RIDDLE NO. 17

THE FOUR ASHRAMAS—THE WHY AND HOW ABOUT THEM

The division of society into four orders called Varnas is not the only peculiar feature of Hindu Society. What is called Ashram Dharma is another. There is however one point of difference between the two. The Varna Dharma is a theory of the organization of society. The Ashram Dharma on the other hand is a theory of regulating the life of an individual.

The Ashram Dharma divides the life of an individual into four stages (1) Brahmacharya, (2) Grahasthashram, (3) Vanaprastha and (4) Sannyas. The state of Brahmacharya has both *de jure* and *de facto* connotation in that it means an unmarried state of life. Its *de jure* connotation means the stage of study under a teacher. Grahasthashram is the stage of a householder, a stage of a married family life. The stage of Sannyas is a stage of renunciation of civic rights and responsibilities. It is a stage of civic death. The stage of Vanaprastha is in between Grahasthashram and Sannyas. It is a stage in which one belongs to society but is bound to live away from society. As the name implies it prescribes dwelling in forest.

The Hindus believe that this institution of Ashram Dharma is as vital as that of the Varna Dharma for the well-being society. They call the two by a joint name of Varnashram Dharma as though they were one and integral. The two together form the steel-frame of the Hindu Society.

To begin with it would be better to have a full understanding of the Ashram Dharma before inquiring into its origin and its purpose and its peculiarities. The best source for an exposition of the Ashram system is the Manu Smriti from which the following relevant extracts are reproduced:

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"In the eighth year after conception, one should perform the initiation (*upanayana*) of a Brahmana, in the eleventh after conception (that) of a Kshatriya, but in the twelfth that of a Vaisya[1]."

"A twice-born man who, not having studied the Veda, applies himself to other (and worldly study), soon falls, even while living, to the condition of a Sudra and his descendants (after him)."[2]

"The vow of the three Vedas under a teacher must be kept for thirty-six years or for half that time, or for a quarter, or until the (student) has perfectly learnt them."

"Who has studied in due order the three Vedas, or two, or even one only, without breaking the (rule of) studentship, shall enter the order of householder."[3]

"The student, the householder, the hermit, and the ascetic, these (constitute) four separate orders, which all spring from (the order of) householders."

"But all (or) even (any of) these orders, assumed successively in accordance with the Institutes (of the sacred law), lead the Brahmana who acts by the preceding (rules) to the highest state."

"And in accordance with the precepts of the Veda and of the Smriti, *the housekeeper is declared to be superior to all of them;* for he supports the other three[4]."

"A Twice-born *Snataka,* who has thus lived according to the law in the order of householders, may, taking a firm resolution and keeping his organs in subjection, dwell in the forest, duly (observing the rules given below):

"When a householder sees his (skin) wrinkled and (his hair) white, and the sons of his sons, then he may resort to the forest[5]."

"But having thus passed the third part of (a man's natural term of) life in the forest, he may live as an ascetic during the fourth part of his existence, after abandoning all attachment to worldly objects."

"He who after passing from order to order, after offering sacrifices and subduing his senses, becomes tired with (giving alms and offerings of food), as ascetic, gains bliss after death."

"When he has paid the three debts, let him apply his mind to (the attainment of) final liberation; he who seeks it without having paid (his debts) sinks downwards."

[1] Manu Smriti Chapter II 36.

[2] *Ibid.,* II 168.

[3] *Ibid.* III 1-2.

[4] *Ibid.,* VI 87-89.

[5] *Ibid,* VI 1-2.

"Having studied the Vedas in accordance with the rule, having begot sons according to the sacred law, and having offered sacrifices according to his ability, he may direct his mind to (the attainment of) final liberation."

"A twice-born man who seeks final liberation, without having studied the Vedas, without having begotten sons, and without having offered sacrifices, sinks downwards[1]."

From these rules it is clear that according to Manu there are three features of the Ashram Dharma. First is that it is not open to Shudras and women. The second is Brahmacharya which is compulsory, so is Grahasthashram. Vanaprastha and Sannyas are not compulsory. The third is that one must pass from one stage to another in the order in which they stand namely first Brahmacharya, then Grahasthashram, then Vanaprastha and lastly Sannyas. No one can omit one and enter the next stage.

A cursory reflection on this system of stages which may well be called a system of planned economy of the life of the individual raises many questions. First is what forced Manu to have such a system of planned economy. Referring to the Vedas, the theory of stages in life is quite unknown. The Vedas speak of Brahmachari. But there is nothing to show that Brahmacharya was regarded as the first and inescapable stage in life. Why did the Brahmins make Brahmacharya as the compulsory stage in the life of an individual? This is the first riddle about the Ashram Dharma.

The second question is why Manu made it obligatory to observe the order of sequence in the following of the different stages of life by the individual. Now there is no doubt that there was a time when it was open to a Brahmachari to enter any of the three Ashrams! He may become a Grahasthashrami or he may at once become a Sannyasi without becoming a Grahasthashrami. Compare what the authors of the Dharma Sutras have to say on the point.

Vasistha Dharma Sutra[2] says:

"There are four orders viz. (that of) the student, (that of) the householder, (that of) the hermit, and (that of) the ascetic".

"A man who has studied one, two or three Vedas without violating the rules of studentship, *may enter any of these* (orders) *whichsoever he pleases*."

Gautama Dharma Sutra[3] says:

"Some (declare, that) he (who has studied the Veda) *may make his choice* (which) among the orders (he is going to enter.)"

[1] Manu Smriti. Chapter VI. 33-37.

[2] *Ibid* Chapter VII verses 1, 2, 3.

[3] *Ibid* Chapter III verses 1 and 2.

"The four orders are, (that of) the student (that of) the householder, (that) of the ascetic (*bhikshu*) (and that of) the hermit in the woods (*Vaikhanasa*)."

It is obvious from the views expressed by the Dharma Shastras that there was a time when the married state was an optional state. After Brahmacharya one would straight enter the stage of Vanaprastha or Sannyasa. Why did Manu remove the option and make the married state an obligatory state, why did he make the married state a condition precedent to the stage of hermit and the stage of hermit a condition precedent to the stage of a Sannyas?

After Grahasthashram there remain two stages to complete the round of life—Vanaprastha and Sannyas. The question is why Manu felt the necessity of life of the individual after Grahasthashram into two stages. Why was one stage of Sannyas not enough? The rules of regulating the life of the Vanaprastha and the Sannyasi as laid down in Manu are so alike that they give some point to the question.

In the following table a comparative study is made of the Codes for the Vanaprastha and the Sannyasa as prescribed by Manu:

The Code for Vanaprastha	The Code for Sannyasi
"Abandoning all food raised by cultivation and all his belongings, he may depart into the forest, either committing his wife to his sons, or accompanied by her." Ch. VI-3.	"Having performed the Ishti, sacred to the Lord of creatures (Pragapati) where (he gives) all his property as the sacrificial fee, having reposited the sacred fires in himself, a Brahmana may depart from his house, (as an ascetic)." Ch. VI-38.
"Taking with him the sacred fire and the implements required for domestic (sacrifices) he may go forth from the village into the forest and reside there, duly controlling his senses." Ch. VI-4	"Worlds, radiant in brilliancy, become (the portion) of him who recites (the texts) regarding Brahman and departs from his house (as an ascetic), after giving a promise of safety to all created beings." Ch. VI-39.
"Let him offer those five great sacrifices according to the rule, with various kinds of pure food fit for ascetics, or with herbs, roots and fruit." VI-5.	"For that twice-born man, by whom not the smallest danger even is caused to created beings, there will be no danger from any (quarter) after he is freed from his body." Ch. VI-40.

The Code for Vanaprastha	The Code for Sannyasi
"Let him wear a skin or a tattered garment; let him bathe in the evening or in the morning and let him always wear (his hair in) braids the hair on his body, his beard, and his nails (being unipped)." VI-6.	"Departing from his house fully provided with the means of purification (Pavitra), let him wander about absolutely silent, and caring nothing for enjoyments that may be offered (to him)." Ch. VI-41.
"Let him perform the Bali-offering with such food as he eats and give alms according to his ability; let him honour those who come to his hermitage with alms consisting of water roots and fruit." VI-7.	"Let him always wander alone, without any companion, in order to attain (final liberation) fully understanding that the solitary (man, who) neither forsakes nor is forsaken, gains his end." Ch. VI-42
"Let him be always industrious in privately reciting the Veda; let him be patient of hardships, friendly (towards all), of collected mind, ever liberal and never a receiver of gifts, and compassionate towards all living creatures." VI-8.	"He shall neither possess a fire, nor a dwelling, is may go to a village for his food, (he shall be) indifferent to everything, firm of purpose, meditating (and) concentrating his mind on Brahman." Ch. VI-43.
"Let him offer, according to the law, the Agnihotra with three sacred fires, never omitting the new-moon and full-moon sacrifices at the proper time." VI-9.	"A potsherd (instead of an alms-bowl) the roots of trees (for a dwelling), coarse worn-out garments, life in solitude and indifference towards everything, are the marks of one who has attained liberation. Ch. VI-44.
"Let him also offer the Nakshatreshti, the Agrayana; and the Katurmasya (sacrifices), as well as the Turayana and likewise the Dakshayana, in due order." VI-10.	" Let him not desire to die, let him not desire to live, let him wait for (his appointed) time, as a servant (waits) for the payment of his wages." Ch. VI-45.
"With pure grains, fit for ascetics, which grow in spring and in autumn, and which he himself has collected, let him severally prepare the sacrificial cakes (*purodasa*) and the boilded messes (karu), as the law directs." VI-11.	"Delighting in what refers to the Soul, sitting (in the postures prescribed by the Yoga), independent (of external help) entirely abstaining from sensual enjoyments, with himself for his only companion, he shall live in

The Code for Vanaprastha	The Code for Sannyasi
	this world, desiring the bliss (of final liberation." Ch. VI-49.
"Having offered those most pure sacrificial viands, consisting of the produce of the forest, he may use the remainder for himself (mixed with) salt prepared by himself." VI-12.	"Neither by (explaining) prodigies and omens, nor by skill in astrology and palmistry nor by giving advice and by the exposition (of the Sastras) let him, ever seek to obtain alms." Ch. VI-50.
"Let him eat vegetables that grow on dry land or in water, flowers, roots and fruits, the productions of pure trees, and oils extracted from forest-fruits." VI-13.	"Let him not (in order to beg) go near a house filled with hermits, Brahmanas, birds, dogs or other mendicants." Ch. VI-51.
"Let him avoid honey, flesh and mushrooms growing on the ground (or elsewhere, the vegetables called) Bhustrina, and Sigruka, and the Sleshmantaka fruit." VI-14.	"His hair, nails and beards being clipped carrying an alms-bowl, a staff, and a water-pot, let him continually wander about controlling himself and not hurting any creature." Ch. VI-52.
"Let him throw away in the month of Asvina the food of ascetics, which he formerly collected, likewise his worn-out clothes and his vegetables, roots and fruit." VI-15.	"His vessels shall not be made of metal, they shall be free from fractures, it is ordained that they shall be cleansed with water, like (the cups, called) Kamasa, at a sacrifice." Ch. VI-53.
"Let him not eat anything (grown on) ploughed (land), though it may have been thrown away by somebody, nor roots and fruit grown in a village, though (he may be) tormented (by hunger)." VI-16.	"A gourd, a wooden bowl, an earthen (dish), or one made of split cane, Manu the son of Svayambhu, has declared (to be) vessels (suitable) for an ascetic." Ch. VI-54.
"He may eat either what has been cooked with fire, or what has been ripened by time; he either may use a stone for grinding or his teeth be his mortar." VI-17.	"Let him go to beg once (a day), let him not be eager to obtain a large quantity (of alms); for an ascetic who eagerly seeks, alms, attaches himself also to sensual enjoyments." Ch. VI-55.

[1] Manu Smriti, Chapter VI verses 38-45.

[2] *Ibid,* Chapter VI 207.

[3] *Ibid,* Chapter VI 208.

The Code for Vanaprastha	The Code for Sannyasi
"He may either at once (after his daily meal) cleanse (his vessel for collecting food), or lay up a store sufficient for a month, or gather what suffices for six months or for a year." VI-18.	"When no smoke ascends from (the kitchen), when the pestle lies motionless, when the members have been extinguished, when the people have finished their meal, when the remnants in the dishes have been removed, let the ascetic always go to beg." Ch. VI-56.
"Having collected food according to his ability he may either eat at night (only) or in the daytime (only), or at every fourth mealtime, or at every eighth." VI-19.	"Let him not be sorry when he obtains nothing, nor rejoice when he obtains (something), let him (accept) so much only as will sustain life, let him not care about the (quality of his) utensils." Ch. VI-57.
"Or, he may live according to the rule of the lunar penance (Kandrayana), daily diminishing the quality of his food in the bright (half of the month) and (increasing it in the dark (half); or he may eat on the last days of each fortnight once (a day only), boiled barley-gruel." VI-20.	"Let him disdain all (food) obtained in consequence of humble salutations, (for) even an ascetic who has attained final liberation, is bound (with the fetters of the Samsara) by accepting (food given) in consequence of humble salutations." Ch. VI-58.
"Or, he may constantly subsist on flowers, roots, and fruit alone, which have been ripened by time and have fallen spontaneously following the rule of the (Institutes) of *Vikhanas*." VI-21.	"By eating little, and by standing and sitting in solitude, let him restrain his senses, if they are attracted by sensual objects." Ch. VI-59.
"Let him either roll about on the ground, or stand during the day on tiptoe, (or) let him alternately stand and sit down; going at the *Savanas* (at sunrise, at midday, and at sunset) to water in the forest (in order to bathe)." VI-22.	"By the restraint of his senses, by the destruction of love and hatred, and by the abstention from injuring the creatures, he becomes fit for immortality." Ch. VI-60.

[1] Manu Smriti Chap. VI 209.

The Code for Vanaprastha	The Code for Sannyasi
"In summer let him expose himself to the heat of five fires, during the rainy season live under the open sky, and in winter be dressed in wet clothes, (thus) gradually increasing (the rigour of) his austerities." VI-23.	"When by the disposition (of his heart) he becomes indifferent to all objects, he obtains eternal happiness both in this world and after death." Ch. VI-80.
"When he bathes at the three Savanas (Sunrise, midday and Sunset), let him offer libations of water to the manes and the gods, and practising harsher and harsher austerities, let him dry up his bodily frame." VI-24.	" He who has in this manner gradually given up all attachments and is freed from all the pairs (of opposites), reposes in Brahman alone." Ch. VI-81.
"Having reposited the three sacred fires in himself, according to the prescribed rule, let him live without a fire, without a house wholly silent, subsisting on roots and fruit." VI-25.	"All that has been declared (above) depends on meditation; for he who is not proficient in the knowledge of that which refers to the Soul reaps not the full reward of the performance of rites." Ch. VI-82.
"Making no effort (to procure) things that give pleasure, chaste, sleeping on the bare ground, not caring for any shelter, dwelling at the roots of trees. VI-26.	"Let him constantly recite (those texts) of the Veda which refer to the sacrifice, (those) referring to the deities, and (those) which treat of the Soul and are contained in the concluding portions of the Veda (Vedanta)." Ch. VI-83.
"From Brahmanas (who live as) ascetics let him receive alms, (barely sufficient) to support life, or from other householders of the twice-born (castes) who reside in the forest." VI-27.	"That is the refuge of the ignorant, and even that (the refuge) of those who know (the meaning of the Veda); that is (the protection) of those who seek (bliss in) heaven and of those who seek endless (beatitude)." Ch. VI-84.
"Or (the hermit who dwells in the forest) may bring food from a village, receiving it either in a hollow dish (of leaves), in (his naked) hand, or in a broken earthen dish, and may eat eight mouthfuls." VI-28	"A twice-born man who becomes an ascetic, after the successive performance of the above-mentioned acts, shakes off sin here below and reaches the highest Brahman." Ch. VI-85.

The Code for Vanaprastha

"These and other observances must a Brahmana who dwells in the forest diligently practise, and in order to attain complete (union with) the (supreme) Soul, (he must study) the various sacred texts contained in the Upanishads." VI-29.

The Code for Sannyasi

Comparing the Vanaprastha with Sannyas and Grahasthashram with Vanaprastha one sees some very striking resemblances between them. Comparing Vanaprastha with Sannyas there are only a few differences in the modes of life prescribed for them. Firstly a Vanaprastha does not abandon his wife or his rights over his property. But a Sannyasi must abandon both. Secondly, a Vanaprastha can have a fixed dwelling although it must be in a forest. But a Sannyasi cannot have a fixed dwelling not even in a forest. He must keep on wandering from place to place. Thirdly, a Sannyasi is debarred from expounding the Shastras while the Vanaprastha is not expressly placed under such a disability. As for the rest their mode of life is identical.

The resemblance between Grahasthashram and Vanaprastha is also very close. The Vanaprasthi is a Grahasthashrami for all essential purposes. Like the Grahasthashrami be continues to be a married man. Like, the Grahasthashrami he continues to be the owner of his property. Like the Grahasthashrami he does not renounce the world and like the Grahasthashrami he follows the Vedic religion. The only points of difference between the Vanaprasthi and the Grahasthashrami are three. (1) the Grahasthashrami is not bound to observe abstinence in his food and clothing to which a Vanaprasti is subject. (2) The Grahasthashrami dwells in the midst of society while the Vanaprasthi is required to live in a forest. (3) The Vanaprasti is free to study the Vedanta while the Grahasthashrami is confined to the study of the Vedas. As for the rest their modes of life are identical.

Having regard to these close resemblances between Grahasthashram and Vanaprastha and between Vanaprastha and Sannyas it is difficult to understand why Manu recognized this third ashram of Vanaprastha in between Grahasthashram and Sannyas as an ashram distinct and separate from both. As a matter of fact, there could be only three ashrams: (1) Brahmacharya, (2) Grahasthashram and (3) Sannyas. This seems to be also the view of Shankaracharya who in his Brahma Sutra in defending the validity of Sannyas against the Purva Mimansa School speaks only of three ashramas.

Where did Manu get this idea of Vanaprastha Ashram? What is his source? As has been pointed out above, Grahasthashram was not the next compulsory stage of life after Brahmacharya. A Brahmachari may at once become Sannyasi without entering the stage of Grahasthashram. But there was also another line of life which a Brahmachari who did not wish to marry immediately could adopt namely to become *Aranas* or *Aranamanas*[1]. They were Brahmacharies who wish to continue the life of Study without marrying. These Aranas lived in hermitages in forests outside the villages or centres of population. The forests where these *Arana* ascetics lived were called *Aranyas* and the philosophical works of these *aranas* were called *Aranyakas*. It is obvious that Manu's Vanaprastha is the original *Arana* with two differences (1) he has compelled Arana to enter the marital state and (2) the arana stage instead of being the second stage is prescribed as the third stage. The whole scheme of Manu rest in the principle that marriage is compulsory. A Brahmachari if he wishes to become a Sannyasi he must become a Vanaprastha and if he wishes to become a Vanaprastha he must become a Grasthashrami i.e., he must marry. Manu made escape from marriage impossible. Why?

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[1.] Radha Kumud mookerjee—Ancient India Education p-6.