

Is there a Conflict Between Householder and Renunciant Tradition in the Hindu Discourse?

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Abstract:

The Hindu tradition with its various facets has shown features from the extremely sensual to the extremely ascetic and both are deemed of extreme importance. The Trivarga tradition of Dharma, Artha, Kaam saw an addition of Moksha later and the question is whether the extremely eudaemonic tradition where the entire concentration was to keep the material body happy, re-thought its mores, imported the concept of salvation from outside, or was it a natural growth of the other three Purusharthas? The paper discusses the views of the major western and Indian writers on Hinduism.

Keywords: Brahamanic, Shramanic, Trivarga, Caturvarga, Moksha

Hinduism, also known as the Sanatana dharma is probably one of the oldest religions known to humanity. An amalgamation of the belief systems of ancient Vedic age and other indigenous beliefs, Hinduism today is recognized as much as a social system as a religion (Zaehner, 1962, p.8). This coming together of the varied religious beliefs that have been incorporated over time does not only give Hinduism its basic unique flavour but also sets a tension which on the face of it appears irreconcilable. Not only this, there has been a wide gap between textual and practical Hinduism which confuses scholarship and academicians a lot- a fact which Thapar (p.62) rues when she says “that Hinduism was projected largely in terms of its philosophical idea, iconology and rituals... Histories of the ‘Hindu’ religion have been largely limited to placing texts and ideas in a chronological perspective with few attempts at relating these to the social history of the time. Scholarship also tended to ignore the significance of the popular manifestation of religion in contrast to the textual, a neglect which was remedied by some anthropological research, although the textual imprint is more visible even in such studies”.

A similar view is expressed by Zaehner (1962, p.3) when he says- “ But here a dilemma creeps in, for law exists on two levels: on the one hand it is written down in the sacred texts, on the other it is inscribed in the hearts and consciences of men: Sometimes the two exist side by side in harmony, sometimes there is tension and conflict.

But probably it is this unique ambivalence, which grants a very diversely distinctive flavor to Hinduism and sets up within it a tension that is never wholly resolved.

But to go back to Thapar’s assertion, one would be tempted to say that while dealing with such an expansive scenario as India or the Hindu religion with its four thousand years history where utterly confusing mass of apparently diverse, self-contradictory detail exists, where we fail to decry that which is of permanence, stable, unchanging and eternal (Zaehner, 1962, p3). In fact, it is too early to make

such an assumption as Thapar's, as here we are dealing with a religion which oscillates between extremely worldly set up, even sensuality on one hand, to extreme asceticism on the other. It seems at a time to show extreme devotion to a personal deity and at other times seems to be immersed in abstract, deep and often conflicting philosophical trends. And therefore to do justice to four thousand years long history of contradiction is not an easy task and Thapar's views could be little demoralizing for scholars and especially in the West where scholars like Biardeau, Zaehner, Flood and many more have taken up this daunting task of unraveling the mysteries of Hindu History. Therefore, Zaehner's acceptance of a simultaneous conflict and harmony could be the starting point of our endeavour to discover and discern the various facets of Hinduism.

And nowhere is this contradiction more apparent than in the World Affirming and World Renouncer traditions of the Hindu culture. It is believed that the early or the Rig-Vedic religion was very much this worldly, life affirming, day to day business in complete contradistinction to the later religion. The distinction could be unearthed in the emergence of the fourth goal of life, Moksha, which established itself as the "supreme human purpose" (paramapurushartha) which was absolutely (or appeared to be) in contradiction to the other three where the objective was to achieve world-transcending liberation which was termed as Renunciation-which ultimately became a hallmark of the Hindu religion- a social facet of the philosophically abstract liberation. This distinction between the three purusharthas and the last is what took the shape of what we call the distinction or contrast between the Brahmin householder and the Renouncer tradition.

The picture which appears clear from the indigenous view of the Hindu religion from the textual and historical sources gleaned from the early period reveals the prevalence of two religious groups namely Brahminism and Shramanism and they have been categorically differentiated. Patanjali, the grammarian refers to the hostility between Brahminism and Shramanism as innate as is that between the snake and the mongoose {(S.D.Joshi,ed., Patanjali Vyakarana Mahabhasya (Poona, 1968), II.4.9; I.476}. This distinction finds place in the accounts of foreign visitors like Megasthenes; the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Fa Hsien and Hsuan Tsang; and Alberuni, according to Thapar (1992,p.63). It is generally believed now that by Brahminism was meant the tradition that treated and revered the Vedas as revelation- a tradition of Vedic orthopraxy while Shramanism was a tradition of world renouncers with an itinerant life style, who shunned worldly pleasures to follow a life of asceticism, meditation and were concerned with other-worldly gains rather than this-worldly pleasures. Both Buddhism and Jainism are prominent examples of the Shramana traditions. The development of the Shramana tradition is generally believed to be during the latter half of the first millennium BCE and Gombrich (1998, pp.58-9) links it to the urbanization of the Ganges plain. This tradition was probably antagonistic to the ritual sacrifices which the Vedic injunctions entailed and tried to reinterpret and redefine Brahminism. Opposed to the idea of worldly involvement, Shramana tradition emphasized liberation from the consequence of action (karman) and the resultant cycle of rebirth. In this regard Dr Flood (Lipner, p.22) says that "Although Brahminism re-asserted itself over Shramanism, the idea of liberation from action and the methods of its attainment entered mainstream Vedic religion".

Now this statement calls for a deeper probe into this problem. Was this an imported, new concept or was this a natural growth or corollary of the tradition. Romila Thapar (1992, p.63) says " Sometimes the Brahmins and the Shramanas are addressed jointly as in the Buddhist texts and the Ashokan edicts. Here they are projected as a category distinct from the common people". She continues her argument by

saying that “such a bunching together relates to a similarity of concerns suggestive of a common framework of discourse but does not detract from the fundamental difference of the two systems”.

But if we try to locate this difference, we find that it had emerged out of the system itself. In fact, to see the householder and renouncer traditions as separate does not hold close to the common practical view held by the common practitioners of the tradition too. Normally you find people saying “From bhog to yoga” which means a satiety in the worldly affairs only makes one competent to leave the worldly desires behind and advance on the path of other –worldly concerns. This view generally held by a common Hindu is corroborated by eminent scholars like Heesterman and Biardeau (J Heesterman, 1985, p.40) have argued that renunciation and its attendant ideas of asceticism and meditation leading to Moksha, can be derived from Vedic tradition itself, that there is no need to postulate an externally derived ideology”.

The second reason for many scholars trying to establish the Shramanic tradition as separate and not an off shoot of Brahminism itself could be due to the deficient understanding in scholars themselves. R.C.Zaehner (1962, p.11) says that “it is often said that Hinduism is so obsessed by its quest for ‘liberation’ that it has very little to say in matter of day to day morality and man’s relation to his fellow”. Though, the contrary is the truth and reality. Which is why, Zaehner further says “This is partly due to what appears to be a lack of proper perspective among modern Hindu apologists themselves as well as to an over emphasis on the philosophical role of Hinduism which though important does not touch the heart of or evoke a religious response from the average Hindu. It is due, too, to a tendency to stress the Upanishadic element in Hinduism at the expense of the more mundane and this-worldly side we find in the Epics”.

The Brahminic sacrificial rituals were becoming bloodier and costlier, and the tradition lost its simple, fresh flavour and Shramanism was an effort to reinterpret the whole tradition that as a counter reaction to over-ritualism. The Shramanic system emphasized ritual-less-ness in entirety.

Dumont (1998, p.274) also sees renunciation as an extension of a normal house-holder tradition. He asserts that “it is often represented as the last stage in the life of the Brahman, who is successively novice, householder, hermit and sanyasi. The artificiality of this theory has been noted for it juxtaposes obligatory stages (novice, householder) and optional stages (that of hermit, Vanaprastha, is even archaic)”.

This extension is not limited only to the fulfillment of worldly duties but to put the experiences thus earned into generation of new ideas. With this regard Dumont asks the question-Is it really too adventurous to say that the agent of development in Indian religion and speculation, the ‘creator of values’ has been the renouncer? He answers by saying that (1998, p.275) “Not only the founding of sects and their maintenance, but the major ideas, the ‘inventions’ are due to the renouncer whose unique position gave him a sort of monopoly for putting every thing in question”. Therefore, a renouncer is probably the foundation on which the worldly householder tradition depended. He was the torch bearer who reinterpreted and resourced philosophical freshness for the tradition as no one else other than him were in such a sound position of authority to reflect on religion as they had successfully passed the worldly exam of householder and seen and been through all and therefore his aspirations were then aimed and directed beyond the worlds.

To put it in the words of Dumont (1998, p275) than “ the discipline of the renouncer by its very tolerance of worldly religion becomes additional to it. An individual religion based upon choice is added on to the religion of the group.”

And the intertwining of Moksha and the value system of renunciation connected to it according to Dr Flood (Lipner, 1997, p23) entailed freedom from action, asceticism and, in the Upanisads, the internalization of the Vedic ritual, developed within a Shramanic world view, whereas the values of Dharma, Artha, and Kama developed within a Brahminical worldview”.

This view reveals that both the householder and renunciation tradition again were co related and were not mutually exclusive. He furthers his argument by saying that “ The trivarga (Lipner,1997, p.23) is an expression of Vedic orthopraxy, whereas the Caturvarga is an indication of the assimilation by Brahminism of the Shramanic ideology of moksha”.

And so we can say that the Shramanic tradition was a natural and obvious culmination of the tradition of values for the ultimate trial of their reasonableness in the renunciate tradition. In the light of the view of these scholars , we can say that even if the Shramanic tradition was an aid for the development of the Moksha purushartha in the Caturvarga, it was also a logical summation of the celebrative Trivarga.

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