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THE NOTION OF ĀŚRAMA IN THE DHARMASŪTRAS

By Patrick Olivelle, Philadelphia

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In classical Brahmanic thought there are two views on the āśramas. One, called the samuccaya theory, holds that every twice-born man should pass through all four āśramas in due order. The foremost authority for this view is Manu:

caturtham āyuşo bhāgam uşitvādyam gurau dvijah | dvitīyam āyuşo bhāgam kṛtadāro gṛhe vaset || [4.1] vaneşu ca vihṛtyaivam tṛtīyam bhāgam āyuṣaḥ | caturtham āyuṣo bhāgam tyaktvā saṅgān parivrajet || [6.33]

The principal argument in favour of this view is the scriptural statement [Tait. Sam. 6.3.10.5] that a Brahman is born with three debts: of sacrifice to the gods, of studentship to the rsis, and of offspring to the manes. Manu [6.35—37] sees in these debts the obligation to pass through the first two āśramas. This passage frees a man from debt, and allows him to set his mind on liberation.

The other opinion, called *vikalpa*, holds that a person may renounce from any *āśrama* so long as he is completely detached from worldly attachments:

> brahmacaryād eva pravrajed gṛhād vā vanād vā atha punar avratī vā vratī vā snātako vāsnātako vā utpannāgnir anagniko vā yad ahar eva virajet tad ahar eva pravrajet¹.

In both these views the four āśramas are related to definite periods of an individual's life. Consequently, the word āśrama has been regularly translated as 'stage or order of life'.

However, a closer examination of the earliest available evidence, namely the four Dharmasūtras of Gautama, Baudhāyana, Āpastamba, and Vasiṣṭha, shows that in the earliest known stage of the development of this theory, the four āśramas were not related to periods of an in-

Jābāla Up. 4.

dividual's life. They were rather the four possible modes of life² that presented themselves to the student who had completed his education at the house of his teacher, and was about to enter the adult world³. This I hope to demonstrate by analysing these documents in their probable chronological order.

The Gautama Dharmasūtra

Gautama opens the topic by stating the view of a pūrvapakṣin: tasyāśramavikalpam eke bruvate: brahmacārī gṛhastho bhikṣur vaikhānasaḥ [3.1—2]. tasya refers to the student who has completed the statutory period of study after his upanayana, and who was the subject of discussion in the preceding chapter. The choice (vikalpa), therefore, is to be made by such a student, and the four āśramas are introduced as the objects of his choice.

Sūtras 1—35 present the view of the pūrvapakṣin. Therefore, the descriptions of brahmacarya [ss. 4-9], pārivrājya [ss. 11-25], and vānaprasthya [ss. 26-35] do not present Gautama's own position, but that of the pūrvapakṣin. So also s. 3, in which the householder is called the source of the other āśramas: eṣām grhastho yonir aprajanatvād itareṣām, which would be superfluous in the aikāśramya theory of Gautama, where the very possibility of the other āśramas is denied. Nevertheless, the fact that the householder was considered the youi of the others because he alone has offspring demonstrates that all the āśramas are considered to be permanent states. The statement would be devoid of any significance if one were to assume that the āśramas are periods of life, for in any event one begets children only during a certain period of one's life, which does not make that period the source of the others. On the other hand, if they are considered permanent states, then it is appropriate that the householder be considered the source of the others, as it is from him that the three celibate āśramas receive their candidates.

Moreover, the brahmacārin of the first āśrama is differentiated from the student, who is the subject of the vikalpa. The former is the perpetual student (naiṣṭika), as indicated by s. 5: ācāryādhīnatvam āntam, "obedience to the teacher until death". If it were otherwise, one who has

² I do not wish to use the phrase 'vocations of life' because of its Christian overtones, but it comes very close to the idea of the āśramas in the Dharmasūtras.

³ This student is distinguished from the student of the first āśrama: cf. below p. 3.

already completed his studies would be given the choice of becoming a student; this would be absurd.

In s. 36 Gautama gives the siddhānta view: aikāśramyam tv ācāryāh pratyakṣavidhānād gārhapatyasya. The word tu places this in opposition to the view expressed in ss. 1—2. According to Gautama, therefore, there is only one āśrama, namely that of the householder, because that alone is prescribed in the Veda 4.

The Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra

Unlike the other three, this text has undergone many additions and interpolations. BÜHLER, almost a century ago, doubted the authenticity of the third and the fourth *praśnas*, which deviate from the first two at several points ⁵. Even the first two *praśnas* do not seem to be entirely free of interpolations.

The discussion of the renouncer is an obvious example. This topic is treated in two separate sections: 2.6.11.9—34; and 2.10.17.1—18.27. This double treatment is found in no other Dharmaśāstra. Many factors indicate that the second section is an interpolation:

- i) These are the last two kāndas of the second praśna, right before the dubious third praśna. It is much easier to make this sort of an addition at the end of a text than in the middle.
- ii) This is the only text in all the extant Dharmaśāstras that deals with the procedure for becoming a renouncer.
- iii) Sūtras 2.10.17.2—6, and 15—16 not only accept the four āśramas, but also favour the samuccaya point of view, which contradicts the aikāśramya view propounded in 2.6.11.27.

Moreover, the Baudhāyana Kalpa seems to have been strongly influenced by texts dealing with the renouncers and forest hermits. That such texts existed at a very early date is shown by Pāṇini's reference to the Bhikṣusūtras of Pārāśarya and Karmanda⁶. BauDhS. 3.3.1—22 appears to be a summary of a Vaikhānasasūtra, and is unique among the Dharmaśāstra texts on the subject. Baudhāyana's, furthermore, is the only Pitṛmedhasūtra to deal with the funeral of a renouncer [3.11], and the Bau. Gṛḥyaśeṣasūtra devotes two sections to the renouncer:

⁴ This view is referred to in later literature as bādha: cf. P. V. KANE, History of Dharmaśāstra, II (Poona: 1941), p. 424.

⁵ The Sacred Laws of the Aryas, S. B. E., Vol. XIV (Oxford: 1882), pp. xxxiii—xxxv. Similar doubts are expressed by P. V. Kane, op. cit., I (Poona: 1931), p. 23.

⁶ Aştādhyāyī, 4.3.110—111.

the one [4.16] contains the Kapilasamnyasavidhi, and the other [4.17] is a verse account of the funeral of a renouncer.

It is, therefore, legitimate to assume that 2.6.11.9—34 alone is the authentic text of the Baudhāyana Dharma on the āśramas. This is further supported by the fact that it is structurally similar to the parallel sections of the other Dharmasūtras.

Baudhāyana, in the same way as Gautama, introduces the topic by giving the view of a $p\bar{u}rvapaksin$ who classifies the dharma into four types [s. 9]. This classification is based on Tait. Sam. 5.7.2.3 (= s. 11)⁷:

ye catvārah pathayo devayānā
antarā dyāvāpṛthivī viyanti |
teṣām yo ajyānim ajitim āvahāt
tasmai no devāh pari datteha sarve ||

Sūtra 12 enumerates the four āśramas, relating them to both the dharmasya caturdhā bhedam of s. 9, and the catvārah pathayo of s. 118.

In Baudhāyana, as in Gautama, the description of brahmacarya [s. 13], vānaprasthya [ss. 14—15], and pārivrājya [ss. 16—26] belongs to the pūrvapakṣa. It is apparent that both refer to the same pūrvapakṣa. In fact, Baudhāyana s. 15 on the vānaprasthya agrees verbatim with Gau. 3.26—35, except for the addition of savaneṣūdakam upaspršan.

Here also, as in Gautama, the subject of the brahmacaryāśrama is the perpetual student: brahmacārī guruśuśrūṣy ā maranāt [s. 13].

The formulation of the siddhānta view [s. 27] is almost identical with that of Gautama: aikāśramyam tv ācāryā aprajanatvād itareṣām. Both agree that there is only one āśrama, but Baudhāyana gives a different reason: the fact that the others are not productive of offspring. This is the reason given in Gau. 3.3 for the pūrvapakṣin's assertion that the householder is the yoni of the others, a context to which it is better suited.

Baudhāyana, unlike Gautama, does not stop at the mere enunciation of this view, but goes on to bring further arguments in its favour. In

⁷ To get any sense out of the sequence of sūtras, s. 9 from adṛṣṭatvāt till the end, and the whole of s. 10 have to be elided. This is a repetition of s. 29, where the author is attacking the pūrvapakṣa view, and hence suits the context. Sūtra 11 has to be connected with the first part of s. 9, as it gives the reason for the fourfold division. It is very odd that the author should use the pratīka in one sūtra and quote the text in full immediately after. In s. 29, on the other hand, the pratīka is appropriate, since the text has already been quoted.

⁸ Compare Jābāla Up. 5 where samnyāsa is referred to as panthā: eṣa panthā brahmaṇā hānuvittah.

s. 28 he says that the theory of the four āśramas should not be paid heed to, because it was invented by the Asura Kapila, the son of Prahlāda, in his campaign against the gods. Then [s. 29] he rejects the pūrvapakṣin's interpretation of Tait. Sam. 5.7.2.3, and explains that catvāraḥ pathayo refers to the four types of sacrifices. In ss. 31—34 several Vedic texts are quoted in support of the aikāśramya view, one of which [s. 33] is the famous passage on the three debts [Tait. Sam. 6.3.10.5]. However, it is interpreted only with reference to the householder, who alone fulfils these debts, without the slightest indication that the obligation to pass through the āśramas is implied by it.

The Apastamba Dharmasūtra

Āpastamba and Vasiṣṭha represent the view which in all probability constitutes the *pūrvapakṣa* of Gautama and Baudhāyana. As opposed to the latter two, the former admit the four *āśramas*, and hold that one may choose any of them at will.

In s. 2.9.21.1 Āpastamba enumerates the four āśramas, and in s. 2 says: teṣu sarveṣu yathopadeśam avyagro vartamānah kṣemam gacchati. They were, therefore, considered as permanent states all of which lead to final bliss if one abides in them avyagro. This word indicates an undisturbed state of mind, implying stability and constancy.

In s. 3 a rule common to all āśramas is given: sarveṣām upanayana-prabhṛti samāna ācāryakule vāsaḥ. Because of the use of sarveṣām the field of application of this injunction includes the brahmacaryāśrama. As, according to this rule, those living in any of the four āśramas should have first gone through the period of pupilage after their upanayana, it follows that this period is to be distinguished from the brahmacaryāśrama. In fact, as ācāryakule śarīranyāsaḥ is prescribed for a person in the first āśrama in s. 6, he could be none other than the perpetual student.

Āpastamba deals with the renouncer in ss. 7—17, and with the forest hermit in ss. 2.9.21.18—23.2. Both these sections begin with identical sūtras: ata eva brahmacaryavān pravrajati. The same sūtra is quoted in Baudhāyana's second section on the renouncer [2.10.17.2] as the opinion of "some". Both Haradatta [on Āp. 2.9.21.8] and Govinda [on Bau. 2.10.17.2] agree that according to this sūtra only a student who has completed his studies and has not broken his vow of chastity is entitled to renounce. There can be, therefore, no doubt that the āśramas are considered here to be the ways of life open to a student. It was not possible to pass from one to another.

In ss. 2.9.23.3—8 many reasons are given why the three celibate āśramas are considered by some to be superior to that of the householder. The author rejects this view, and devotes seventeen sūtras to demonstrate the opposite, namely the superiority of the householder. The main reason given is the fact that the householder alone begets offspring, which consitutes the true immortality of man according to the Tait. Br. 1.5.5.6 [= Āp. 2.9.24.1]: prajām anu prajāyase tad u te martyāmṛtam. This agrees with the pūrvapakṣa view in Gau. 3.3 that the householder is the yoni because he has children.

The Vasistha Dharmasūtra

Vasistha devotes a chapter to each of the four āśramas [ch. 7—10]. After enumerating them he proposes the vikalpa theory: teṣām vedam adhītya vedau vedān vāvišīrnabrahmacaryo yam icchet tam āvaset [8.3]. This is thus far the clearest enunciation of the theory. The meaning of brahmacaryavān of Āp. 2.9.21.8 and 19, and of Bau. 2.10.17.2, is made clear here by the use of avišīrnabrahmacaryo.

In common with the other three authors, Vasistha considers the perpetual student to be the subject of the first āśrama: brahmacāry ācāryam paricared ā śarīravimokṣāt [7.4]. Here, however, we get the first glimpse of the process which led to the identification of the first āśrama with the statutory period of studentship after the upanayana. Unlike the others, who deal with the duties of such a student immediately after giving the rules for upanayana, Vasiṣṭha has no separate section on him, but gives the rules applicable to both types of students in the chapter on the first āśrama.

In three ślokas he asserts the superiority of the householder. In the first [8.14], two reasons are given: the householder alone sacrifices, and he alone performs austerities. Vasistha continues [8.15—16]:

yathā nadī nadāḥ sarve samudre yānti saṃsthitim | evam āśramiṇaḥ sarve gṛhasthe yānti saṃsthitim || ¹⁰ yathā mātaram āśritya sarve jīvanti jantavaḥ | evaṃ gṛhastham āśritya sarve jīvanti bhikṣukāḥ ||

The word samsthiti, which indicates goal or conclusion as well as continuance and support, and the reference to the mother, strongly suggest that the idea here elaborated is the same as that of the pūrvapakṣin in Gau, 3.3.

Gau. 1.28—61; Bau. 1.2.3.16—1.2.4.8; Äp. 1.1.2.11—1.2.7.31.

¹⁰ The same as Manu. 6.90.

Vasiṣṭha ends each of the chapters on the householder [8.17], the forest hermit [9.12], and the renouncer [10.31] by stating that the goal of each of these āśramas is brahmaloka or svarga, thus indicating their permanence.

Conclusions

From the above analysis we may draw the following conclusions:

- 1. According to all four authors, irrespective of whether they support or oppose this view, the subject of the āśramavikalpa is the young man who has completed the statutory period of study after his upanayana, and who has not broken his vow of chastity.
- Similarly, all four consider the first āśrama to be the state of the student who has taken the vow to serve his teacher until death (naiṣṭikabrahmacārin).
- 3. Each of the four āśramas is considered a permanent state of life that ends only with the death of the individual. Passing from one āśrama to another is unknown to the Dharmasūtras.
- 4. The motive for the construction of the theory of the four āśramas was the maintenance of the universality of the dharma by finding a place within it for the renouncer's way of life, thus neutralizing by assimilation a force that threatened the very fabric of orthodox society.

Both Gautama and Baudhāyana reject the multiplicity of āśramas. This may represent the earliest reaction of conservative circles to the new ideas coming from certain quarters of the orthodox tradition¹¹. It is, therefore, worthwhile to determine the sources of this new trend. It seems a fair assumption that it originated in circles favourable to the ideal of renunciation, probably the same that gave rise to the Upanishadic speculation.

There is, in fact, an interesting passage in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad which appears to be an early attempt at classifying the dharma of life:

trayo dharmaskandhā yajño 'dhyayanam dānam iti prathamas tapa eva dvitīyo brahmacāry ācāryakulavāsī tṛtīyo 'tyantam ātmānam ācāryakule 'vasādayan sarva ete puṇyalokā bhavanti brahmasaṃstho 'mṛtatvam eti¹².

A similar reaction is found in an even earlier document: kim nu malam kim aginam kim u śmaśrūni kim tapah | putram brāhmana icchadhvam sa vai loko vadāvadah ||

Ait. Br. 33.11. cf. P. V. KANE, op. cit., II, p. 420.

¹² Ch. Up. 2.23.1.

There is a controversy regarding the syntactical division of this sentence. Traditionally prathamas is taken with yajño . . . iti, and dvitiyo with tapa eva¹³. The three dharmaskandhāḥ, therefore, would be the āśramas of the householder, the forest hermit, and the student respectively, while brahmasamstho is the renouncer.

dharmaskandha, dharmabheda, as well as panthā appear to have been synonyms for āśrama in the early phase of the theory. Baudhāyana, for example, introduces the four āśramas with the words: tasya ha vā etasya dharmasya caturdhā bhedam [2.6.11.9]. In fact, Baudhāyana uses the word āśrama only once, and, even then, only in a compound which has the character of a technical term—aikāśramyam [2.6.11.27]. In the very next sūtra [28] he quotes a passage in which Kapila is said to have been the author of etān bhedān, which recalls the dharmasya bhedam of the earlier sūtra and the dharmaskandhas of the Upanishadic passage.

Three points in this passage of the Chandogya are of interest to us:

- Brahmacārin means the perpetual student.
- The dharmaskandhas are permanent states which lead to punyaloka.
- iii) The brahmasaṃstha is not considered one of the dharmaskandhas, since his goal is immortality. Śaṅkara poignantly calls the first three āśramamātrasaṃstha¹⁴. The exclusion of renunciation from the early enumeration of āśramas is further indicated by the use of the term atyāśramibhyaḥ for those who set their mind on liberation¹⁵. The inclusion of renunciation in the scheme of the āśramas was the first step in its assimilation into the framework of orthodox thought and way of life.

In conclusion I wish to draw attention to the probable reasons that led later thinkers to associate the āśramas with definite periods of an individual's life.

With the growing importance of renunciation in religion and in philosophy, the total rejection of it advocated by Gautama and Bau-

¹³ yajñādhyayanadāna are traditionally regarded as the threefold duty of a householder. Others connect the iti clause with the three dharmaskandhas, and, consequently, prathama, dvitīya, and trtīya refer to vānaprastha, upakurvānabrahmacārin and naistikabrahmacārin respectively. For the first opinion see P. V. Kane, op. cit., II, pp. 420—421, and for the second, S. Radhakrishnan, The Principal Upanishads (London: 1953), pp. 374—375.
¹⁴ Śańkara on Ch. Up. 2.23.1, and on Vedānta Sūtra 3.4.20.

¹⁵ Šve. Up. 6.21. Šankara on this text: paramahamsasamnyāsinas tv evātyāśraminah.

dhāyana could not last long. This position is, in fact, totally abandoned by later writers.

The original vikalpa theory of Āpastamba and Vasiṣṭha, on the other hand, was not capable of defending the central position of the gṛhasthāśrama, on which the entire edifice of the orthodox way of life was built.

Furthermore, in the course of time the āśramas came to be increasingly associated with the samskāras. As both types of students were gradually assimilated into the first āśrama—a move already fore-shadowed in Vasiṣṭha—upanayana came to be considered as its initiatory saṃskāra. Similarly, vivāha was the entrance into the second āśrama. Thus a more general association of the concepts of saṃskāra and of āśrama was possible. The fact that the former is connected with different periods of an individual's life may have led to the latter's being similarly considered. Thus we find initiatory rites prescribed even for those entering the last two āśramas.

Both the samuccaya and the second vikalpa views are based on this concept of the āśramas. Consequently, the later vikalpa theory is very different from that proposed in the Dharmasūtras. The subject of the vikalpa here is not the student alone, but anyone belonging to the first three āśramas, as well as those not belonging to any āśrama such as a snātaka and a widower. Nor is its object all four āśramas, but only the last. The motive for the choice, moreover, is not the necessity to choose a way of life, but the detachment from worldly goods (vairāgya) experienced by the subject.