



FACULTY OF JURIDICAL SCIENCES

COURSE: BALLB

Semester –IV

SUBJECT: SOCIOLOGY-III

SUBJECT CODE: BAL-401

NAME OF FACULTY: DR. SHIV

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Lecture-22



Ashrama System in India

Read this comprehensive essay on Ashrama System in India !

Ashrama Vyavastha is one of the fundamentals of Hindu Social Organization. The old Hindu thinkers have taken man into account as a social being.

The life of an individual is influenced by four factors, namely the place of work where a man lives, the time in which he lives, the effort which he makes and his natural trait. The Ashrama system is based on particular point of view with regard to the problem of life and the problem of conducting life.

The Meaning:

The literal meaning of word Ashrama is “a halting or resting place”. Hence, Ashrama signifies halt, a stoppage or we may say a stage of rest in the journey of life to prepare a man for further journey.

The word Ashrama is derived from the Sanskrit root ‘Srama’ which means to exert oneself. Hence, Ashrama stands to mean (i) the place where exertions are performed, (2) the action of performing such exertions is initiated. In the words of P.H. Pradhu, “The word, therefore, signifies a halt, a stoppage on a stage in the journey of life just for the sake of rest in a sense in order to prepare oneself for the further journey. He further says that “The Ashramas then are to be regarded as resting place during one’s journey on the way to final liberation which is the final aim of life.

Vyasa has remarked in the Mahabharata that the four stages of life form a ladder or a flight of four steps. These lead to Brahmana which means that through them a person can reach the region of Brahma.

Ashramas are regarded as different stages in the life of an individual which train him for some period and the individual exerts himself in the same order to qualify himself for the next stage of life.

According to the scheme, life is divided into four stages- Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha and Sanyasa. Every stage has its own duties and functions. The theory of Purusharthas is given concrete expression in the Hindu scheme of Ashramas. Each Ashrama has its own duties and functions which provides healthy restraints on the instinctive and impulsive life of man. By passing through these Ashramas and by performing the prescribed duties, a man can prepare himself for Moksha.

The Four Ashramas:

In common practice, we find the following four Ashramas.

1. Brahmacharya Ashrama:

The first stage of life is called Brahmacharya Ashrama. A boy enters this Ashrama through the performance of Upanayana ceremony. Through this initiation rite, a person is said to be reborn (Dwija). The age of initiation into the first stage of life differs from Varna to Varna. The initiation ceremony takes place for a Brahmin at the age of 8, for Kshatriya at the age of 10 years and a Vaishya at the age of 12 years.

The Sudra child is not allowed to go through the first stage, as he was traditionally not allowed to have education. The initiation ceremony can be postponed upto 12 years for a Brahmin, up to 14 years for Kshatriya and upto 16 years for a Vaishya.

After the initiation rites are over, the education begins at the residence of a teacher (Gurukula). The student is required to learn the Vedas which contain the cultural traditions of the Aryans. His speech and thought must be pure and guarded by the studies of the Vedas. The life of the student is regulated in such a manner that there is a balanced development of personality. Strict discipline is required of a student and he has to lead a hard life. He is required to restrain his senses. The control over the senses also means control over sex desires. The student is also observance of complete celibacy. In this manner the life of brahmachari is a life of discipline.

The place of this Ashrama is the residence of Guru. This Ashram is completed by the time a man attains the age of 25 years. The duties of studentship include the life of austerity, service to the teacher, reverence and respect.

2. Grihastha Ashrama:

With the completion of the life of studentship, the next stage of life begins which is called Grihastha Ashrama or the life of a householder. This stage starts with his marriage ceremony. Marriage is more a social obligation as its main purpose is the performance of Dharma and the perpetuation of family as well as the continuation of the group through progeny.

According to the Ashrama system, the Dharma of a householder consists of performing the five Maha Jajnas or the five great sacrifices.

These Maha Jajnas are offered to Brahma and is called Brahma Jajna. Pitri Jajna, Deva Jajna, Bhuta Jajna and Nara Jajna. Brahma Jajna is conducted by the recitation of the Vedic Mantras. Pitri Jajna is done by offering Tarpan, that is to say, offering of water and food. This is commonly known as Sradha. Deva Jajna is done by offering burning obligations to the Gods. Bhutas are satisfied by sacrifice. Nara Jajna is performed by receiving and entering guests at home. Of these five Jajnas, the first three refers to Deva Rina, Rishi Rina and Pitri Rina.

Apart from this, a householder is also supposed to offer food to animals, saints and anybody who happened to pass through, by chance. People belonging to the other three Ashramas depend upon the Grihastha and it is the duty of householder to satisfy birds, animals and insects and persons belonging to all the social rungs. The Pancha Maha Jajnas include a wider field of social duties including men and bhutas.

This Ashram is mainly meant for the satisfaction of man's material and emotional urges, i. e., 'Artha' and 'Kama'. The Hindu as a householder is expected to fulfill his acquisitive and instinctive urges within the frame-work of Dharma. The age at which a person enters into this Ashrama is about 25 years.

3. Vanaprashta Ashrama:

It is the third Ashrama of life and an individual is expected to enter this stage at the age of 50. In the Vanasprastha Ashrama a person has to leave his family and the village too. He is expected to hand over all the household responsibilities to his grown up children and he must go to the forest.

The person must live in the forest to bring under control his senses of enjoyment (Niyatendriyah). He has to eat only fruits and vegetables and he should not touch meat. His clothes must be of deer skin or the bark of tree. He is must practise 'Tapas' (penance) to purify his body and soul. In this manner a Vanaprasthi must devote himself to study and meditation.

A Vanaprasthi must lead a life of self-control and friendliness and charity to others. If a person dies during Vanaprastha Ashrama he will attain Moksha.

Although a Vanaprasthi used to live in the forest and his wife was allowed to live with him, it was for the sake of humanity that they lived together. The presence of the wife is permitted to facilitate the performance of social duties. The affiliations and associations of the householder come to an end.

4. Sanyasa Ashrams:

It is the last Ashrams of life after passing through the Vanaprastha Ashram the person enters the last Ashrams, i.e. Sanyasa Ashrams at the age of 75 years. In this Ashrams a person breaks off all attachment with the world. In this stage a person is expected to devote his entire time towards meditation to recognize subtle nature of the supreme soul and its presence in all organisms, both the highest and lowest.

Indifferent to everything meditation and concentrating his mind on Brahmana. Delighting in what refers to the soul, with himself as his only companion he shall live, waiting for his appointed time to come, desiring the bliss of final liberation.

In this manner, the aim of the Ashrams system is to perform the Ashrams Dharma. The Ashrams Dharma is not only social in its implications but it emphasizes renunciation of the world in the Vanaprastha and" Sanyasa Ashrams. Ashrams system is a way of training through which the individual is to attain his end. i.e. Moksha.

