

Four-fold objectives of life for an individual and the societal growth as per Hinduism

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Abstract

Hinduism is the popular name for Sanatana Dharma, which means ‘the eternal principles that govern and protect us’. Hinduism focuses not only on individual growth but also at the growth of society because society is a collection of individuals connected through the world. The three ontological entities of Hindu philosophy are individual, world and the principle that connects everything referred as God. Individual growth is based on establishing four-fold objective namely abiding ethical laws and developing virtues (dharma), earning of wealth (artha), fulfillment of desires (kama) and self-perfection and bliss (moksha). These objectives are to be properly integrated in one’s life. The societal growth is based on providing an environment that promotes the growth of individuals through their fulfillment of four-fold objectives. This paper presents the principles and applications of various values through four-fold objective that have characterized Hinduism from ancient times through current times.

Introduction

Sanatana Dharma is the actual name for Hinduism. The word Hinduism came to be known for the culture, religion and philosophy of the people on the banks Sindhu River. The word Sindhu came to be known as Hindu and Hinduism. It is important to remember that Hinduism cannot be attributed to a single founder at a specific date in history. Most of the basic literature of Hinduism is in Sanskrit language. The word ‘Sanatana Dharma’ is a Sanskrit word, which means ‘the eternal (Sanatana)’ and ‘principles that govern and protect us (Dharma)’. The source literature for Sanatana Dharma is Vedas, which are very large collection of mantras. The word Veda in Sanskrit means ‘knowledge’. Vedas deal with various aspects of life, nature and cosmos. There are large number of scriptures that are written based on the source literature namely Vedas. The emphasis of the Vedic literature of Hinduism is growth of an individual in a society that provides an environment that fosters the growth of individuals. This in turn results in the societal growth.

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Four-fold objectives of life

The Vedic literature clearly provides the vision and guidance for a human being by providing four objectives of life and by pursuing which an individual can achieve fulfillment in life. These four objectives of life are known in Sanskrit as dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Dharma is the principle, which holds all of us together and practice of which protects us here and hereafter. Artha is earning of material wealth. Kama is the enjoyment of sensual pleasures. Moksha is freedom from all undesirable fetters of life. It is to be noted that not only each objective is important but also their integration. In the view of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru (Sriranga Vachanamrita: 1993:47), it is noted that

“In enumerating four objectives of life, the order of dharma, artha, kama and moksha are proper and should not be interchanged. This is because artha and kama should be pursue within the bounds of dharma and moksha.”

Dharma: the first objective

The word dharma in Sanskrit is etymologically derived from the verbal root ‘dhri’, meaning ‘to sustain’. So dharma is that which not only sustains an individual but also society because the society is made up of individuals. It is stated that (Jois 2004:12)

“Dharma sustains the society;
Dharma maintains societal harmony;
Dharma ensures well-being and progress of humanity;
Dharma is surely that which fulfills these objectives.”

It is seen that dharma is the framework for a harmonious functioning of the society. However it is important that dharma has to be practiced by everyone in order that it will keep the individuals and society in harmony. In Manusmriti (Jois 2004:16) it is said that

“Dharma protects those who protect it. Those who destroy dharma get destroyed. Therefore dharma should not be destroyed so that we may not be destroyed as a consequence thereof.”

Thus observance of dharma is critical to the growth of both an individual and the society. In an Upanishat it is stated as (Jois 2004:15)

“Dharma is the king of kings. No one is superior to dharma. Dharma aided by the Power of the king enables the weak to prevail over the strong.”

It is seen from these that Dharma is a law or a guide to all individuals in a society. When individuals adhere to dharma then not only the individuals grow but also the society

grows. In Manusmriti (Jois 2004:21), the common dharma that need to be followed by one and all are given as;

“Non-violence, truthfulness, non-acquiring of illegitimate wealth, purity and Controls of senses are in brief, the common dharma for all people.”

Dharma is underlying principles that can bring harmony in global context. In Mahanaryana upanishat (Jois 2004:24) dharma is seen as the universal principle. It says

“Dharma constitutes the foundation of all affairs in the world. People respect those, who adhere to dharma. Dharma insulates man against sinful thoughts. Everything in this world is founded on Dharma. Dharma therefore, is considered as supreme.”

Thus dharma being the most important as it being the foundation for an individual's life, it is given the first place among the four objectives of life. It should be emphasized that it is not enough to know through education what dharma is but is essential to follow dharma. The approach to follow dharma is the commonly known karma. The karma operates in three domains namely thought, speech and action. These three domains are inter-related. Any meaningful action involves thought and sometimes speech. The thought domain carries the intentions, which are subtler than speech and action domains. Therefore thought domain includes all the activities of mind such as intentions, desires, ambitions, aggressions etc. Thus dharma and karma always go together. So they have to be in harmony. Thus union of dharma as principles and karma as the corresponding practices is achieved through yoga. It is well known that yoga is not limited to only physical postures. The eight-limbs of yoga as formulated by sage Patanjali in Ashtanga-Yoga include the mental and spiritual practices in addition to physical and breathing practices. Also several other forms of yoga such as Bhakti-Yoga, Jnana-Yoga and Karma-Yoga are discussed in the Bhagavad-Gita [Mhaskar 2011].

Artha: the second objective

The second objective (next to dharma) is artha. The primary meaning of artha is material wealth or money. However the secondary meaning of artha is purpose. Thus meanings of artha can be combined as acquisition of materialistic goods, money, power and the purpose for which they are acquired. It is recognized and advised in Hinduism that artha is very important and on it depends one's life both individually as well as socially. A maxim of Chanakys says 'Economic prosperity creates prosperity of the people' [Subramanian 2000:22]. However it is essential that artha or the acquisition of wealth should conform to dharma. The Hindu scriptures recommend that within the framework of dharma one should earn wealth to one's capabilities and work.

It is well known that money plays an important role both at an individual level and societal level. The need of food, clothing and shelter at the individual level and the flow of money between individuals are required for the collective operation of the

society. The materialistic wealth enables an individual to interact and lead a harmonious life with others in the society. So it is important to note that the lack of money at an individual level results in social suffocation for that individual. It is said in Mahabharata (Danielou 1993:100) that

“This is a world of action in which work is glorified. Agriculture, cattle-raising, and craftsmanship all contribute to the creation of wealth. The sacred books tell that without material goods, we may neither fulfill our duties nor realize our desires.... A rich man is able to perform his duty and obtain what he desires, which a man without means cannot do. It is said that virtue and pleasure are by-products of riches. Without wealth, nothing is possible.”

The Arthashastra is a treatise on economics and polity written around 382 B.C. by the Kautilya also known as Chanakya who was the minister of the King Chandragupta Maurya of the well-known Mauryan Empire of ancient India. Greek travelers such as Megasthenes and Daimachus lived during the rule of Chandragupta Maurya. The Indika of Megasthenes describes the wealth and prosperity of the state (Gokhale 1956:4). The objective of acquisition of wealth in reference to the society ruled by monarchy is dealt in the Arthashastra. The description of the government is also provided in some detail. (Kangle 1992, 2:1-5). It is noted that Kautilya used the Arthashastra as a manual in showing how to lead a balanced life by balancing two aspects of life namely the mundane (materialistic) and transcendental (spiritual) (Rangapriya 1983, 2:205-11). Arthashastra, is also referred as the “science of means”, which explores the means of assuring economic and political development, through which possible activities are increased and the stability of goods acquired is guaranteed. The “science of means” thus covers the whole field of management, economics, justice, and government, as well as the art of prosperity (Danielou: 1993: 103)

It is seen from the literary sources both ancient and post-ancient that both national and international trade practices were in vogue. Both the Rig-Veda and Shatapatha Brahmana state that successful voyages were made to distant lands and maritime trade was a profitable outlet for merchants. It is seen from the references from Arthashastra that during Mauryan period both domestic and overseas business was greatly encouraged by the state. Merchants were provided with certain safety measures too (Leela 2006: 56). Another important aspect that is considered by Kautilya in Arthashastra is relationship between the State and the market. It is noted that history is replete with examples to prove that under any circumstances the market cannot replace the state. The market can play its role. However, it cannot take over the responsibilities of the state (Joshi 2006:120).

“To know the responsibilities of the state and the role that the market can play would be an interesting exercise particularly when there is re-thinking on the main contents of Kautilya’s Arthashastra. The significance of such an exercise increases in this era of market oriented reforms.”

Hindu philosophy recommends that wealth should be earned well through hard work and right means. The earned wealth should not only be enjoyed but also given as charity. A Hindu scripture (Vishnudharmottara Purana) recommends 1/6 th of earning to be given as charity. It is desirable become rich as it is said in Arthashastra that ‘It is not difficult for a rich man to do good, because its implementation depends on wealth’ (Danielou 1993:102). The richness and poverty are opposite to each other as said in Arthshastra that “The rich are ever happy, the poor are ever sad. The happiness and sorrow are divided among the rich and the poor.” (Subramanian 1980: 98). Thus giving charity in Hinduism is considered as spiritual action and it is to be cultivated as spiritual value. It should be given without expectation for return. It should be given to a worthy person at a right time and at a right place. (Kulkarni and Kulkarni: 2011)

Kama: the third objective

The third objective of life is known as kama in Sanskrit. It refers to fulfillment of sensual and materialistic desires. Although kama is third in order in the final form of fulfillment, the general form of desire will be there as a driving force. For example, desire to learn and desire to earn money are prerequisite that would lead to the stage of fulfillment. Hence desires play a major role in our life. In Mahabharata (Danielou 1993:111) it is said about desire as;

“There has never been, is not, and will never be anything that seems superior to what we desire. Desire is the essence of all action, on which all notions of duty and wealth are based. Just as cream is the essence of the milk, so pleasure is the essence of duty, the source of wealth.”

The desires not only drive an individual’s life but also drive the collective life in the society. The interactions and transactions between individuals are driven by the desires. So the desires and their fulfillment play a pivotal role in life. It is said in Shukra Niti (Danielou 1993: 112) that

“Pleasure is only easy where social and economic circumstances are favorable. In seeking to realize himself and in fulfilling his desires, each clashes with desires of others. This is life’s battle. Such a state of perpetual conflict can only be avoided by mutual agreement, by a set of conventions to which all subscribe for their own convenience. Respect for such conventions is known as ethics or duty. The pursuit of pleasure is made possible by only self-imposed limits, which in turn make it possible to lead an agreeable and organized collective existence. As with forms of wealth, there are also forms of pleasure, which run counter to duty, and upset the balance that makes the pursuit of pleasure possible, of which intrusions into others’ pleasures are an example.”

It is seen that desire occupies predominant role in our life. If one does not keep a check on desires, then it is possible that unethical and immoral desires can lead a person astray and to self-destruction. This means that desire can lead a person either to ethical or unethical actions. In the view of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru

“ If kama comes as within six-fold enemies namely unethical desire (kama), anger (krodha), greed (lobha), delusion (moha), arrogance (mada) and jealousy (matsarya), then kama must be rejected. However if kama comes as in four-fold objective namely dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kama (ethical desire) and moksha (self-perfection and bliss), then kama is to be respected ”.

Thus kama as an ethical desire is an essential and integral part of four-fold objective that brings fulfillment in a person’s life. Lord Krishna in Srimad Bhagavad-Gita (7.11) says as “ In all beings, I (Lord Krishna) am the desire that does not violate Dharma” (Srikrishna and Ravikumar 2011:138)

Moksha: the fourth objective

The term moksha in Sanskrit refers to total freedom from bondages that cause miseries and suffering. Moksha would also mean spiritual consciousness that will elevate a human being to become free from dualities such as miseries and pleasures, birth and death, etc. The objective of moksha indicates the quest of a human being to freedom and unabated happiness. The sages of Hinduism assert that given the finite life and limitations of sensual and materialistic pleasures, the drive of human beings to pursue liberation from the fetters of life is natural and results in spiritual fulfillment.

To free ourselves from suffering and death and reach happiness is conscious or unconscious aim of all our instincts and all our efforts. Our interest in anything is limited to the extent it can abolish sorrow and produce joy, pleasure, and happiness. For this reason, the supreme aim of life is inevitably conceived as an experience of absolute happiness and total joy, representing union with a Transcendental Being who can only be joy, beyond all suffering and death (Danielou 1993: 127).

Four stages of human life

The above four objectives namely dharma, artha, kama and moksha relates to different stages of human life. It is known that the desire of a child and the desire of an adult are very different. So Hinduism provides a four-stage view of life of a human being namely student life, married (or family) life, retired life and the life of an elderly. These four stages of life provide a general guide for life.

The student life emphasizes learning, education and development of values. The married life focuses on the acquisition wealth and fulfillment of rightful desires. It is in this important stage that an individual transforms into a family, which becomes a unit of a society. The retired life is in which an individual give back through his or her experience and wisdom to the next generation of the society. It is in this stage of life that spiritual frame of mind develops based on one’s experiences in life. The final stage of the elderly life is in which spiritual contemplation is emphasized (Prasad 2010: 9). Among these four

stages discussed above, the householder who is in the stage of married life is very important in the social economy of the society as noted (Hiriyanna 1975: 196).

“The functions of the householder are of great importance in the social economy of the community, for it is he that is the mainstay of the remaining ashramas (stages) – particularly the religious student and recluse, who have to depend upon others for their sustenance. He is the life-breath says Manu, of the rest of the society..... The ideal life of a house-holder is, in the result, one in which artha (wealth) and kama (desires) are harmonized with dharma”

Thus the four stages of human life provide an understanding as well as action plan for the life cycle. The four-fold objective and four stages of human life need to be integrated. The integration is essential because it will enable one to fulfill various desires at physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual levels. It is well known that a human being has to use his or her free-will. So it is essential that a human being need to properly integrate the goals and stages of life to achieve fulfillment in life. Hinduism emphasizes society provide an environment that nurtures this integration so that all members of the society can achieve the fulfillment in life.

Integration of four objectives in life

The three ontological entities according to Hindu philosophy are individual (jeeva), world (jagat) and God (Ishwara). Among these the world is common to all individuals and God is the principle that connects all the individuals and the world (Prasad 2001:171). God is referred as source and substratum of everything. God is also referred as all-pervading and in-dwelling principle. In Hinduism it is recognized that every human being operates consciously or unconsciously in three levels. These levels are physical, mental and spiritual. It is seen from the above discussions that both four objectives and four stages of life are applicable to all human beings. Also it is important to realize that these four objectives and four stages do not operate in isolation. A society is merely not a collection of human beings but it should also sustain harmonious interaction between the human beings at various stages of life. An integration of the four objectives along with four stages of life is essential such that society will be able to provide a supportive and conducive environment for all to pursue all the four objectives for fulfillment in life.

A question arises namely, which of the four objectives is important? Hindu scriptures answer this question by saying no objective can be ignored and all are equally important at various stages of life. The Hindu sages recommend that when the first three objectives namely dharma (abiding of laws), artha (earning wealth) and kama (fulfillment of desires) are to properly enjoyed, then the fulfillment of life occurs through the contentment, joy and bliss. In Mahabharata (Jois 2004:6) it said that ‘the triad namely dharma, artha and kama are inseparable. All the three should be enjoyed harmoniously and omitting one or two is to be deprecated’ According to Kautilya (Jois 2004:6) also, it

is said, “in the inseparable unit of dharma, artha and kama, the one mentioned earlier is superior. This triad should be followed together.”

It is commonly observed that the most people in a society are working towards the two objectives namely artha (earning wealth) and kama (pursuit of desires). However, the artha and kama are considered as short-term objectives whereas, the other two objectives namely dharma and moksha are long-term objectives. The Hinduism provides a vision in terms of long-term objectives and short-term objectives. The vision is that pursuit of short-term objectives should not be in conflict with the long-term objectives. In other words, to maintain the harmony between the short-term and long-term objectives, one needs to give importance to them in proper proportions. In the Hindu view, society also needs to give importance though providing proper support to both short-term and long-term objectives.

Individual and societal development

In another view of the four objectives, when artha (earning wealth) and kama (fulfillment of desires) are enjoyed within the bounds of dharma (moral and ethical laws) and moksha (spiritual knowledge), they give excellent results. In the words of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru, (Sriranga Vachanamrita 1993:47)

“Artha and Kama are like mischievous cows, which kick us when we go to milk them. But when we try to milk them after binding them to the pole of dharma on the one side and the pole of moksha on the other side, they profusely yield us sweet and nourishing milk.”

So every individual needs to pursue the two objectives namely the artha (earning wealth) and kama (fulfillment of pleasures) with the guidance of the remaining two objectives namely dharma (ethical and moral laws) and moksha (contentment and bliss). Then there will be not only development of an individual but also the society. This bounded pursuit of wealth and pleasure is also necessary due to multi-faceted life such as physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Kaushik discusses about ten empirical truths about Hinduism that speaks to us today about the steady and sustainable growth. The derivation of satisfaction from balance between the spiritual, mental and physical aspects of life has been historically a driver based on Hinduism for successful economy as noted (Kaushik 2011).

“It is the systems and general equilibrium approach that is the strength of the Vedic system and culture which allows for the interplay between the three elements of the spiritual, physical and mental to create a peaceful and lasting existence and experience”

It is for this reason that Hindu philosophy advises that pursuit of wealth and pleasures are very important but they cannot be independent of moral and ethical laws on

one end and achieving a spiritually contented life on the other end. This approach results in individual as well as societal development as noted (Danielou 1993: 102)

“Society exists for the purpose of creating favorable conditions for the acquisition of material goods, wealth, and power, in turn allowing science, culture, virtue, religion, pleasure, and spiritual pursuits to flourish. The basis of social organization is thus mainly economic. Social divisions and the need for ethics, rites, and religion are all based on economics, or at least facilitate economic development under favorable conditions, which is in turn conducive to the realization of the four objectives of life.”

Concluding remarks

Thus we see that the individual and societal sustenance and progress is fully dependent on the four-fold objectives of life. However it is also important to recognize that when economic and business development and fulfillment of resulting desires and pleasures occurs within the bounds of ethical and moral laws and governed by spiritual values and contentment then total fulfillment results in life of an individual. It is very important that society needs to maintain a balanced environment where all its individual members can pursue total fulfillment in life. Although, some sources are available from ancient literature to show that a balance of the four-fold objectives was being enforced in Mauryan empire by the state as recommended by Kautilya in his Arthashastra, which is more a practical manual than a theoretical guide. However further research and analysis are needed to study the extent to which the four-fold objective approach and principles were actually followed in ancient India or currently followed.

It is to be noted that the United States constitution provided a template and encouraged the great American experiment in capitalist economy by declaring the universal goals (or ends) of “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” based on equal opportunity. It is seen in the approach of Kautilya, the great Indian economist that the focus is on the “science of means” not just ends. The four-fold objective formulated in Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma) provided an older analogous template without ignoring the importance of liberty in self-centered pursuit of wealth and happiness.

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