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A Response to the Symposium on Sri Dharampal's *Bhāratīya Chitta Mānas and Kāla*

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THE SYMPOSIUM ON Sri Dharampal's *Bhāratīya Chitta Mānas and Kāla*, organized by Prof. Francis Clooney and carried in the last issue of the *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin* (Vol. 8, 1995), is indeed a significant contribution to the debate Sri Dharampal's essay sought to initiate. We are grateful to Prof. Clooney and the four learned commentators who, with their diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, clearly grasped the essence and importance of Sri Dharampal's effort, which in brief is to help launch a new Indian enterprise to comprehend and re-assert the essential civilizational genius of India within the present-day reality of the world.

Prof. Clooney summarized Sri Dharampal's essay not only faithfully but also with a deep sense of sympathy with the author's endeavour. And the four commentators approached the essay with transparent seriousness. In responding to the symposium, we are conscious that many of the points raised by the participants in the symposium represent deep scholarly and cultural concerns which can be resolved only as the enterprise of comprehension and re-assertion of the Indian genius sketched by Sri Dharampal begins to unfold with some vigour. In the following, therefore, we attempt only to clarify two or three issues about which some confusion seems to have arisen, perhaps because of the nature and brevity of the essay.

Sri Dharampal's essay, as is indeed obvious, is addressed not to scholars of Indian tradition but to the lay bearers of the tradition, urging them to come out of their state of forgetfulness and drift, and anchor themselves within their essential Indian-ness with awareness and responsibility. Given the nature of the enterprise, some of the statements in the essay were put in a form that may seem sweepingly general. In a more scholarly context such statements would have required extensive qualification and particularization. Many of the questions, doubts, and apprehensions that were raised in the symposium seem to arise from such a want of detailed qualification and particularization.

While agreeing with the concerns of the participants in this regard, we do wish to point out that studies of India have often concentrated on the differences and diversities in the details of Indian thought, and we shall probably only be restoring the balance if we ignore the details for a while and concentrate on the larger unified picture of the Indian view of humanity and the world.

Sri Dharampal is not unaware of the differences and diversities that prevail in India, not only between the people who claim to be the bearers of the classical Indian tradition and those who have made India their home in the relatively recent past, but also between different schools and interpretations of the timeless Indian

tradition itself. In this essay, he is trying to draw attention to those aspects of Indian thought that to him seem part of what is common to all schools, what may be called the *sarvatantra siddhāntas*. One can raise questions about whether what he indicates as such *siddhāntas* are in reality so or not – such arguments are indeed part of the enterprise of re-discovery and re-assertion that Sri Dharampal wishes to evoke – but one probably cannot argue against the need to discover and re-assert such *siddhāntas* at the present time.

The second point we wish to make concerns a more specific issue raised especially by Prof. Lance Nelson, but which is also alluded to in different ways by others – the one regarding Sri Dharampal's exposition of the hierarchy of *parā* and *aparā vidyā* and its supposed correspondence with the hierarchy of *varnas* and *karmas*. The terms *parā* and *aparā* have to an extent become part of the lay vocabulary of many Indians, and in the current conversational usage these are taken to correspond to the “spiritual” and the “material” pursuits respectively. In the lay usage of some sections of contemporary Indian society there is also a tendency to see a hierarchy between these two and to place the people engaged in the former pursuits higher than those engaged in the latter. Sri Dharampal, while discussing the question of *parā* and *aparā*, is probably referring to these lay usages and trying to convey to Indians that this tendency to categorize people and pursuits as high and low is not sanctioned by classical Indian thought.

In a rigorous sense, the terms *parā* and *aparā* have quite a different meaning than what is conveyed and understood by the terms “spiritual” and “material”. The categories implied by the “spiritual” and the “material” probably are not legitimate categories in Indian thought, but whatever is conveyed by these terms would fall entirely within the domain of the *aparā*.

The terms *parā* and *aparā* originally appear in the Mūṇḍakopaniṣad, which

belongs to the Atharvaveda. Almost at the very beginning of the upaniṣad the great householder, Mahāśāla Śaunaka, asks the great sage Aṅgirā about the one by knowing whom all is known: “*kasminnu bhagavo vijñātam bhavati*”. (I.1.3) Beginning his answer to this fundamental question of Śaunaka ṛṣi Aṅgirā says that those who know recommend two kinds of knowledge as worth knowing, the *parā* and the *aparā*: “*dve vidye veditavye iti na sma yadbrahmavido vadanti parā caivāparā*” (I.1.4). And immediately following this, ṛṣi Aṅgirā defines *aparā* and *parā* in these terms:

tatrāparā ṛgvedo yajurvedaḥ
sāmavedo'atharvavedaḥ śikṣā kalpo
vyākaraṇam niruktaṁ chando
jyotiṣamiti. atha parā yayā
tadaḥsaramadhigamyate. (I.1.5).

R̥gveda yajurveda, sāmaveda, and atharvaveda, as also śikṣā, kalpa, vyākaraṇa, nirukta, chandas and jyotiṣa are *aparā vidyā*. And, *parā* is the knowledge through which the unmanifest Brahman is known, of whom we shall speak below.

Thus all the four vedas and the six *vedāṅgas* are here counted as forming the domain of *aparā vidyā*. The vedas and *vedāṅgas* together, as is well known, are said to encompass all knowledge in the world, including all that is said about the un-sayable Brahman as well as whatever is known of the varied arts and crafts; and ṛṣi Aṅgirā says that all these belong to the *aparā*.

Śrī Ādiśaṅkarācārya, commenting on the upaniṣad, emphasizes that the definition of *aparā* above includes even the text of upaniṣad itself; the upaniṣads speak of and teach about the *parā*, but the upaniṣads themselves do not belong to the domain of the *parā*: “*upniṣadvedyākṣaraviṣayam hi vijñānamiha parā vidyēti prādhānyena vivakṣitam nopaniṣacchabdarāśih*”.

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya of course has taught that in order to achieve *mokṣa* one must give up all *karmas*, including the *karmas*

recommended in the vedas, and thus for him it is perhaps natural to emphasize that vedas and upaniṣads in themselves are part of the *aparā*, which must all be left behind in order to achieve *mokṣa*. But even those belonging to the Śrīvaiṣṇava school, for whom the undertaking of the *karmas* recommended in the vedas is an important part of the path to *mokṣa*, have no hesitation in saying that the vedas as the corpus of indirect knowledge of Brahman belong to the *aparā*, and it is the direct seeing of Brahman that constitutes *parā*. Thus, Raṅgarāmānuja explaining the above verse of the upaniṣads says:

*Aparā ... śadaṅgopetasasiraskasopa-
br̥hmaṇa vedas̥favanajanyam
pāroksajñānam ityarthah, parā yena
tadaḥsaramadhigamyate ādhikyena
gamyate aparokṣikriyata ityarthah.*

Aparā thus encompasses all thinking and action – all that happens, is performed, or is thought of within the manifest world is *aparā*. And therefore not only the pursuits of the peasant and the artisan, but also of the student of the vedas and the performer of the *vaidika* rituals and actions, and even the corpus of the vedas and upaniṣads itself, belong to the *aparā*. *Parā vidya* refers only to the direct seeing, the *pratyakṣa darśana*, of the unmanifest, undifferentiated one Brahman from whom the multiplicity of the manifest, differentiated world arises. But acquiring such *darśana* is in fact the same as achieving *mokṣa* and becoming one with Brahman; about the one who knows Brahman thus, the Mūṇḍakopaniṣad says: *sa yo ha vai tatparanam brahma veda brahmaiva bhavati ...* (III.2.9).

There is indeed a hierarchy of *parā* and *aparā*, but this hierarchy can have no implication for any of the human pursuits in the world, these all belong to the *aparā*. This, of course, does not prove that there is no hierarchy amongst people and pursuits in India, but only that such hierarchy is not based on anything as fundamental as the distinction between the manifest world and the unmanifest Brahman. The distinction

here is only between what the Mahābhārata calls Janārdana himself and what flows from Janārdana, and all that is in the world indeed flows from Janārdana: “*yogo jñānam tathā sāṅkhyam vidyā silpādi karma ca, vedāh śāstrāni vijñānametat sarvaṁ janārdanāt.*” (Anuśāsana 149.139).

The question of hierarchy in the social organization of human life in India has been made somewhat complex by the great amount of attention that has been paid to it by scholars and social reformers alike. The subject needs a more detailed treatment than was possible in Sri Dharampal's short essay. But Prof. Nelson's assertion that when “souls are at different stages in their transmigratory ascent towards *mokṣa*, the idea of hierarchy is unavoidable” seems rather simplistic. In fact, for the *mumukṣu* there are never any constraints of *varna*; individuals of all *varnas* are entitled to and are known to have achieved the direct *darśana* of Brahman which is *mokṣa*. The *bhakti* traditions of India are widely known to have asserted the entitlement of all *varnas* to *mokṣa*; and the great *jñānamārgi* Śrī Ādiśaṅkarācārya in his commentary on Brahmasūtra, recalling the great *jñānis* of the *sūdra varna* such as Vidura and Dharmavyādha, asserts that anyone who has achieved the *jñāna*, to whatever *varna* he may belong, cannot be denied the *phala* of the *jñāna*, which indeed is immediate direct *darśana* of Brahman:

*yeṣāṁ punaḥ pūrvakṛtasamkāravaśāt
viduradharmavyādhaprabhrtīnām
jñānotpattiḥ teṣāṁ na śakyate
phalaprāptiḥ pratiseḍdhum
jñānasyaikāntikaphalatvāt (I.3.38).*

The issue of hierarchy in the Indian social order of course needs much elaboration. We may, however, suggest that according to what we understand of India, it is not the hierarchy between different groups and pursuits that characterizes the Indian way of social organization, but their separate and distinctive identity. Such emphasis on distinctiveness of groups organized around different kinds of pursuits, or around

different localities and religious practices, does subject the individual to the discipline of the group, but it also imbues the group with a more or less unabridgeable sovereignty within the polity. We have discussed this characteristic of the Indian polity in some detail in an earlier essay in *Ayodhya and the Future India*, a 1993 compilation edited by one of the authors (JB). But, whether a polity organized around individuals or around sovereign groups is a better way of human organization is a question that shall have to be debated at some stage.

Finally, a few words about the question of compassionately interpreting Indian thought, which Sri Dharampal raises in the concluding sections of his essay. We feel that the term could have been avoided. In the context of Vedavyāsa's exposition of Indian thought in the purāṇas, the term does not convey much. Vedavyāsa does not interpret Indian thought, he conveys it to us. Almost the whole of the corpus of Indian thought, comprising the Vedas, Mahabhārata, brahmasūtra, and the purāṇas, comes to us through Vedavyāsa. His compassion thus permeates all Indian thought.

But we believe that compassion is indeed not a relevant category in the Indian way of thinking. In India important questions of life and society are not left to the morality or

ethics of the individual. What is emphasized in India, on the other hand, is clarity of intellect and discipline in thought and action, and it is believed that the order that flows from such clarity and discipline shall indeed be a *dhārmika* order in which all shall find a place and all shall be taken care of. This issue too needs much detailed exposition, and we discuss some aspects of it in one of our forthcoming publications, *Annam Bahu Purvīta: The Indian Discipline of Growing and Sharing Food in Plenty*. We may however mention that the concept of caring for all is of such central importance in the *dharmasammata* polity that a highly regarded *kalpa* text like *Āpastambadharmasūtra*, laying down the principles of *rājadharmā*, advises the king to arrange the polity such that:

*na cāsya viṣaye kṣudhā rogeṇa
himātapābhyam va vasidedabhāvād-
buddhipūrvam va kaścit. (2.25.11).*

Let no one suffer from hunger and disease or from extremes of heat and cold. No one in the country ought to suffer thus either because of general scarcity or because of specific design against him.

Such caring in India was never thought of as a matter of compassion or charity, but of *dharma*, the discipline of being human.