THE INTEGRATION OF RENUNCIATION BY ORTHODOX HINDUISM

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Introduction

At the end of his seminal study—"World Renunciation in Indian Religions," Louis Dumont states: "To sum up, Hinduism, the religion of caste and of renunciation has developed by integrating—in Brahmanism—and by tolerating—in the sects—the products of the renouncer's thought and mysticism." In this paper, we intend to investigate that process of integration by examining three of its most decisive moments and to study the developments and changes it caused within Brahmanism.

I. The first moment consisted in the admission of renunciation as an acceptable life-style within the orthodox religious framework. World renunciation is defined as the abandonment of all activities (karma) connected with life-in-the-world. These activities, in so far as they are enjoined on the one or the other of the social groups (e.g. caste) that constitute society, are considered dharma in Brahmanical thought. Consequently, the renouncer finds himself outside dharma; in rejecting the world, he, in fact, rejects dharma. This appears as an intolerable condition, if one were thinking in terms of Brahmanical categories. It has been noted that "behaviour far out-weighs dogma in Hinduism.

II - III. Renunciation, however, was more than a mere life-style. It was stamped with a distinctive Weltanschaung—the birth-death cycle (samsara), kept in motion by action, is considered a state of bondage and suffering—and

had a single goal—the liberation (mokṣa) of the individual from that bondage through a life of non-action. This Weltanschauung and this ultimate goal soon became accepted by the world. They became part of the common religious heritage of Hinduism. However, many religious traditions originating from the thought of renouncers restricted the goal of liberation to those who abandoned the world. With that restriction, how could it become truly the religious goal of the man-in-the-world? The second and third moments of the integrating process were attempts to dissociate the goal of liberation from the lifestyle espoused by renouncers. In the Bhagavadgītā we find a redefinition of renunciation, making it possible to renounce without actually leaving the world. In the conversation between King Janaka and the female ascetic Sulabhā, recorded in the Mokṣadharma of the Mahābhārata, there is a dismissal of renunciation in which Janaka finds both renunciation and kingship to consist in external emblems unrelated to liberation.

1 - The Admission of Renunciation

According to the classical theory of āśramas presented by Manu and by the overwhelming majority of Brahmancial texts, the āśramas are stages of life in which a man belonging to the three upper classes (varṇa) should live successively. He should spend the first part of his life as a student (brahmacārin), the second as a householder (grhaśthā), the third as a forest hermit (vānaprastha), and the fourth as a renouncer (saṃnyāsī). Scholars have long noticed the artificiality of this theory. However, little research has been done into its origin and development.

Āśrama is a relatively new word in the Sanskrit vocabulary. It is not found in the early Vedic literature and the early Buddhist sources use it with a very different meaning. It is used probably for the first time with the present meaning in the Gautama-dharma-sūtra (3.1). The theory of āśramas found in

5 Cf. Manu-smṛti, 4.1; 6.33.
7 Louis Dumont, op.cit., p. 45.
9 The Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad (6.21) uses the compound atyāśrama (one who has gone beyond the āśramas). However, this Upaniṣad cannot be assigned to a date much prior to that of the Gautama-dharma-sūtra, which, according to P. V. Kane (op. cit., Vol. I, pt. 1, p. 36), was composed between 600 and 400 B.C. The word is used in the Maṅgalya Upaniṣad (4.3), but this passage is considered by the editor of the Upaniṣad, J. A. B. Van Buitenen, as a later insertion: The Maṅgalya Upaniṣad (5-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1962), p. 104.
it and in the three other early Dharmasūtras, viz. of Baudhāyana, Āpastamba, and Vasiṣṭha, is very different from that of Manu. We shall call it the pre-classical theory. It is the earliest form of the āśrama theory that has come down to us. We have already dealt with it in a previous study⁹ and restate its conclusions here.

Gautama and Baudhāyana are opposed to the view that there are four āśramas. They recognize only the householder's life as legitimate and present the āśrama theory as the view of an opponent. Āpastamba and Vasiṣṭha, on the other hand, present it as the accepted doctrine. The theory of āśramas, however, as presented by these four authors is basically the same.

(i) The āśramas are permanent states of life. It is not possible for a man to change his āśrama or to pass from one to another.

(ii) A person can choose to live in any one of the four āśramas.

(iii) This choice is to be made at a definite point in one's life, namely at the conclusion of the period of studentship (brahmacharya) which follows the initiatory investiture with the sacrificial thread (upanayana). At this juncture the four āśramas present themselves to the young adult as four alternative ways of religious living.

(iv) The first āśrama, viz. studentship (brahmacharya), is distinguished from the post-initiatory studentship that bears the same name. The former is a permanent state, viz. residence at the guru's till death, later known as nisṭhikabrahmacarya, whereas the latter is only temporary. In the classical theory these two are confused and the post-initiatory studentship becomes the first āśrama.

This pre-classical theory of āśramas caused a radical change in the notion of dharma. Besides the dharma of social groups (varṇadharma), there came into being a new dharma, that of the four states of life (āśramadharma). The āśramas, in fact, are often referred to as 'the divisions of dharma'.¹⁰ Later literature refers to the totality of dharma as varṇāśramadharma—the dharma of classes and āśramas. Before the advent of the āśrama theory the element of choice or option was totally absent from the concept of dharma. On the cosmic level dharma was the regular functioning of the universe. On the social plane dharma was the established structure and functioning of society. Nowhere did it leave room for choice or alternatives; it was fixed and immutable. As the guiding principle of human behaviour, dharma was translated in terms of duties


¹⁰ dharmaṣya caturdhā bhedam. Baudhāyana-dharma-sūtra, 2.6.11.9.

Cf. Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 2.23.1.
and obligations; man must follow the established order—he cannot change it. By the same token, ‘better’ and ‘worse’ were not categories applicable to dharma. The dharma proper to an individual (svadharma) in so far as he belonged to a given class (varna) was his best dharma, his only dharma.

The theory of āsrāmas changed all this. First, it introduced the element of choice into the concept of dharma. Within this new scheme it was possible to choose one’s dharma, since one could choose one’s āsrāma.

The introduction of choice gave rise to a momentous change in the concept of dharma. Choice necessarily implied a value judgement, a better and a worse. The one type of āsrāma, thus, came to be considered better and the other worse. On this judgement was based the choice of an āsrāma. The ‘better’ and the ‘worse’, however, are said of the means according to its suitability to attain the end. The end in the present case was liberation (mokṣa). The latter being the explicit goal of the renouncer, the dharma of renunciation was considered by its supporters as better suited for or even as the only means of liberation. Thus we find the duties of a renouncer referred to as mokṣadharma (dharma leading to liberation) and his āsrāma called mokṣāsrāma, kaivalyāsrāma, apavargaāsrāma, etc.

Within the context of liberation we now find a twofold division of dharma. The dharma of renunciation was called nivṛtiddharma, since it entailed abstention from action and stopped the cycle of birth and death. The dharma of the householder, on the other hand, was called pravṛtiddharma, since it consisted of activity and furthered the life cycle. Dharma with its two arms-pravṛttta and nivṛttta—was now able to embrace both life-in-the-world and renunciation, both the traditional goals of men-in-the-world and the new goal of renunciation. Dharma, thus, became meaningful with reference to mokṣa.

The first reaction to these innovations from the conservative Brahmanical circles was the total rejection of the āsrāma theory, the position advocated by Gautama and Baudhāyana. This soon gave way to a grudging acceptance, e.g. Āpastamba. All four of the early Dharmasūtras, however, are concerned with one implication of the theory—the presumed superiority of the renouncer’s āsrāma. Āpastamba affirms that, since all the āsrāmas lead to the same goal, there is no reason to place any one above the others. Most authors of Dharmasūtras, however, place the householder above the rest, calling him the source and the support of the others. This position is understandable in the light of the opposite view of the renouncers.

11 Cf. Manu-smṛti, 12.88-89.
12 Āpastamba-dhrama-sūtra, 2.9.21.2.
13 Ibid., 2.9.24.14.
14 Cf. Gautama-dhrama-sūtra, 3.3; Vasishtha-dhrama-sūtra, 8.14-16; Manu-smṛti, 6.87-90.
A greater threat to the orthodox framework, however, was posed by the
admission of choice into the concept of dharma. It was probably this challenge
that prompted the revision of the pre-classical theory of āstānas to its classical
form as presented by Manu. In the latter the element of choice is totally elimi-
nated. The āstānas are now related to definite periods of a man’s life. In this
scheme one has as much freedom in choosing an āstāma as one has in growing
old. The classical form of the theory seems to have been fashioned according
to the sacramental (sāṃskāra) model. It was facilitated by the fusion of the
first āstāma, viz. perpetual studentship, with the temporary studentship following
initiation. Consequently, the entry into the first āstāma is made through the
sacramental rite of initiation (upanayana). Similarly, one becomes a house-
holder through the sacrament of marriage. Like the sacraments, therefore, which
are to be performed at various points of a man’s life, the āstānas come to be
associated with definite periods of life.

Theoretically speaking, once choice is eliminated and all āstānas become
equally obligatory, it is pointless to speak of the superiority of one āstāma over
another. Nevertheless, we find that Manu himself continues to praise the
householder and to place his āstāma above the other three as their very source.15
Evidently, the elimination of the choice factor from āstāma theory and, also
from the dharama as such had been merely on the theoretical plane. It did not
have the desired practical effect.16 In fact we now come across a rival theory
of āstānas that gives even more prominence to the choice factor than the
pre-classical theory. It is found mainly in the literature of orthodox renouncers17
but is accepted as authoritative by all medieval legal experts.18

In brief, this theory states that one may renounce while one is still a
student, or a householder or a forest hermit. In other words, one should
renounce the very day that one feels totally detached from the world.

Two important points of this theory should be noted. First, the choice
factor is not only maintained here but also extended. In the pre-classical theory
the choice was limited to a definite point in time; it had to be made immediately
after the period of pupilsage following one’s initiation. Here, on the other hand,
one can choose to renounce at any moment in one’s life. Second, the entry into
the other āstānas is not dealt with. It is partly due to the fact that this theory
originated from the renouncers, who were more concerned with the entry into

15 Ibid., 6.87-90.
16 This may explain the artificiality of the classical theory of āstānas noted above.
17 Cf. Ṣaṅkhyā Upaniṣad, 4; Āranyay Upaniṣad, 2.
18 Cf. Pārāśaramādhyātma, ed. V.S. Islampurkar (Bombay Sanskrit Series, Nos. 47, 48,
59,64,67,74; Bombay: 1893-1919) Vol, I, pt. 2, p. 151; Vijnānāvara on Yājñavalkya-
śāstra, 3,56.
renunciation. Moreover, once the temporary studentship and the perpetual studentship had merged in the first āśrama, the entry into the latter and into the householder's āśrama required no special theory. The entry into both was performed by the respective sacramental rites (saṃskāra). The third āśrama, on the other hand, became obsolete at a very early period.

In a circuitous way, this brings us back to the beginning—namely, the opposition between life-in-the-world and renunciation, between dharma and its abandonment. The inclusion of the renouncer's way of life into the framework of dharma through the theory of āśrams and the division of dharma into pravṛttī and nivṛttī had done nothing but pose the problem in different terms. Within the āśrama theory it was formulated in terms of the tension between the second and the fourth āśrams. In terms of dharma, it became the opposition between pravṛttidharma and nivṛttidharma. Moreover, the possibility of choosing between these two opposing life-styles had come to stay.

Mokṣa-liberation came to be accepted by all religious traditions of India as the supreme goal of human endeavour, the ultimate concern of man. The division of dharma and the admission of choice was based on this goal. Within this framework life-in-the-world, the householder's life, had to take the second place.

II The Redefinition of Renunciation

In the Bhagavadgītā we find a bold new attempt to make the man-in-the-world once again the center of religion while maintaining mokṣa as the one goal of all men, both of renouncers and men-in-the-world. It does so by subjecting to question the accepted notion of what constitutes bondage.

A constant thorn in the side of orthodox thinkers was the apparently contradictory statements of the scriptures: perform actions; abandon all actions. The stock reply is that one should pass through the āśrams.19 In other words, the dharma of action (pravṛttidharma) is proper to certain āśrams and that of non-action (nivṛttidharma) to others.

The Bhagavadgītā begins with the same dilemma: to act or not to act? Arjuna sees the great epic battle about to commence and contemplates all the resultant evils. After a long debate with himself, he resolves: "I shall not fight."

Arjuna, in other words, exercises the freedom of choice in a matter of dharma. This is the setting in which the Gītā's doctrinal exposition takes place.

In resolving this dilemma, the author of the Gītā indicates that he is wedded to the traditional notion of dharma: it is fixed, immutable and binding; it admits

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20 Bhagavadgītā, 2.9.
no choice or alternative. 21 Neither does he acknowledge the division of dharma into pravṛti and nitya. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that he never uses the word āśrama. It seems improbable that he was unaware of the āśrama theory. His silence seems to indicate a deliberate departure from the beaten track in an attempt to provide a more satisfactory answer to the problem.

The Gītā begins with an analysis of action. “What is action? What is non-action? Even sages are bewildered here.” 22 It had long been held that action (karma) was the cause of saṃsāra and of bondage. This was precisely the reason for its abandonment by those seeking liberation and for the tension between renunciation and life-in-the-world. The Gītā considers this too simple a view of action and bondage. If mere action were responsible for the continuation of saṃsāra, liberation would have been impossible, “for no one ever, even for a moment, remains without performing an action.” 23 Buddhism had already recognized this and made desire—the motivating factor of action—rather than action qua tale the cause of saṃsāra. The Gītā follows this lead and distinguishes two types of action:

A. Unmotivated action, i.e. mere action without any regard to its result.

B. Motivated action, i.e. action prompted by the desire for its result.

Only the latter type is detrimental to the attainment of mokṣa. Traditional renouncers give up all actions, the motivated as well as the unmotivated. The Gītā concedes that such men can reach liberation. Nevertheless, it considers such renunciation an idle exercise, if not altogether impossible. 24 Renunciation, on the contrary, should be directed not at the first class of actions but at the second. With this the Gītā redefines renunciation. True renunciation, says the Gītā, consists in abandoning the desire for the results (phala) of one’s actions, while continuing to engage in activity. 25 “Let him who hates not nor desires be known as the permanent renouncer (nityasamnyāsi).” 26 Truly wise is the man “who in action sees non-action, and in non-action action.” 27 Action without desire is true non-action, for it does not lead to bondage, while non-action tainted with longing is equivalent to action that binds.

The Gītā’s position, therefore, is that one can truly renounce in spirit (manosā) 28 while engaging in normal activities and continuing to live in the

21 Cf. Ibid., 2.31-35; 3.8, 33, 35; 18.40-48, 59-60.
22 Ibid., 4.16.
23 Ibid., 3.5; Cf. Ibid., 18.11.
24 Cf. Ibid., 3.4-5.
25 Cf. Ibid., 18.11.
26 Ibid., 5.3.
27 Ibid., 4.18.
28 Cf. Ibid., 5.13.
world. The knot of *samsāra* can be cut by the renouncer as well as by the man-in-the-world. The gates of *mokṣa* are open to all, to the renouncer and to the man-in-the-world.

In this process, however, the *Gītā* totally devalues *dharma* at least with reference to the ultimate goal, *mokṣa*. We saw that within the framework of the twofold *dharma*—the *pravṛtti* and the *nivṛtti-dharma*—as such remains meaningful with reference to that ultimate goal. According to the *Gītā*, on the other hand, which recognizes neither the above division of *dharma* nor the possibility of choosing between the two, *dharma* is totally unrelated to *mokṣa*. *Dharma* is valid and operative only in the realm of *samsāra*. Employing Sāmkhya terminology, the *Gītā* explains that *dharma* and action are the work of the strands (*guna*) of primordial nature (*prakṛti*). As such they are unrelated to the self (*puruṣa*) and his liberation. Thus, the *Gītā*, in dissociating *mokṣa* from the lifestyle of renunciation, dissociated it from all life-styles, including that of life-in-the-world. The goal of life is separated from the mode of life.

If this be true, why should a person striving for liberation bother to observe his *dharma* or to act at all? Such a person, the *Gītā* tells us, should continue to perform only the obligatory acts (*nityakarma*) and not the optional ones (*kāmyakarma*), for the latter are necessarily connected with desire. The obligatory acts should be performed solely because they constitute one's *dharma*. It is a type of categorical imperative. In a matter of *dharma* it is not possible to ask 'why'. This was true also of the traditional concept of *dharma*. However, the latter recognized various benefits and rewards attached to the prescriptions of *dharma*. These benefits acted as one of the chief motives for following one's *dharma*. In the *Gītā*, however, motives are absent; the imperative alone remains; or, better, the imperative itself becomes the motive. Moreover, at times the *Gītā* seems to indicate that this imperative is not merely on the moral plane but also on the physical. One cannot but obey the laws of nature (*prakṛti*). That is the final admonition of Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna: “If you turn to the thought of ‘I’ and think, ‘I will not fight’, vain is this your resolve; nature will constrain you.”

The importance of the *Gītā*’s redefinition of renunciation, however, lies in the fact that it removed the obstacle to liberation, namely action, posed by life-

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32 True, in the early part of his teaching ( *Gītā*, 2.31-37); Kṛṣṇa appeals to the human instincts of Arjuna by showing him the rewards of *dharma*: “Slain, thou shalt win heaven; victorious, thou shalt enjoy the earth. Therefore arise with no uncertain spirit for the fight.” However, in the more advanced teaching where desire is eliminated such rewards cannot be made the motive of actions.
in-the-world. With the elimination of desire, action ceases to be a hindrance. One can, thus, aspire to liberation while remaining in the world.

III-The Dismissal of Renunciation

The third moment in the process of integrating renunciation is the dismissal of the renouncer’s life-style as irrelevant to the acquisition of mokṣa.

Traditionally King Janaka is the symbol of the sage-king. As king, he epitomizes the life-in-the-world and, as one who has already attained mokṣa, he is a witness to the possibility of gaining liberation without renouncing the world.34

The Mokṣadhōrma of the Mahābhārata (12.308) records a dialogue between him and a female renouncer named Sulabhā. The Gītā, as we have seen, demonstrates the possibility of liberation for men-in-the-world by examining the true cause of bondage. On the other hand, Janaka in this passage shows that liberation can finally be dissociated from renunciation and made the goal of men-in-the-world only by examining the true cause of liberation.

In brief, Janaka’s argument is as follows. According to the Śāṅkhyā doctrine, which Janaka follows, knowledge alone is the cause of liberation. One’s mode of life is not intrinsically connected with liberation. According to Janaka, the liberating knowledge can be acquired by anyone irrespective of the mode of life. Since both a renouncer and a king are liberated only through knowledge, their difference lies merely in external emblems. The renouncer is recognized by his begging bowl and the triple staff and the king by the sceptre and the royal umbrella. The life-style of the renouncer, i.e. the state of non-possession (ākīncaña), does not lead automatically to liberation, just as the life-style of the king, i.e. the state of possession (kālīncaña), does not by itself entail bondage. Janaka concludes: “Wearing orange clothes, shaving the head, carrying the triple staff and the water pot—I consider these as outward signs, useless for liberation. Since, even when these emblems are present, knowledge alone is the cause of liberation, mere emblems are useless here to liberate oneself from suffering.”35

In the account of this dialogue as recorded in the Mahābhārata, Sulabhā wins the argument by pointing out that Janaka is still attached to duality and far from liberation. This fact, according to her, indicates that liberation is possible only through renunciation. Nevertheless, the arguments put forward by Janaka represent the tradition supporting life-in-the-world while integrating the ideal of mokṣa. In fact, this dialogue is introduced in response to Yudhishṭhira’s question? Further, although Sulabhā, resorting to an ad hominem argument,

34 Cf. Gītā 3.20; Mahābhārata, 12.211; 12.308.
points out that Janaka has not attained liberation, she does not address herself to the broader issue raised by Janaka, namely, that knowledge, not outward emblems and life-style, is the sole cause of liberation.

Janaka reappraises renunciation in the light of this true cause of moksha and finds that it is not necessarily connected with the latter. Renunciation is one life-style among many in any of which liberation is possible and none of which are directed related to its attainment. Janaka, thus, takes the Gita’s separation of goal from life to its ultimate conclusion. The Gita saw renunciation as a value and tried to redefine it so as to make life-in-the-world true renunciation. Janaka, on the other hand, dismisses renunciation as irrelevant and unimportant since it is as unrelated to moksha as life-in-the-world.

Conclusion

I consider these three moments in the integration of the life-style and values of renunciation into the orthodox religious framework to be veritable milestones in the intellectual history of Hinduism.

The first, namely the theory of āśramas, made renunciation a viable option within the orthodox religion. More important, it made possible the admission of variety and choice, and, consequently, of value judgement into the concept of dharma.

The second and the third moments, on the other hand, enabled Hinduism to remain basically the religion of society and at the same time to integrate the values and goals which were “the products of the renouncer’s thought and mysticism.” Hinduism, thus, remains “the religion of caste and of renunciation”, the religion both of the renouncer and the man-in-the-world.