

## ROLE OF *GURU* AS AN INTERPRETER OF DHARMA

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Dharma, a concept untranslatable to any other language of Homo sapiens, a concept which doesn't have any parallels in any other culture, is a unique combination of an ideal and praxis. Its long prevalence and sustenance to the changes of spacio-temporal as well as socio-political conditions proves its inner strength and the faith of the people in following it. This doesn't mean that it is a static set of conceptualization which continued as an archaic fossil. It was continuously debated, contested, negotiated and modified according to the requirements of spacio-temporal contexts.

The changed context of globalization where people from various languages and cultures traditions live together in the same space and similarly people from same language, culture and tradition live at varied places and yet connected through the available technological communication systems necessitates dharma to be understood, interpreted and contextualized to suit the contemporary lived experiences of not just Indians or Hindus but human beings in general. Since the concern is identified to be interpreting dharma according to the spacio-temporal context of lived experience, the question that pops up is - who can do that? Rather who can be considered to be capable of interpreting the dharma? This takes us to see who has done it in the tradition before. *Guru* is the one who bridged dharma with its practice; the code and the people; principles of living and people who follow it. The place of guru in interpreting dharma according to the context is invaluable.

Finding out a *guru*, who can interpret dharma and guide an individual in a right way - by linking ideal to the practical; theory to the action; cosmic to the mundane; metaphysical to the empirical; faith to the reason - is the problem that can resolve way of the social, moral, political being of the present world. Present generations are heterogeneous mixture of varied attitudes and aptitudes encompassed and controlled by the pace of technological developments. We have people who validate only reason, those who devote themselves to un-flickering faith, those who try to reason faith and others who trust reason faithfully - this heterogeneous mixture can be engaged only by a *guru* who is capable of interpreting the dharma to the context in an appropriate way.

## I

Before mapping various patterns of the concept of *guru* within Hindu tradition, it would be worthwhile to analyze the very conception of *guru* itself as a part of the larger conceptions of knowledge creation/discovery and dissemination. The conception of *guru* cannot have an independent development from its culture. Though all cultures may have a conception of *guru* or teacher and seeker - its notion

varies from culture to culture and also within the culture on the basis of spacio-temporal distinctions. Seen in this way, conception of *guru* is a heterogeneous and culturally varied one.

As noted above any exploration in the conception of *guru* has to be located within the discourse of the conception of knowledge and its dissemination along with to which the knowledge is being imparted. Analytically, the conception of *guru* assumes the existence of knowledge ( $jñāna$ ), and the presence of seeker (*śiṣya*), giver (*guru*) along with a methodology that the *guru* may follow to impart knowledge to the seeker. Primarily, the 'conception of knowledge', and 'seeker of knowledge' determine the conception of *guru*. Method that the *guru* follows would again be determined by both the conception of knowledge and seeker along with the competency of the *guru*.

Let us assume that the shifts in the conception of *guru* in the Hindu tradition are also largely dependent on the shifts in the conception of knowledge, seeker and method. There are at least six shifts that we can perceive within the Hindu tradition during *Vedic*, *Upaniṣadic*, *Dharmaśāstras*, *Epic*, *Purāṇic* and *tāntric* traditions. Literature of each of these traditions within Hinduism provides us required resources to explore the shifts in the conception of the *guru*. I am not assuming clear cut distinction between these traditions in terms of historicity of time, space and development of thought and life. Hinduism, interestingly, accommodated more than one of the above listed traditions in its fold in any given time of its history. For instance, in the present day India we may witness the practice of more than one tradition simultaneously. Further, it must be noted that the list of traditions mentioned is not exhaustive. There may be many more to add considering the vastness of the Hindu tradition which extends for almost 5000 years, if not more. In order to cope up with the limitations of space I am limiting myself to the above traditions only.

## II

“The Pan-Indian Sanskrit term *guru* has a cluster of meanings with significance beyond that of English translation, rightly observes Joel Mlecko (2015:33). Etymologically, ‘*gu*’ means ignorance and ‘*ru*’ means dispeller; thus *guru* is a dispeller of all kinds of ignorance. There is no exact counterpart in Western

culture for *guru*, as observed by Mlecko, who in Indian tradition means ‘a teacher, Counsellor, father-image, mature ideal, hero, source of strength, even divinity integrated into one personality’ (2015:34). Mlecko, further adds, ‘Primarily the *guru* is the personal teacher of spirituality that is, of the basic, ultimate values perceived within the Hindu tradition - *values of which he possesses not only of intellectual knowledge but also of experiential knowledge*. That is how *guru* holds the knowledge not only of the ideal but also how to practice the ideal. ‘In early Hinduism, he was a vital factor in imparting *Vedic* knowledge, in later thought the *guru* became the visible embodiment of truth and in some cases worshipped as an incarnate deity” (2015:34). Such is the significance of *guru* in Hinduism.

The quest during *Vedic* tradition is of spiritual in nature. The process and outcome of the spiritual enquiry is transmitted orally from *guru* to *sisya*. As the knowledge during this period is spiritual, *guru* in *Rigveda* (IV, 5:6) is described as the source and inspiration of the knowledge of self; and in *Yajurveda* (VII, 27) as the one who blesses and enhances the seeker’s spiritual life. Since the knowledge is to be transmitted orally the *guru* is indispensable as the *Vedic* recitation involves using proper accent and pronunciation.

Unlike *Vedas*, which have scattered references, *Upaniṣads* are explicit with regard to the place of *guru* in knowledge acquisition. For *Upaniṣadic* tradition, education is not an end itself, but a means to the attainment of sacred knowledge or knowledge of ultimate reality. *Āchāndogya Upaniṣad* informs us that only by the knowledge received direct from the *guru* does one attains the most beneficent truth (IV, 4, 3). Since the ultimate reality is subtler than the subtle, *Katha Upaniṣad* states (I, 2 and 8) knowledge of it has to be taught by the “one who knows Him as himself”. In this way, during *Upaniṣadic* tradition ultimate reality is conceived to be subtler than subtle and its knowledge is possible only through a qualified and able *guru*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, self-study was disapproved by *Upaniṣads*. The word *Upaniṣad* itself as noted by Joel Mlecko (1982:35) supplies an important clue, for it literally means ‘sitting down nearby (the teacher)’. *Āchāndogya Upaniṣad* informs us of *Satyakama* who after gaining knowledge from fire, bull, swan and bird came to his *guru*, who marvels at the knowledge of *Satyakama* and enquires about the *guru* of the presently possessed knowledge. *Satyakama* replies that ‘I was taught by others than a *guru*. But I am told by learned people that

As pointed out by Mlecko, *guru* and disciple relation is one of spiritual reciprocity and mutual furtherance, where *guru* provides guidance and knowledge on the spiritual path and the *sisya* reciprocates with obedience and devotion (1982;37). *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (IV 14,1) says “We can give you the knowledge, even the knowledge of Atman but only the teacher can show you the way” which informs us of the significance of the place of *guru* on equal pedestal with gods, if not above. From the above discussion one can conclude that during the *Upaniṣadic* tradition, as rightly observed by Mlecko, function of the *guru* is not only to ‘intellectually and verbally explain the scripture, its letter and spirit’ but also to teach ‘by his life, daily acts, causal words, silence’ and to ‘oversee the *śiṣya*’s health, sleep, diet, the company he keeps and the places he visits’. To be near the *guru*, to humbly and reverently serve and obey him is to find to know and to experience the ‘way’” (1982; 37).

#### ***Dharmaśāstras - Guru as God - Ethical perspective***

The concept of *guru* in the tradition of *Dharmaśāstras* (Ethical path of *Guru*, *Guru* as teacher of *niti*) diverges from that of *Upaniṣadic* one as the concern of *Dharmaśāstras* was primarily to expound ethical conduct. Distinction was drawn between teacher who taught at free of cost and the one who was paid for his teaching. *Dharmaśāstras* while making this distinction names the former to be *Ācārya* and the later *Upādhyaya*. *Ācārya*, according to Manu, teaches the *Veda* with its *Kalpasutras* and *Upaniṣadas* for free; whereas *Upādhyaya* teaches only a portion of *Veda* for his livelihood by being paid. *Ācārya* was placed at a higher pedestal in this order, and ‘paid teacher’ and the ‘paying student’ were unqualified to participate in *Śrauta* rites. In this way qualities of sacrifice, devotion and disinterested approach to material wealth were considered to be essential elements of *guru* in *Dharmaśāstras*. Further, unlike *Upaniṣadic* tradition *Dharmaśāstras* place the *ācārya* along with mother and father on equal footing with god. (*Vishnu Dharmaśāstras* XXXII, 1-2; Manu *Dharmaśāstras* II, 227-37). For instance, *Āpastambha* treatise presents *guru* to be holding a similar position to that of a deity at a sacrifice and states that ‘the *śiṣya* shall approach his teacher with the same reverence as a deity by being attentive and

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knowledge which has been learned from a teacher best helps one to attain his end.’ (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, IV, 9,2-3).

eagerly listening to his words' (*Āpastambhasutra* 1,2,6,13). *Dharmaśāstras* in this way elevate the position of *guru* to that of a god on the basis of his practices and ethical behavior.

In the *Epic tradition*, the conception of *guru* diverges further from that of Vedic, *Upaniṣadic* and *Dharmaśāstras* traditions. The divergence is based largely on the shifts in the conception of knowledge and the way of realizing it. As observed rightly by Mlecko, 'in the epic literature the human personality holds the center of interest and purely divine element is subsidiary. The *Vedic Samhitās* praise and propitiate the gods; major portions of the *Upaniṣadas* extol and delineate the all pervading formless *Brahman*. On the other hand, the epics are homocentric. They speak of men and their greatness and of Gods who have taken human form (*avatāra*) and who, in fact, are often servants of men. Though incarnations of the Lord Rāma and Krishna are portrayed as more human than divine' (1982, p.42-43). In a similar way we find a shift from religious knowledge to religious experience; knowledge of abstract reality to *bhakti* in the epic traditions which necessitates the divergence in the conception of *guru* from that of previous times. The shift is also from Vedic memorization and study to a more popular religiosity that has enhanced the significance of teacher while limiting the importance of priest, scripture and even gods. *Mahābhārata* (chapter-IV of the *Sanat sugatiya*) while stressing the role of *guru* states; But the birth obtained from the preceptor (*guru*) that verily is true, and likewise immortal. He perfects (one), giving (one) immortality. Recognizing what he has done (for one), one should not injure him. The disciple should always make obeisance to the preceptor; and, free from heedlessness, should always desire sacred instruction. On a similar note in the *Gītā* we find Lord Krishna who is extolled as *Jagadguru* points to the human teachers and states; 'Those who themselves have seen the Truth can be thy teachers of wisdom. Ask from them, bow unto them, be unto them a servant' (IV, 34).

### ***Purāṇic Tradition - Guru as the preceptor of Truth***

The humanizing tendency of epics extends its presence even into the *purāṇic* tradition and consequently enriches the conception of *guru*. Ultimate reality during the *purāṇic* age was understood in terms of possessing the personality of recognizable human attributes. The *purāṇic* 'Reality' is more of theistic in nature and homocentric

in conception which permeated Hindu consciousness as expressed in everyday religious and aesthetic life of the people. As observed by RC Hazra, the stature of guru grown immensely from that of previous times; The *Br̥hatnāradiya Purāṇa* says that there is no truth (*taṭṭva*) higher than the preceptor (the *guru*). This high idea about the preceptor is perhaps one of the reasons why he is found to play an important part in the *Purāṇic* religious rites. (1940:262)

The devotional attitude towards the personal deity is shared by the guru in some of the *purāṇas*. The *guru* as pointed out by Mlecko (1982; 44), “is often identified with the highest deity of the sect. In the *Varāha Purāṇa* (IC) a devotee willing to have *dikṣā* (initiation) is to identify his *guru* with *Vishnu* and honor the spiritual preceptor accordingly. Similarly, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* teaches that the *guru* is to be regarded as the deity (XI, 3) and worshipped (X, 86), for *mokṣa* (liberation) is attained only under the guidance of a *guru*. This *guru*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* counsels, must know the *Vedas* well, worship Krishna (XI, 3, 21), and be in control of all passions (XI, 10, 5)”.

#### ***Tāntric* Tradition: *Guru* himself is the highest reality**

The indispensability of the place of *guru* becomes more prominent in the *tāntric* tradition. The conception of *guru* not only diverges from the earlier conceptions, but also extends itself widely in the *tāntric* tradition. Since *tantra* is understood to be as pointed out by Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta (1962; 88) as secret of secrets (*guhya-guhyam*) there is no other way of being initiated into it, save the practical help of the *guru*. *Guru* is at the center of the *tantric* tradition. Basing on the abilities of the teacher and the kind of qualities that are to be promoted in the student, *guru* in *tāntric* tradition is classified in a six-fold way (*Kulārṇavatāntra*) as *preraka*, *sućaka*, *vāćaka*, *darśaka*, *śikṣaka* and *bodhaka*.<sup>2</sup> The *tāntric guru* is not just a teacher

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<sup>2</sup> *Preraka*, who stimulates interest in *sādhana*, the method of spiritual practice, by drawing attention to its beneficent results; *sućaka*, who opens the eye of the seeker to the *sādhana* and its objective; *vāćaka*, who explains the method and the goal; *darśaka*, who shows them in convincing detail; *śikṣaka*, who teaches step by step the discipline and details of the ritual; and finally the *bodhaka*, who endows the aspirant with the necessary understanding of mind and illuminates his being with his own spiritual light.

or a learned man, but someone who has attained and himself is the highest reality. Dasgupta while explicating the place of *guru* observes, “in almost all the *tantras* the *guru* is always praised in superlative terms and is declared to be the highest reality itself” (1962,88). *Kulārṇavatāntra* provides the best description of *guru* in one’s life by stating that *guru* is the father, mother and god himself (XII,49). Commentary available on this verse delineates the significance of *guru* in the best possible way. The *guru* is the mother who carries the seeker in the womb of his consciousness before he gives him birth into the life of the Spirit. The *guru* is the father who tends to the growth and welfare of the initiate in the difficult Path. The *guru* embodies the Lord for it is through the person of the *guru* that He manifests Himself to the discipline and reaches to him his saving Grace. (Pandit; 1969; p.21)

Cutting across the conceptions of *guru* available in various Hindu traditions explicated in terms of his relation with larger domain of knowledge conception and dissemination - there is another pattern of *guru* that can be mapped by looking at the ‘functions of *guru*’. The functions of *guru* changed according to the demands of the society, state, culture and often elated his role. I am not here trying to argue for contradiction or opposition between the two conceptions of *guru*; one as a part of larger paradigm of knowledge and other as understood in terms of his functions. These two conceptions are complimentary and addressed the needs of the community equally.

When we map the concept of *guru* in Hindu tradition in terms of his functions, we understand that teaching or imparting the knowledge is only one of the functions that gurus have performed. However, *guru* often had gone beyond imparting knowledge to a wider scope of counseling people on ethical, social, political, religious and spiritual matters. In this way, we had *gurus*, those who guided rulers (*rāja gurus*) on social, political, intellectual and ethical issues; those who lived in the forests (*vānaprastha*) but helped people by clarifying doubts regarding the *dhārmic* practices when approached (*Rāma* in *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Pāṇḍavas* in *Mahābhārata* during their forest life met *ṛṣis* who were proficient in *dharma* and had discourses with them); and those who resurrected Hindu *dhārmic* tradition on the basis of their interpretations of *Vedas* and established *dhārmic* orders (three *Ācāryas* - Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva of *Vedāntic* tradition are the best examples of this).

In the above way, conception of guru transcended the role of mere knowledge dissemination and percolated into larger domains of political, social, spiritual and ethical guidance/counseling. This development is not a segregated one, rather an integrated and holistic one. The significant role of *guru* has grown in all the domains of life in an organic and integrated way. If we widen our understanding of the conception of *guru* beyond the paradigm of knowledge dissemination to the other functions that he is endowed with and examine the patterns of functions on a closer scrutiny one significant aspect that comes forth is *guru*'s role as an interpreter'; interpreter of what is right or wrong - ethically, politically, socially and spiritually. This role as an interpreter of dharma (whether it be *rājadharmā* or *nyāyadharmā* etc.) has deepened and widened the place of *guru* into every sphere of human life. This widening and deepening demanded varied versatility on the part of *guru*. *Guru* has to provide solutions to all kinds of conflicts of human life. For this *guru* need to be equipped with dharma; as dharma in its holistic perspective considered to be the 'way of life', *dhārmic* way of life was considered to be the appropriate way of leading life. To interpret and analyze every day conflicts of social, political, spiritual, ethical aspects of life in the light of dharma, the *guru* needed to be equipped with a proper holistic knowledge and understanding of dharma.

This wider conception of *guru* as the interpreter of dharma has continued its influence in the classical as well as in the modern Indian traditions. Even after the break in the traditional knowledge paradigm that was caused by colonial intervention, which has imposed Western system of education paralyzing the traditional Hindu system, the need for *guru* as the interpreter still proves its relevance.

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