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

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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 siddhántas. One can raise questions about whether what he indicates as such siddhántas 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 siddhántas 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 Muṇḍakopaniṣad, which belongs to the Atharvaveda. Almost at the very beginning of the upaniṣad the great householder, Mahāśāla Śaunaka, asks the great sage Āṅgirā about the one by knowing whom all is known: “kasminnu bhagavo vijñātaṁ bhavati”. (I.1.3) Beginning his answer to this fundamental question of Śaunaka ṛṣi Āṅgirā says that those who know recommend two kinds of knowledge as worth knowing, the parā and the aparā: “dve vidyā veditavye iti na sma yadbrahmavido vadanti parā caiva parā” (I.1.4). And immediately following this, ṛṣi Āṅgirā defines aparā and parā in these terms:

\[ \text{tatrāparā ṛgvedo yajurvedaḥ} \\
\text{sāmavedo’tharvavedaḥ śिक्षा kalpo} \\
\text{vyākaranāṁ niruktāṁ chando} \\
\text{jyotiśamiti, atha parā yayā} \\
\text{tadakṣaramadhyamaye. (I.1.5).} \]

Ṛgveda yajurveda, sāmaveda, and atharvaveda, as also śīkṣā, 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 Āṅgirā 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: “upnisaḍvedyākṣaraśīram hi vijñānāmi parā vidyāy prādhānyena vivakṣitaṁ nopaniṣacchabdarṣaṁ”.

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 upanisads in themselves are part of the aparā, which must all be left behind in order to achieve mokṣa. But even those belonging to the Śrīvaśīṣya 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 ... sadangopetasiraskasapa- brhma na vedasvanajanyam pāroksajñānāh ityarthah, parā yena sadaksaramadhiṣyate adhikyena ganyate aparokṣātyāta 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 pravṛtya darsana, of the unmanifest, undifferentiated one Brahman from whom the multiplicity of the manifest, differentiated world arises. But acquiring such darsana is in fact the same as achieving mokṣa and becoming one with Brahman; about the one who knows Brahman thus, the Muṇḍakopaniṣad 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: “yogajñānam tathā sākhyam vidyā sipādi karma ca, vedāh śāstrāni viññāmannetar sarvam 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 varṇas are entitled to and are known to have achieved the direct darsana of Brahman which is mokṣa. The bhakti traditions of India are widely known to have asserted the entitlement of all varṇas to mokṣa; and the great jñānārgī Śrī Ādiśaṅkarācārya in his commentary on Brahmaśūtra, recalling the great jñānī of the śūdra 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 darsana of Brahman:

yeśām punah pārvaścāsanānta vada jñānānta vayaḥ sākhyam pratiṣedhakum jñānānta kāṇāntākhalataḥ (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 dharma 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 Purvā: 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 dharma-polity that a highly regarded kalpa text like *Apastambadharmasūtra*, laying down the principles of rājadharma, advises the king to arrange the polity such that:

\[
na cāsyā viśaye kṣudhā rogena himatāpābhyaṁ va ṃsiderābhadvād-buddhipūrvarn va kaścit. (2.25.11)
\]

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.