin of the Ashrama System

The term 'ashrama' originates in the Sanskrit word 's-rama', signifying 'to exert oneself'. Consequently, 'ashrama' signifies a locale where endeavours are undertaken, or the act of engaging in such endeavours commences. As articulated by P.H. Prabhu (1979, 1940), this term denotes a pause, a point of cessation, akin to a stage on the journey of life, intended for repose and preparation before advancing further. Prabhu (ibid.) also expounds that these ashramas serve as resting spots in the voyage towards ultimate liberation, the ultimate objective of life. Vyasa (2019), in the *Mahabharata* (महाभारत), likens the four life stages to steps on a ladder, a progression firmly tied to Brahmins. German scholar Paul Deussen (2015, 1966) similarly posits that 'ashrama' designates a site of toil and labour. These ashramas are progressive stages towards *Moksha* (मोक्ष), the ultimate culmination of human existence. Following Hindu philosophy, ashramas are deemed indispensable for education and self-discipline.

Some Indian social thinkers believed that the original count of ashramas was three, not four. They contend that the Vanaprastha ashrama was absent. As per their stance, the *Chandogya Upanishad* (छान्दोग्य उपनिषद्) solely references three ashramas. They maintain that even the Manusmriti discusses only three life stages. However, the *Jabala Upanishad* (जाबाल उपनिषद्) presents an alternative perspective, enumerating four life stages within the framework of the Hindu social system, emphasising that an individual traverses these four ashramas to attain *Brahma* (ब्रह्म). There is no consensus on the entry age for an ashrama. Generally, it is believed that each ashrama spanned twenty-five years, and an individual's natural lifespan extended to a hundred years. Prabhu (1979, 1940) articulates that divergent opinions exist among various authorities with respect to the specific age at which one is anticipated to commence each of the Ashramas, as well as the duration of life to be devoted within each phase. On the other hand, M.N. Srinivas (1996) presents the notion that the Brahmacharya ashrama encompassed only the duration

of up to fifteen years of age. In his perspective, he states that the initial phase of the studentship (Brahmacharya) concluded around the age of sixteen, at which point the young individual would marry and transition into the subsequent stage of Grihastha, or the householder phase.

Nature of Ashramas

Irrespective of the perspective held, whether advocating for three or four ashramas, each of these constructs remains pertinent within Indian society even in contemporary times. Nevertheless, it stands as a distinct reality that these concepts do not hold substantial significance within our modern way of life. Let us delve into the essence of each of these ashramas and explore the inherent principles that define them, as guided by Hindu philosophy:

1. **Brahmacharya Ashrama:** At the age of seven years, a young boy was traditionally required to enter the Brahmacharya ashrama. His parents were responsible for arranging a guru for him, who played the dual role of his spiritual guide and academic mentor. The student's commitment was anticipated to be unwavering as he wholeheartedly served and assisted the guru. He resided within the ashram premises, living under the comprehensive guidance and authority of the teacher. His focus was expected to remain detached from worldly matters, and he was explicitly instructed against indulging in comfort and opulence. The guru provided him with the utmost beneficial teachings and experiences, steering him towards both personal growth and the realisation of ultimate truths. During his time as a *Brahmachari* (ब्रह्मचारी), it was a fundamental precept that the student refrained from any interactions with the opposite sex. The induction of an individual into the Brahmacharya ashrama marks their status as *Dwija* (द्विज) or "twice-born." This transition is also referred to as the *Upanayana* (उपनयनम्) initiation. A consensus exists that this phase is essential in a student's life. During this time, they metamorphosed into knowledgeable individuals and devout followers of their responsibilities towards teachers and society.

2. **Grihastha Ashrama:** The subsequent phase in an individual's life was the one where they transitioned from their academic pursuits to embracing worldly affairs. As articulated by Prabhu (1979, 1940) that upon completing the prescribed course of study as a Brahmachari and following the stipulated dharmas, he undergoes a ceremonial bath, symbolising the culmination of his time in that ashrama; thus, he emerges as a *sanataka* (स्नातक). This marks his readiness to embark upon the subsequent ashrama, namely the Grihastha ashrama. This ceremonial rite is technically termed *Samavartana* (समावर्तन). Grihastha ashrama, regarded as the most pivotal juncture in an individual's life, is believed to determine their future trajectory. This period serves as a litmus test for their competence, sagacity, adherence to social ethics, and ability to adapt socially. The theoretical knowledge acquired is now put into practical application in the Grihastha ashrama. The individual's duty lies in providing for their family with dignity. It is incumbent upon them to amass wealth through righteous means in alignment with dharma. This phase also involves the responsibility of bearing children. In the expressions of Prabhu (ibid.), this individual must discharge obligations (rinās) towards family members, deceased ancestors, strangers, and deities, to be deemed prepared for the subsequent Vanaprastha ashrama.

In the Hindu social structure framework, the Grihastha ashrama is recognised as a pivotal juncture in an individual's life. Notably, the *Shantiparva* (शान्तिपर्व) of the Mahabharata underscores the importance of this stage when Yudhishtira, in disillusionment with worldly life, contemplated embracing Sanyasa (Pandey, 2019). Within this ashrama, it is believed that *Dharma* (धर्म), *Artha* (अर्थ), and *Kama* (काम) coexist, serving as avenues toward Moksha. This accolade for the Grihastha ashrama is echoed in Smriti literature as well. This ashrama that bolsters the other three ashramas invites an inquiry: Why is such significance attributed to it, considering that all four ashramas are generally deemed equally important?

The answer is not the preeminence of physical desires over knowledge or renunciation. Prabhu (1979, 1940) logically posits that the reason behind this lies in acknowledging that not all individuals may experience all four life stages due to a potential lifespan of less than 100 years.

Given that the Grihastha ashrama encompasses Dharma, Artha, and Kama, it serves as a platform for Moksha even if other stages are unattainable. Prabhu (ibid.) contends that Grihastha ashrama uniquely allows for the simultaneous practice of the three *Purusharthas* (पुरुषार्थ) and the discharge of the three rinās. This perspective arises from the observation that, in practice, it is challenging or unfeasible for the average person to sequentially navigate through all four ashramas, considering the typical human lifespan, which often falls short of a century. Consequently, it is wisely suggested that salvation can still be attained while residing in the Grihastha ashrama till life's end. This hinges upon fulfilling the three rinās and faithfully practising the three purusharthas within the prescribed framework. Additionally, learning to coexist harmoniously with others, leading a life of sacrifice, and nurturing compassion and empathy are also emphasised within this stage.

3. **Vanaprastha Ashrama:** It constitutes the third stage of life. It was envisioned that an individual would embrace this ashrama around the age of fifty. At this juncture, the expectation was for the person to initiate the process of renouncing worldly life. It signalled a gradual detachment from married life as well. However, the complete discharge of worldly responsibilities might have yet to transpire at this phase. Consequently, continuing to reside within the world was permissible. The emphasis, however, was on gradual withdrawal, ultimately leading to a state of unburdened existence devoid of earthly obligations. The focus would shift towards controlling one's mind and soul, seeking spiritual liberation (Moksha). Periodically, retreats to jungles for meditation were contemplated. Dietary modifications were also anticipated,

encompassing a diet of vegetables and fruits while abstaining from sweets and meat. Attire would consist of deerskin or tree bark, while dwelling would be beneath a tree, sleeping on the ground. This way of life aimed to foster detachment from the external world. The continued observance of rituals and the pursuit of knowledge was expected, coupled with practices to cleanse the body. Additionally, cultivating qualities of self-discipline, kindness, and benevolence, as well as fostering compassion towards all living beings, was integral as Prabhu (ibid.) expounds that the Vanaprastha ashrama, as its name signifies, involves not only departing from the shelter of community and home but also bidding farewell to the village. One must retreat to the forests, endeavouring to gain mastery over the senses of enjoyment.

4. **Sanyasa Ashrama:** This marks the final phase in a Hindu life journey. As elucidated by Prabhu (ibid.), the Sanyasi achieves readiness for attaining immortality by disciplining their senses, shedding self-centred attachments, and leading a life of non-violence towards all living beings. Prabhu (ibid.) further posits that by adhering to this path, all the transgressions of an individual who embraces the Sanyasa ashrama are absolved or eradicated, leading them to the ultimate purpose of existence – Moksha. In this ashrama, the customary age of entry is around 75 years, although exceptions permit a direct transition from the Grihastha stage. At this juncture, the individual is called upon to forsake worldly existence, embracing a life of renunciation. Worldly pursuits of Artha (wealth) and Kama (desire) become inconsequential. They are elevated beyond mundane allurements, unaffected by the external world's events. Desires and anxieties are relinquished. The Sanyasi assumes the role of a teacher, demonstrating how to control anger and desires while nurturing mastery over the soul, thereby attaining spiritual liberation. It is asserted that a person within this ashrama should not rely on external assistance.

Their sustenance relies solely on alms, and they transcend concerns related to life and death.

Significance of Ashramas and Modern Worldview

Thus, within the framework of Hindu social organisation, the ultimate objective is Moksha, attainable by traversing the ashramas. Each ashrama entails specific duties for individuals, and the faithful fulfilment of these responsibilities facilitates progression from one ashrama to the next. These ashramas are likened to schools of human life, where individuals can discharge their rinas – debts owed to teachers, sages, parents, gods, and elders. Proper fulfilment of these rinas is the path towards Moksha. Therefore, the pivotal significance of the ashrama system lies in its potential to lead to salvation.

Modern society is intricate and demanding, burdened by economic concerns. Many, especially those from lower and middle-income backgrounds, need help to attain education until age 25. Similarly, fulfilling worldly obligations entirely by age 50 and transitioning to a life of renunciation is often challenging. Employment rules in both public and private sectors usually permit active service up to the age of 60. Given these factors, the ashrama system might seem outdated, considering the average lifespan is often less than 100 years due to natural or accidental deaths. Moreover, external factors beyond individual control often dictate life's progression through stages due to limited employment opportunities worldwide.

However, this perspective is restricted and influenced by worldly stressors. If we earnestly adopt the ashrama system and advocate for individuals to live up to 100 years while progressing through ashramas to the extent possible, many contemporary challenges could be mitigated. The world has much to learn from the wisdom of Indian traditions, and the ashrama system is but one facet of this vast knowledge legacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ashrama system is a profound aspect of Hindu social organisation, embodying a structured journey through the various stages of life. The four ashramas – Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sanyasa- are rooted in ancient philosophies and scriptures – present a comprehensive framework for an

individual's growth, development, and spiritual evolution. Each ashrama is characterised by distinct duties, responsibilities, and aspirations, reflecting the diverse facets of human existence.

While the ashrama system's origins are deeply intertwined with cultural and spiritual heritage, its relevance extends even to contemporary times. The system imparts a sense of purpose and offers a roadmap for personal and societal betterment. It highlights the seamless integration of individual pursuits with collective well-being and spiritual realisation. From the rigorous discipline of the Brahmacharya ashrama to the selfless service of the Grihastha stage and the gradual detachment of the Vanaprastha phase to the ultimate renunciation of the Sanyasa ashrama, the journey encompasses a rich tapestry of experiences.

However, as society evolves and faces complex challenges, some aspects of the ashrama system may appear less feasible. The changing dynamics of education, career, and familial responsibilities have led to adaptations in life trajectories. Despite these shifts, the ashrama system's essence – its emphasis on self-discipline, spiritual growth, and responsible living – remains perennially relevant. The system encourages individuals to lead a life of purpose, aligning their actions with a higher spiritual goal.

In a world marked by materialism, the ashrama system's wisdom offers a holistic path to self-discovery and societal harmony. The notion that every stage of life serves as a stepping stone towards Moksha, regardless of whether one follows the entire sequence, is a testament to its adaptability. The ashrama system exemplifies the timelessness of Indian philosophical traditions, inviting us to reflect on the integration of duty, spirituality, and personal growth in our modern lives. Embracing its principles can illuminate a transformative journey towards a balanced and fulfilling existence.

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Notes :

1. The Manu Smriti, also known as the Manusmriti or Laws of Manu, is a well-known ancient Indian legal text that provides guidelines for various aspects of life, including the stages of life (ashramas) and their associated duties.
2. Dharma Shastras are a genre of ancient Indian texts that deal with ethical and moral principles, including the duties and responsibilities associated with each stage of life. Various dharma shastras discuss ashrama dharma in detail.
3. Although primarily focused on political and economic matters, Kautilya's Arthashastra also touches upon societal organisation, including the different stages of life and the corresponding duties of individuals within those stages.
4. While not explicitly outlining ashrama dharma, the Vedas and Upanishads, being foundational texts of Indian philosophy, contain philosophical insights and discussions on life, duty, and spirituality that indirectly contribute to the understanding of the stages of life and their associated principles.
5. The concept of three ashramas (Brahmacharya, Grihastha, and Sanyasa) appears in ancient Indian

texts and traditions. These three ashramas were fundamental to the traditional Vedic and Hindu societal structure. The addition of the fourth ashrama, Vanaprastha, expanded the traditional framework to include four stages of life. The transition from three to four ashramas likely occurred gradually as societal norms and philosophical perspectives evolved.

6. The author aims to elucidate that while the subsequent reference pertains to males, this does

not indicate its irrelevance for females. The author asserts their commitment to gender neutrality while adhering to the conventional approach of elucidating the ashrama system from a male standpoint.

7. 'Rinas', plural of the ऋण (ऋण), refers to obligations or debts, encompassing responsibilities owed to family, ancestors, strangers, and deities. Fulfilling these duties is a prerequisite for advancing to the next stage, Vanaprastha ashrama.

