

An Analytical Reassessment of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha in the Context of Contemporary Society

Shruti Mishra^{1*}, Devhooi Mishra²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Sanskrit, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi – 221005

Email: shrutimishra0125p@gmail.com

²Research Scholar, Department of Dharma Agam, Faculty of Sanskrit Vidya Dharma Vigyan, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi – 221005

Email: devhootimishra.phil@gmail.com

***Corresponding Author:** Shruti Mishra, Research Scholar, Department of Sanskrit, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi – 221005

Email: shrutimishra0125p@gmail.com

*"The whole life-system of the Hindus is based upon the Purusharthas – Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha."
— Swami Vivekananda (1907)*

ABSTRACT

The present topic "An Analytical Reassessment of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha in the Context of Contemporary Society" analyzes the relevance of the four aims of human life (Purushartha Chatushtaya; Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha) as already implied in the Vedas, in relation to modern society. The Vedas are the foundational pillars of our Indian Sanatan Culture, upon which our traditions and customs are based even today. Our Vedic Knowledge tradition encompasses more than just spirituality or ritual practices; it broadens the pathways for the holistic development of every dimension of human life – personal desires, economic growth, ethical values and more. The concept of Purushartha Chatushtaya originates from Vedic texts. These four Purusharthas are the prescribed rules considered essential for balanced development of every human being. However, modern society, which gives greater importance to external worldly growth over internal development, has violated these rules in many ways. It now focuses mostly on Artha and Kama, using either (good way or bad). Under the influence of Westernization, the concept of Moksha has become limited to only a very limited group of individuals, even only to those who, while moving forward with modernity also progress in the direction of spirituality.

On the other hand, the term 'Dharma' in present times has been largely reduced to the concept of religious groups and people, spreading hatred and differences in the name of different religious beliefs and sects. As a result, the whole order of the Purushartha Chatushtaya has become disorganized.

Therefore, the objective of this research paper is to reinterpret the significance of the Purushartha Chatushtaya in the context of contemporary society – without compromising with modernity and its essential relevance will be re-established.

Keywords: Purushartha Chatushtaya, Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha.

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PurushandPuruṣārtha:-

The root of Indian culture has always been fundamentally based on Dharma (righteousness, moral order). Even globally, Dharma is regarded as the life force or soul of India. This is why the glory of Bharat (India) is found in its scripture: Shruti and Smriti. This Dharma-centric Bharat will always be enriched in history like a golden bird, and the entire responsibility of the nation's upliftment in the future rests in the hands of the people living here. The term "Purusha" (person) here does not denote a specific gender but represents the collective or universal meaning. Etymologically, "Purusha" means the subconscious being residing within the body, indicating the soul or inner self. (‘पुरुः पुरुषीत्वा पुरुषेते इत पुरुषः’). The term can also denote a human being, thus including both men and women.

"Purushartha" (human goals or efforts) etymologically means that which every human strives

An Analytical Reassessment of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha in the Context of Contemporary Society
for ("अथैतेप्राथम्येनैतदुक्ततत्पुरुषार्थः") Although living being has many desires, but scriptures

and Vedic texts identify four main Purusharthas: Dharma (righteousness), Artha (wealth), Kama (desire or pleasure), and Moksha (liberation). Every person either seeks all four or one to three of these goals, striving to attain them. It should be noted that only humans have the capacity to achieve these four Purusharthas. Beings in other forms (*yonis*) only experience the results of their past actions (good or bad karma) until they are granted a human body by the infinite grace of the Supreme. Unlike others, humans are not bound to merely live through life; they have the ability to create new virtuous acts through their efforts. This capacity is why God created the human body and intellect. As stated in the Bhagavata Purana, "God created the intellect, senses, mind, and life force for humans for meaning, material existence, self, and imagination."¹ Truly, the human body is very dear to the Supreme, as it alone serves as the instrument for the soul's reunion with God after wandering eternally. Thus, it is the person (Purusha) who is the means to achieve the fourfold human pursuits (Purusharthas).

- **Dharma: The Universal Proposition-**

The word "Dharma" is derived from the root "धृधाञ् धारणपोषणयोः"² with the suffix "man (मन्)," meaning to uphold, sustain, or nourish. Dharma refers to those specific principles or rules considered essential in our scriptures for the welfare and proper development of all humanity. These are universal laws that endure human society and the world together. In the Karna Parva of the Mahabharata, Sage Vyasa defines Dharma as: "They call it Dharma because it upholds Dharma, sustains the subjects. That which is conjoined with upholding is certainly Dharma"³. Thus, the term Dharma originates from "dhāraṇā," and whatever own the capacity to preserve is undoubtedly Dharma. Humans and animals share many similarities, with nearly similar needs like food, sleep, fear, and mating, all naturally present in both, but Dharma serves as the distinctive measure between them.

As stated in the Hitopadesha: "Food, sleep, fear, and mating—these are common to humans and animals. Dharma is their special distinction; without Dharma, humans are no different from animals."⁴ Dharma is crafted for humans, not animals. This is why attaining divine human body is considered fortunate, enabling promise of both worldly and another world's progress.

The Bhagavata Purana notes: "The human body is rare and short-lived for embodied beings; even rarer, I consider, is the sight of one dear to Vaikuntha."⁵ In the Rigveda, Dharma is mentioned as "ऋत" (ऋत्) denoting eternal laws mandatory for all humans and serving as vital

means for both spiritual and material upliftment. In contemporary society, the concept of Dharma has narrowed down; once renowned as eternal and ethical laws, it has shrunk to mere communities and religious sects and faiths. People of various groups and beliefs now view those of different faiths as enemies, rejecting all other rules to impose their own faith. While differing faiths might be acceptable since each person and intellect differs, deeming one's own devotion superior, accusing others' loyalties, and behaving illegally toward them, how is this justified? Leaving aside Dharma's true meaning, people cling to other interpretations. Dharma comprises social and spiritual rules grounding human practicality.

The Narada Purana states that "Whose days pass devoid of Dharma, that one, though breathing like a blacksmith's bellows, does not live"⁶. Sage Manu lists Dharma's ten characteristics in the Manusmriti: "Steadfastness, forgiveness, self-control, non-stealing, purity, sense restraint, intellect, knowledge, truthfulness, and non-anger. One should self-assess how many of these traits reside within."⁷

Manu declares the Veda, Smritis, righteous conduct, and one's conscience as direct marks of Dharma⁸. Vedic orders and Smriti-prescribed code of conduct represent supreme Dharma. "Conduct is the highest Dharma, as stated in the Shruti and Smritis; thus, a self-possessed twice-born should always adhere to it."⁹ Thus, For the soul's welfare, humans should ever uphold pure conduct.

- **Artha: -The Material Assets-**

In the four Purusharthas, the second is Artha, whose literal meaning is wealth, economic growth, and prosperity. These are the material resources by which a person completes their worldly journey without hindrance. Vedic texts consider Artha an extremely important means for fulfilling human needs, with scriptures ordering its accumulation in a dharmic manner. Dharma regulates the Artha Purushartha. Artha holds the maximum importance in the Grihastha Ashrama among the four Ashramas. Living an ideal, respectable, and meaningful life in the householder stage requires Artha essentially. Poverty is described as the greatest sorrow and misfortune in human life¹⁰. A poor person is judged inferior by society and lives forever without honor, often facing social rejection. The Vishnu Dharmottara Purana states: "Wealth brings friends; wealth brings relatives. He who has wealth is a man in the world; he who has wealth is a scholar."¹¹ Thus, alongside Dharma, the crucial need for dharmic Artha in sustaining life is undeniable. From Vedic times, Artha Purushartha has occupied a key place in social order, with agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade as primary sources of earning in the Rigvedic period, evidenced by numerous references¹². In contemporary society, Artha is considered essential: "Artha alone aids the proper observance of all duties."

Without Artha, neither Dharma nor Kama can be fulfilled, as

*per the Shruti*¹³. Proper achievement of Dharma also requires Artha as a means, but it

must align with Dharma. Wealth earned through Adharma, harming others, or causing suffering is sinful, leading to an auspicious end but downfall. Today, most pursue such gains, driven by greed for accumulation regardless of means, resulting in sin and degradation.

- **Kama:-The Worldly Life Pleasures**

A human is born on the earth bound by three types of

debts. These are:

- **Deva-rina (debt to gods):** This is the debt to deities and nature, sustained by elements like air, fire, and food provided by nature, repaid through yajnas, havans, worship of gods, and nature conservation.
- **Rishi-rina (debt to sages):** This is the debt to rishis and gurus, from whom Vedic knowledge like Vedas and Upanishads is received via tradition. It is repaid only through svadhyaya (self-study) of these scriptures in the guru's presence and service.
- **Pitri-rina (debt to ancestors):** The most crucial, this arises from parents and forefathers for breeding, upbringing, sanskaras, and lineage upliftment. Jyotisha attributes obstacles in progeny to pitri-dosha from neglecting pitri-karma in past or present lives, angering ancestors who hinder family growth. Unlike forgiving gods, displeased pitris punish without mercy. Sage Manu states that *"one bound by these debts should focus on moksha only after repaying them, else pursuing other paths lead to hell"*¹⁴. Having repaid the three debts, one should direct the mind to moksha. Serving moksha without repayment leads downward. *Repayment involves properly studying Vedas, producing righteous progeny, satisfying gods via yajnas, and ancestors via tarpana and shraddha, thus attaining moksha.*¹⁵ In modern society, these norms are vanishing, shaken by modernity, people violate lineage rules through inter-caste/inter-faith marriages, unethical relations driven by forbidden kama, and brahmacharya erosion, causing varna-sankara (mixing of castes) condemned in Sanatana Dharma. In The Bhagavad Gita (1.41-44) Arjuna was condemning the Mahabharat Battle because of this: *"Adharma corrupts women, leading to varna-sankara; such progeny fail to satisfy pitris via tarpana/shraddha, causing ancestral wrath, family downfall, destruction of eternal kuladharma / jatidharma, and hell for perpetrators."*¹⁶ To avoid this, one must pursue kama in dharmic way.

- **Moksha:-The Ultimate Liberation-**

The ultimate goal of Hindu philosophy, after fulfilling the threefold human aims - Dharma, Artha, and Kama is Moksha (liberation). Moksha is considered the highest purpose of human life, the final height of all scriptures such as the Vedas and Upanishads. It represents the liberation of the soul from the cycle of birth and death, where the soul reunites with the Supreme Being and attains eternal freedom and bliss, free from all suffering and bondage.

Humans fundamentally lived driven by two urges: seeking happiness and avoiding sorrow.

Everyone desires happiness and tries to avoid misery, which is why people get disturbed by adverse events and again rejoice over favorable situations. However, worldly pleasures and sorrows are temporary, and humans often fail to see that true lasting happiness does not exist in this material world. The Bhagavad Gita confirms this by *urging devotion to God beyond this impermanent and unhappy world.*¹⁷

Moksha is understood in Vedic and philosophical texts as the soul's supreme realization, where it perceives the entire universe as Brahman (ultimate reality) and gains complete freedom from all bonds. Human life is considered precious because it offers the rare opportunity to cut across maya (illusion) and realize one's true divine nature. The journey includes properly balancing the three aims of Dharma, Artha, and Kama before achieving Moksha.

Moksha is derived from the root "मोक्ष्मोचने" with prefix "उच्" literally means "to

release" or "to free," referring to liberation from attachment and delusion. It is the highest purushartha (human goal) because it leads to the dissolution of individual ego and merging with universal consciousness. Attaining Moksha requires self-realization, which is difficult as long as ego and negative qualities remain, but becomes natural when they are overcome. Importantly, Moksha transcends heavenly pleasures of Swarga or the sufferings of Naraka, which are temporary results of good or bad karma. The cycle of rebirth continues until one attains liberation.

Thus, Hindu philosophy teaches that after fulfilling Dharma, Artha, and Kama righteously, one should try hard for Moksha, the supreme spiritual goal of eternal freedom and bliss.

- **Contemporary Society and Shifted Priorities:-**

Time is constantly changing. The people, objects, circumstances, and needs that existed 25 to 30 centuries ago during the Vedic period have experienced a complete transformation. Human conditions, attire, thinking, and modes of action were totally different from today. Now, society is heavily influenced by Western culture. Where once society and individuals were centered on Dharma (righteousness), today they focus more

An Analytical Reassessment of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha in the Context of Contemporary Society
 on Artha (wealth) and Kama (desires). Dharma has become merely a tag of a sect or community. This shift has multiplied hatred, separation, discrimination, jealousy, and a sense of superiority among people. Individuals justify discrimination and sometimes commit heinous acts in the name of religion.

Regarding livelihood and desires, the present society has given more priority to Artha and Kama. Wealth is essential for living, but modern man accumulates it without concern for right or wrong, good or bad deeds. This greed destroys goodness, increases sinful tendencies, and leaves no room for spirituality. *The desire for wealth is endless; no matter how much one earns, it never feels enough. People spend their entire lives accumulating wealth but remain unsatisfied even in their last moments, leading to repeated rebirths without experiencing true peace or joy.* The Ishopanishad advises to *enjoy the world by renouncing greed.*¹⁸

Kama (desire) is the third and very important aim of life. It sustains creation and our sensory experiences, beginning from desire, transforming into thought, and then resolution. After forming a resolution, a person acts accordingly and faces the consequences, good or bad, binding them to the cycle of action and result. Kama is sacred and respected in the threefold aims but modern society has spoiled its concept by associating it simply with sensory pleasure without ethical considerations. This leads to moral decay and spiritual downfall. People acting under desire without discipline experience no lasting peace or eternal happiness, only worldly suffering until death. These purusharthas (life goals) must be followed in their prescribed order: Dharma first, then Artha, then Kama, to ultimately attain Moksha (liberation). This sequence and practice are eternal and universal, applicable in any era or society, ensuring that even in contemporary times a person can reach the highest goal.

• **Reinterpreting the Concept of Purushartha in Modern Contemporary Society :-**

Success in any task depends not on its quantity but on its quality. Today's world is so advanced and busy that people often neglect their spiritual progress. Including the principles of purushartha in daily life is not difficult; it only requires careful attention.

Righteous Action (Dharma): Dharma does not mean leaving family life and becoming a hermit. Every stage of life has its own duties. True dharma is to follow these duties without ignorance. We should act responsibly towards ourselves, our family, and society. Always strive for progress, but never at the cost of harming others.

Righteous Wealth (Artha): Wealth means what is necessary for living, both for ourselves and others. Our efforts should always be honest and ethical, without causing harm to anyone. Wealth earned through violence, wrongdoing, or by hurting others leads only to downfall and never helps in progress.

Desire and Energy (Kama): Kama is a form of power given by the divine to inspire positive actions and support family growth. Like electricity that can warm or cool when used properly but can be deadly if an error occurs, kama can lead to either progress or ruin depending on how it is controlled.

Ultimate Goal (Moksha): God has given humans the gift of human body and mind to free themselves from the endless cycle of life. If a person only pursues worldly desires through dharma, artha, and kama without spiritual effort, they remain trapped in countless rebirths. The highest human purpose is moksha - liberation. While fulfilling daily duties, one must sincerely study scriptures and strive for spiritual freedom.

• **Conclusion:-**

Purushartha is a timeless philosophy valuable to all people in every era. It helps one become truly human and opens the path to growth both in this world and beyond.

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- ¹ बुद्धिर्द्वय-मनु-प्राणानंजनानाम् असृजत्प्रभुः।
मात्रार्थं च भार्गव आत्मनेऽकल्पनाय च॥ (श्रीमद्भागवतः 10.87.2)
- ² ३.००११ (कौमुदीधातुः - १०९२)
- ³ धारणां मयतमत्याहुः धर्मो धारयत प्रजातुः।
यस्यां ारणसंयुक्तं मय इततनश्च्युः॥ (महाभारत कण्वपर्वः 3.21.41)
- ⁴ आहार-तनू-धर्म-मै-र्-नु-चसामान्यमेतत्पशुन्धनयराणाम्।
धर्मो तहेषामन्धकोतेशेषः धर्मेण हीनाः पशुन्धनसुः समानाः॥ (तहतोपदेश)
- ⁵ दुर्धर्मो भवानुषोढो देहनां क्षणभङ्गकः।
तत्रातपदुर्धर्ममन्येः कुण्ठतप्रयदशयनम्॥ (श्रीमद्भागवतः 11.2.29)
- ⁶ यस्य धर्मयतर्हाना ततदनायायानियानि च।
सुः शोहकारस्त्वैश्वर्यसन्तपनजीर्तनः॥ (नारदपुराण)
- ⁷ धृततुः क्षमादमोऽस्तेयं शौचात्मनि यतनगृहः।
धीतयं दद्यात्सर्वं तपो दशकं धर्मयक्ष्णम्॥ (मनुस्मृतः 6.92)
- ⁸ रूढः स्मृतः सदाचारस्वस्थचितप्रयमात्मनः।

एतच्चतुर्थधर्माहुः साक्षात्तमयस्यर्क्षणम्॥(मनुस्मृत-2/12)

9 आचारः परमोऽस्त्युक्तः स्मातयएच

तस्मादन्तस्मत्सदायुक्तोतनत्वंयादात्स्निजुः॥(मनुस्मृत-1.108)

10 "दासद्वयपरमदुःखम्" (चाणक्यनीततः अध्याय 6, श्लोक 3)

11 यस्यायस्यस्तमन्त्राण्यस्यायस्यस्तस्यवाङ्मयः॥

यस्यायः सपुमाल्लोकेयस्यायः सचपन्ति॥ (चाणक्यनीततः)

12 (ऋग्वेदः 1.52.11; 1.100.10; 1.160.5; 1.189.3; 3.49.1; 4.21.2 इत्यादः)

13 अर्थद्वयेऽर्षेणोक्तमयामव्यततः।

नक्ततेऽर्षेणैतैर्धर्मयकामातर्ततश्चतुः॥ (महाभारतशांतपर्व)

14 कृणातनत्रीण्यपाकृत्यमनोमोक्षेनर्षेयेत

अनपाकृत्यमोक्षेत्तुसेर्मानांजत्यधुः॥ (मनुस्मृत-6.35)

15 अधीत्यतन्त्रधर्मे दानुत्रांशोत्पाद्यधर्मयः।

इष्टं च शतकतोयज्ञैर्मनोमोक्षेनर्षेयेत्॥ (मनुस्मृतः 6.36)

16 अधमायद्रभमाकृष्णप्रदयन्तिकुर्नियुः।

िषुदुष्टासुराण्येयजायतेर्णयसंकरः॥

संकरो नरकायैर्कुर्वाणां कुस्यच।

पतन्ति तपतरो ह्येषां सुतपिदकतः। यादुः॥

दोषैरेतैः कुर्वाणां यंसङ्कराकैः।

उत्साद्यिजातधर्मायुः कुर्धमायश्च शतादुः॥

उत्सन्नकुर्धमायणां मनुष्याणां जनादयन।

नरकेतनयतः सोभतीत्यनुश्रुमा॥ (श्रीमद्भगवद्गीताः 1/41, 42, 43, 44)

17 अतनत्यमसुखं लोकतममप्राप्य भजस्व माम्॥ (श्रीमद्भगवद्गीताः 9.33)

18 "इशायास्तमदैसंयन्त्रकञ्च जगत्। तेन त्यक्तेन भुञ्जीतुः। मागृधुः कस्यन्तस्विनम्॥" (इशोपनिषत्ः 1)

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