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Consciousness-Based Human Goals: *Puruṣārthas* in Critique of the UN Sustainable Development Goals

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***Sārāṁśa* (Abstract):**

This paper operates in the field of Consciousness Studies applied to development, asking whether the ontology which accepts the primacy of Consciousness can serve as the basis of universal human goals. It argues that such a basis already exists in the Bhāratīya knowledge tradition through the four *Puruṣārthas* (the ultimate goals of human existence) - *dharma* (that which upholds and sustains), *artha* (means or prosperity aligned with *dharma*), *kāma* (fulfilment in harmony with life), and *mokṣa* (freedom from bondage). *Puruṣa*, consciousness that animates the being, is the subject; *puruṣārthas* are its aims. When goals are rooted in consciousness, continuity and balance arise naturally. Sustainability then becomes a minor residue, a mere speck of dust within the sovereignty of *dharma*. By contrast, the United Nations' SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) are limited in research and vision, blind to civilizational frameworks, rarely subjected to open public *samvāda* (critical dialogue), and typically emerge from high level meetings for direct implementation. In practice, they function as policing and data collection regimes that channel money and attention along predefined tracks, with little alignment to the ontological foundations of human life. On the other hand, the *puruṣārthas* framework has in-built checks and balance for fostering a society where daily discharge of our obligations towards sustainable development is not an exceptional achievement but the natural outcome of a life well-supported by its institutional environment.

Keywords: *Puruṣārthas*, Consciousness (*Puruṣa*), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), *Sanātana Dharma*, Civilizational Frameworks, *pañca-mahāyajñas*, *pañca ṛṇas*

VIŚAYA: THE SUBJECT MATTER

अथातो पुरुषार्थजिज्ञासा ॥

Athāto Puruṣārtha-jijñāsā

"Now, therefore, the inquiry into the *puruṣārthas*."

The subject of this article is an inquiry into the *puruṣārthas*, the fundamental aims of human life. This is not a novel pursuit; it is the timeless, intrinsic pursuit of human existence itself. This inquiry is *sanātana* (eternal), sustaining itself across generations through diverse textual traditions, from *śruti* and *smṛti*, *purāṇa* and *itihāsa*, to *darśana* and regional wisdom literature like the *Tirukkuraḷ*. That which sustains the beings and their means in this pursuit of the *arthas* of *puruṣa* is *sanātana dharma*.

Before turning to the subject itself, it is useful to outline, in brief, a classical Bhāratīya understanding of life. This forms the basis for the *puruṣārthas*, the aims or consciousness-based goals (CBG) of human existence.

At the heart of Bhāratīya philosophical thought is a recognition so simple that it is easy to miss it: “*that within every living being, there is something that witnesses*”. Not the mind, which wanders. Not the body, which changes. Not even the emotions, which rise and fall like weather. There is, behind all of these, an awareness - steady, silent, unchanged by whatever passes through it. This is *puruṣa*. It is not a god sitting somewhere in the sky, nor a soul that needs saving. It is the conscious principle itself: pure, self-luminous, without beginning or end. When you observe your own anger arising and say "I noticed I was angry," the anger belongs to the mind. The one who noticed is *puruṣa*. It does not act, does not desire, does not suffer. It simply is, and its mere presence is what makes all experience possible.

Alongside *puruṣa* stands *prakṛti*: primordial nature, the vast field of everything that moves, changes, grows, and dissolves. *Prakṛti* is not inert matter in the modern sense. It is dynamic, intelligent, and generative, composed of three fundamental qualities: *sattva* (clarity and harmony), *rajas* (activity and striving), and *tamas* (inertia and rest). From this primordial nature, everything that constitutes a human being unfolds in sequence: cosmic intelligence (*mahat*), the sense of individuality (*ahamkāra*), the coordinating mind (*manas*), the faculties of perception and action, the subtle elements underlying the senses, and finally the gross physical body made of earth, water, fire, air, and space. This entire column, from the subtlest thought to the densest bone, is *prakṛti*. *Puruṣa* is none of it, and yet nothing in *prakṛti* comes alive without *puruṣa's* presence.

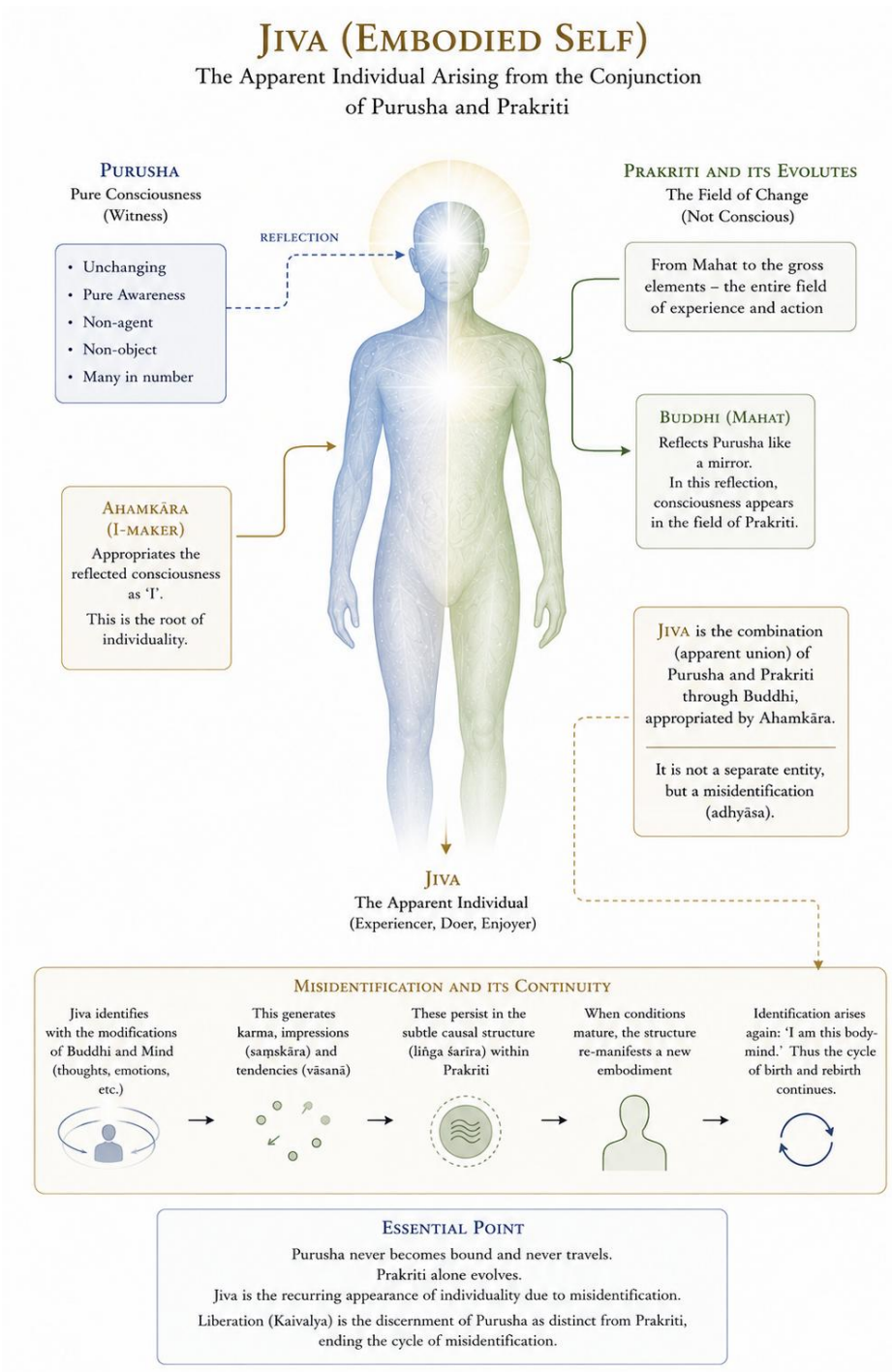


Fig 1: Ontological Structure of *Jiva: Puruṣa, Prakṛti*, and Misidentification
(Source: AI-generated illustration created using ChatGPT (OpenAI) based on author prompt)

The relationship between the two is something like light and a mirror. *Puruṣa* is the light. *Mahat*, the first and most refined evolute of *prakṛti*, is the mirror: being the most *sattvic* and transparent of all evolutes, it alone is capable of receiving and reflecting the light of consciousness. The denser evolutes that follow, from *ahamkāra* downward through mind, senses, and the physical elements, are progressively less transparent, progressively further from that pure reflection. The world we experience is what this reflected light, passing through all those layers, finally produces. This is also why *viveka*, the discriminative capacity of *buddhi* (the individual form of *mahat*), is the very instrument of liberation. The mirror that caused the confusion of *puruṣa* with *prakṛti* is also the mirror that, when sufficiently refined and still, can recognise that the reflection was never the light itself. Liberation is not the destruction of the mirror. It is the mirror becoming clear enough to see what it has been reflecting all along.

The *jīva* (sentient being) is what arises from this meeting. When the light of *puruṣa* falls upon *mahat* and the process of individuation through *ahamkāra* takes hold, a living, experiencing self is born: consciousness appearing as a particular being, with a specific body, a specific history, specific desires and fears and capacities. The *jīva* is neither pure consciousness alone nor mere matter alone. It is the two in intimate, complex relationship. It is you and I as we actually are: aware, embodied, seeking, sometimes confused, occasionally luminous. *Puruṣa* in its transcendent purity seeks nothing. The *jīva*, however, situated between consciousness and matter, moves through four fundamental orientations: *dharma* as order and rightness, *artha* as sustenance and material stability, *kāma* as fulfilment and desire, and *mokṣa* as freedom. These are not arbitrary goals but expressions of the different dimensions of human life as it unfolds within this dual structure. They belong to the *jīva*: to the embodied, seeking, living Self.

And the *jīva* does not arrive at this seeking fresh, without history. This is where the Bhāratīya understanding of continuity of life becomes essential. Life, in this framework, is not a single biographical arc from birth to death. The *jīva* carries its history across lifetimes in the form of *samskāras*: impressions accumulated through thought, action, and intention, which shape the tendencies, gifts, and struggles of each successive embodiment. The law of *karma* ensures that no effort is wasted and no harm goes unaccounted for, not as punishment, but as a principle of moral coherence in a universe that is fundamentally ordered. What was not completed in one life persists as a seed in the next. What was understood deeply becomes natural capacity. What was avoided must eventually be faced. Life is thus a long, patient, spiral movement, not a line moving only forward, and not a circle going nowhere, but a *jīva* gradually working its way toward the recognition that it was never, in truth, separate from the *puruṣa* in whose light it has always lived. That recognition, when it comes fully, is *mokṣa*: not an escape from the world, but the end of confusion about what one is.

While countless global events unfold, great individuals emerge and depart, and innumerable problems and solutions are proposed, a fundamental question persists: how does any of this serve the individual? This perspective is not selfish but rather a form of reverse engineering. A child drinks milk not from instruction, but from the innate intelligence of survival compelled

by hunger. Life is learned from within, guided by an intelligence inherent to being, with external information serving a supplementary role.

This innate intelligence is not exclusive to humans. The *Durga Saptaśatī* explains that all living beings possess a form of knowledge oriented toward the objects of their senses:

*jñānam asti samastasya jantor viṣaya-gocare | viṣayāś ca mahābhāga yāti caivam
pṛthak pṛthak || 1.47 ||*

"O greatly blessed one, all living beings possess knowledge within the range of their sensory perception; yet these objects are perceived differently by each of them" (*Durga Saptaśatī*, 1.47)

The text further emphasises the universality of this knowing capacity:

*jñānino manujāḥ satyam kiṃ nu te na hi kevalam | yato hi jñāninaḥ sarve paśu-pakṣi-
mṛgādayaḥ || 1.49 ||*

"It is true that human beings are knowledgeable, but they are not the only ones; indeed, all beasts, birds, deer, and other animals also possess knowledge" (*Durga Saptaśatī*, 1.49)

*jñānaṃ ca tan manuṣyāṇāṃ yat teṣāṃ mṛga-pakṣiṇāṃ | manuṣyāṇāṃ ca yat teṣāṃ
tulyam anyat tathobhayoḥ || 1.50 ||*

"The knowing capacity of humans and that of these creatures is essentially alike, and in other respects as well it remains comparable for both" (*Durga Saptaśatī*, 1.50)

This establishes an ontology for the *puruṣārthas* rooted in a universal intelligence that creates, sustains, and dissolves the world. While this intelligence is interconnected and, in an absolute sense, non-dual (*advaita*), it is also manifest discretely across all beings and objects. Consequently, when formulating policies or plans, this understanding demands profound humility and respect for all life, countering the modern tendency to view beings merely as objects for satisfying human needs. The goal is to acknowledge and perceive life as a whole: a vast, intelligent system of which we are a part. As a part of something so immense, one does not steer the whole but rather seeks to align with it.

This alignment is the essence of consciousness-based goals. This innate intelligence functions as a universal compass, guiding one's life. The role of a king, and by extension any institution of governance, is to create the conditions necessary for this intelligence to express itself optimally.

Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa captures this in the *Bhagavad Gītā* through a distinction that is foundational to everything that follows:

idaṁ śarīraṁ kaunteya kṣetram ity abhidhīyate | etad yo vetti taṁ prāhuḥ kṣetrajña iti tadvidah || 13.2 ||

"This body, O Kaunteya, is called the field (*kṣetra*). One who knows it is called the knower of the field (*kṣetrajña*) by the wise" (*Bhagavad Gītā*, 13.2)

The field is *prakṛti*. The knower is *puruṣa*. And it is the *jīva*, the embodied being standing at the meeting point of the two, for whom the aims of life become meaningful. The human body is therefore the primary instrument for pursuing the four *puruṣārthas*, a principle affirmed in the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*:

dharmārtha-kāma-mokṣāṇāṁ sādhanam mānavam śarīram |

"The human body is the instrument for the pursuit of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*." (*Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*, Aṣṭamollāsa, v. 139)

In contrast, modern discourse on sustainable development often claims to articulate universal human goals. The *Our Common Future* report (1987) by *World Commission on Environment and Development* aimed to transcend cultural barriers to create a unanimous global perspective. However, such attempts risk constructing a new "religion of development" that, while claiming universality, overlooks living civilisational frameworks like *dharma* and the *puruṣārthas*.

Bhārat, a continuous civilisation of 1.4 billion people, has always had *dharma* as the central pillar sustaining human aspiration. The *puruṣārthas* have been ceaselessly discussed, debated, and reinterpreted through *śruti*, *smṛti*, *itihāsa*, *purāṇa*, dramas, sculptures, folklore, and family traditions: an unbroken national dialogue (*mahāsamvāda*). This living heritage is frequently ignored in global discourses that impose frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Why should concepts such as *dharma*, *nīti* (as explored in the *Vidura-nīti*, *Śukra-nīti*, *Cāṇakya-nīti*), the *pañca-mahāyajñas*, or texts like the *Tirukkural* be excluded from discussions on sustainable development? If sustainability is about that which sustains, then surely it is *dharma*, the very principle of sustenance, that has upheld this civilisation. The *Mahābhārata* defines this relationship plainly:

dhāraṇāt dharmam ity āhuḥ dharmo dhārayate prajāḥ |

"*Dharma* is called so because of *dhāraṇā*, meaning to sustain. It is *dharma* that upholds and sustains the people." (*Mahābhārata*, 8.49.50)

Given this, *dharma* must be central to any authentic discourse on the planet's flourishing. This foundational understanding leads directly to the *saṁśaya* (doubt), which will explore a critical question: why does *dharma* not find its rightful place in the contemporary discourse of policymaking?

SAṂŚAYA: DOUBT/INQUIRY

Now the *saṁśaya* arises, the central doubt that compels this inquiry. It is not presented here as an accusation against global leaders or policymakers, nor as an attempt to read their motivations. At best, one may make an *anumāna*, an inference, about the reasons why certain frameworks emerge and others do not. What is offered here instead is an invitation to think: to place the *puruṣārthas* alongside the SDGs, and to ask honestly why there was a felt need to articulate universal human goals afresh, when living traditions have carried such frameworks for millennia. What was found insufficient? And what, in the process of constructing the new, was left behind?

For clarity, and to avoid mixing distinct questions, the *saṁśaya* is unfolded in a series of related doubts.

1. Universality and Particularity

The Brundtland Report opens with the mandate for "a global agenda for change" (WCED, 1987, p. 5). From the very first page, the emphasis is global: global goals, global indicators, a global framework. The SDGs carry this further, seventeen goals intended to apply with equal force to every nation, every culture, every community on earth.

But what does *global* actually mean? Hunger is not an abstraction. It is felt in a particular body, in a particular village, shaped by a particular ecology, a particular history of land use, a particular pattern of monsoon or drought. To set one uniform framework of goals for all of humanity presumes a universality that may, in practice, paper over exactly the particularities that matter most.

The *puruṣārtha* tradition offers a different understanding of how universality and particularity relate. Consider first the physical world. The same laws of thermodynamics govern a fire in a kitchen in Tamil Nadu and a furnace in northern Finland. The same principles of ecology determine how a forest in the Amazon and a forest in the Western Ghats sustain themselves, even though the species, the soils, and the rainfall patterns are entirely different. The laws are universal; their expression is always local, always particular, always responsive to context. This is not a contradiction. It is precisely how natural order works.

Ṛta is the Vedic name for this universal ordering principle. It is not a religious concept in the sectarian sense. It is the recognition that existence is not random, that the cosmos operates according to consistent, intelligible patterns: in the movement of celestial bodies, in the cycling of seasons, in the processes of growth and decay, in the inner rhythms of living beings. Long before the vocabulary of science, *rta* named what science has since confirmed: that the universe is lawful, that its processes are ordered, and that this order is not imposed from outside but is intrinsic to the nature of things.

Dharma is what *ṛta* looks like when it reaches human life. If *ṛta* is the underlying law, *dharma* is its application, the principle of right functioning in the specific conditions of a particular being, a particular relationship, a particular moment. Just as the same ecological law that governs a forest produces different trees in different soils, the same *dharma* that underlies all human life produces different duties and obligations in different roles and stages of life. A king's *svadharma* (one's own duties) differs from a farmer's; an elder's differs from a student's. This is not inconsistency. It is the same sustaining principle finding contextually appropriate expression. The universal does not erase these differences. It moves through them. Universality, in this understanding, is not uniformity. It is the same order finding different and appropriate expression in every particular life.

From this standpoint, what is truly universal is neither the body nor the measurable conditions of embodied existence. The body is a temporary instrument, the *kṣetra*, the field, through which *karmas* are worked out and the *puruṣārthas* pursued. What persists across all bodies, all cultures, all conditions is the *jīva*: the living, conscious Self that takes birth, accumulates experience, and carries the impressions of one life into the next. The *Bhagavad Gītā* speaks to this directly:

*vāsāmsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya navāni grhṇāti naro 'parāṇi | tathā śarīrāṇi vihāya
jīrṇāny anyāni samyāti navāni dehī ||*

"Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and takes up new ones, so the embodied Self casts off worn-out bodies and enters into others that are new." (*Bhagavad Gītā*, 2.22).

Life, in this view, is not a single trajectory from birth to death. It is a long, continuous stream of existence, in which beings work out their *karmas*, fulfil their *svadharma*, and gradually discharge the web of obligations and debts, the *pañca ṛṇas*, that bind them to the world. To reduce this continuity to a fixed set of linear, progressive targets is not only a simplification; it is a fundamental misapprehension of what a human life is. True development is not merely the elimination of hunger or poverty, urgent as those aims are. It is the capacity to live in such a way that, when this embodiment ends, one is free to move forward without accumulating further bondage. That freedom, that lightness of being, is development in its deepest sense.

The doubt, therefore, is not about universality as a value. The *puruṣārtha* tradition has always recognised universals: *ṛta* as the lawful order intrinsic to existence, *dharma* as its expression in human life, and the *jīva* as the conscious being present across all conditions and all lifetimes. The doubt is about universalisation without universals, the projection of particular historical and cultural assumptions as if they were self-evident global truths, and the consequent exclusion of living traditions that have carried their own carefully elaborated accounts of what it means to be human.

2. Knowledge Systems

Every framework of goals rests on a framework of knowledge. This is not a peripheral observation. It goes to the heart of the matter. Before asking what the SDGs say, it is worth asking what kind of knowledge was admitted into the room when they were being constructed, and by what criteria that knowledge was judged to be valid.

This is not a question unique to development discourse. Knowledge is never produced in a vacuum. Scientific communities operate within shared assumptions about what counts as a legitimate question and a legitimate answer. These assumptions shift not simply because evidence accumulates but because the frameworks through which evidence is interpreted eventually break under their own weight. The history of ideas shows repeatedly that methodological pluralism, the willingness to allow multiple frameworks to contest one another, has historically been more productive than the early closure of inquiry around a single authoritative method. The systematic exclusion of certain ways of knowing, not because they are demonstrably wrong but because they do not conform to the dominant framework, is a recognised problem in the philosophy of knowledge. It matters for the quality and completeness of what is ultimately produced.

With that in mind, consider what *vidyā*, the Sanskrit term for knowledge, actually means. It does not mean information, and it does not mean technical skill, though it encompasses both. The oldest formulation is *sā vidyā yā vimuktaye*: knowledge is that which liberates. This is a remarkably precise epistemological claim. It does not say that knowledge is that which is empirically verified, or that which is instrumentally useful, or that which can be formalised and transmitted as data. It says that knowledge is measured by what it does to the one who holds it: whether it expands their freedom, their clarity, their capacity to act well in the world. A person may be full of information and still be bound, confused, and harmful. A person with genuine *vidyā* moves differently through the world.

This does not make the tradition anti-empirical. Quite the opposite. The traditions of inquiry that developed within this framework were among the most rigorous the ancient world produced. *Brahmodyas* were formal contests of knowledge on questions of ultimate reality, conducted in royal courts and open assemblies. *Vāda-sabhās* were structured philosophical debates in which positions were stated, objected to, defended, and either upheld or abandoned in the light of stronger argument. The dialogues preserved in the Upaniṣads, including the celebrated exchange between Gārgī and Yājñavalkya in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, show a tradition in which no position was exempt from challenge, and in which women, students, kings, and wanderers could all be participants in the inquiry. The six classical schools of philosophy, *Nyāya*, *Vaiśeṣika*, *Sāṅkhya*, *Yoga*, *Mīmāṃsā*, and *Vedānta*, each developed distinct epistemologies and ontologies, and spent centuries contesting one another's foundations. Buddhist, Jain, and *Ājīvika* schools joined this conversation, producing what was in effect a sustained cross-tradition examination of the most fundamental questions: what is real, what is knowledge, what is the good life, and how do we know?

The result was not a single dogma. It was a continuously refined understanding, sharpened by centuries of contestation. What made this intellectually productive was precisely that no framework could simply declare itself universal. It had to earn that claim through argument, and remain open to having that claim challenged.

The *samśaya* here is a direct one. The SDG framework rests on particular epistemological assumptions: that development is best understood through measurable indicators, that progress is linear, that the primary unit of concern is the individual human being in a single lifetime, and that these assumptions are sufficiently universal to apply across all cultures and contexts. These are not self-evident axioms. They are a *darśana*, a philosophical viewpoint, with specific historical and cultural origins. The question is not whether this *darśana* has value. It clearly does. The question is whether it has been subjected to the kind of rigorous cross-framework contestation that genuine knowledge production requires. Was *dharma* ever seriously considered as an ordering principle? Was *mokṣa* ever imagined as a legitimate human goal, and if not, why not? Which knowledge systems were present when these goals were being shaped, and which were structurally absent?

Unless these questions are asked, what presents itself as global knowledge risks being something narrower: a regional framework that has travelled well, mistaking its reach for its depth.

3. The Definition Problem

At the heart of the matter lies a prior question that the SDG framework has never quite settled: what is development?

Modern global discourse offers several formulations. The 1986 UN Declaration on the Right to Development defined it as "a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom" (United Nations, 1986). The Brundtland Report added the temporal dimension: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 43).

These are significant formulations. But they are also restless ones. Each decade brings new targets, new frameworks, new measurements. The SDGs themselves represent a substantial revision of the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals), which were a revision of earlier frameworks, which will in turn be revised again. This is sometimes described as adaptability, and there is genuine adaptability in it. But there is also something else: the absence of a stable ground. When the definition of development keeps shifting, it may be because the deeper question, what a human being fundamentally is and what a human life is ultimately for, has not

been asked. Without an answer to that question, the definition of development will always be provisional, always subject to the next round of negotiation.

The *puruṣārtha* tradition begins exactly there. Its word for upward movement is *purogati*, and it means something more precise than improvement in living standards. It means the ascending capacity of the *jīva*, the living, embodied Self, to act with greater freedom, greater clarity, and greater alignment with *dharma*. A person who moves through life accumulating wealth and influence but growing more anxious, more compulsive, and more bound by appetite is, in this framework, not developing but declining. The tradition has a word for that too: *adhogati*, downward movement, a life increasingly driven by *kleśas*, the afflictions of ignorance, craving, aversion, and fear. External conditions are not irrelevant to this movement; material deprivation is a real obstacle to *purogati*, and *artha*, the right acquisition of material means, is one of the four *puruṣārthas* precisely for this reason. But external conditions alone do not constitute development. They are the field within which development either happens or does not.

The *Mahābhārata* states the integration of aims plainly:

dharmārtha-kāmāḥ samam eva sevyā yas tv eka-sevī sa naro jaghanyaḥ | dvayos tu dakṣaṁ pravadanti madhyaṁ sa uttamo yo niraṭīs tri-varge ||

"Dharma, artha, and kāma are to be pursued together. One who pursues only one of them is considered inferior. The one who skillfully attends to two is regarded as middling, but the highest is the one who is devoted to all three in harmony." (*Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, 161.38).

This is not a ranking of activities. It is a systems observation. A life organised around material accumulation alone produces one kind of failure. A life organised around pleasure alone produces another. A life of rigid moral observance without material grounding or human warmth produces yet another. The *puruṣārtha* framework insists that the four aims form an integrated whole, and that pursuing any one of them at the expense of the others is not development but imbalance. *Dharma* is the ordering principle that holds the other three together. *Artha* provides the material stability without which *dharma* and *kāma* cannot be sustained. *Kāma* is the fulfilment that makes life worth living. And *mokṣa* is the horizon that gives all three their ultimate direction, the recognition that the *jīva*'s journey does not end with comfort or pleasure or even virtue, but with freedom from the confusion about what it fundamentally is.

The *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad* provides the metaphysical ground for this orientation in a single verse:

īśāvāsyaṁ idaṁ sarvaṁ yat kiñca jagatyām jagat | tena tyaktena bhujjīthā mā gṛdhaḥ kasyasvid dhanam ||

"All this, whatever moves in this world, is pervaded by the Lord. Enjoy it through renunciation; do not covet, for whose indeed is wealth?" (*Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*, 1).

The instruction here is not world-denial. It is a reorientation of the relationship between the enjoyer and what is enjoyed. The world is not yours to possess; it is pervaded by a principle larger than any individual claim upon it. Enjoy it, yes, but through *tyāga*, through a quality of non-grasping that allows engagement without bondage. This is the ethic that underlies *dharma*-aligned *artha* and *kāma*: not abstinence, but freedom within engagement. It is also, incidentally, closer to ecological sanity than any framework built on the maximisation of consumption. A civilisation that relates to the natural world through non-grasping rather than extraction will sustain it; one that relates to it through possession will exhaust it.

Development, then, in the deepest sense available to this tradition, is the movement of the *jīva* toward greater freedom: freedom from compulsion, freedom from ignorance, freedom from the binding accumulation of unresolved *karma*. It is measured not only in what a person or a community has, but in what they are becoming, and in whether the conditions of their life support or obstruct that becoming. *Dharma* is the ordering principle of that movement. *Artha* and *kāma*, rightly pursued, are its necessary support. *Mokṣa* is its completion.

The *saṁśaya* is therefore this: can modern definitions of development, framed in terms of well-being, participation, and needs satisfaction, reach this depth? Can they account for *purogati*, for the quality of inner movement that distinguishes a life that is genuinely developing from one that is merely accumulating? Or are they bound to cycles of redefinition precisely because the deeper question, what a human being is and what a human life is for, remains unasked?

4. The Agency Problem

Another unresolved question concerns agency: who gets to define global goals? Do UN bureaucrats, economists, and politicians truly represent the aspirations of all humanity, or only of a fraction shaped by access, power, and institutional structures?

This is not a cynical question. It is a structural one. The Open Working Group that shaped the SDGs was constituted by member state representatives, largely drawn from diplomatic and technocratic institutions. The knowledge they brought was real, the intentions largely genuine, and the process more inclusive than anything that preceded it. And yet the question of legitimacy does not reduce to process alone. Legitimate guidance, in any domain, requires not only the right procedure but the right kind of person. A technically correct surgery performed by someone whose hands are unsteady is still dangerous. A technically inclusive consultation process shaped by people whose fundamental orientation is toward institutional self-preservation rather than genuine human welfare will produce goals that reflect that orientation, whatever the formal procedures surrounding it.

Every serious tradition of thought has grappled with this problem. What qualities must a person possess before their guidance in matters of fundamental human concern can be trusted? The

answer that emerges from the *puruṣārtha* tradition is specific and demanding. The *Vārāhī Tantra* describes the marks of the *ācārya*, the one who is fit to guide:

nirmoho niṣprapañcaś ca nityado niṣpratigrahaḥ |
nisādhyo nirahaṅkāri nistuṣṇo nirvikalpakaḥ ||
kṣamodhā nitya-santuṣṭaḥ satyavādī jitendriyaḥ |
svahitat-paraḥ svacchaḥ sarva-jīva-dayāparaḥ ||
śānta-cittaḥ sadācāro dvandva-tyāgī dṛḍha-vrataḥ |
na strī-lolī na ca krūraḥ kṣudra-karma-vivarjitaḥ ||
dama-māyā-vi-nirmuktaḥ krodha-lobhā-vivarjitaḥ |
divya-jñānānanda-santupta rju-sādhu-subodhakaḥ ||

"The *ācārya* is free from delusion, beyond worldly constructs, ever generous, and without desire to receive. Egoless, patient, ever content, truthful in speech, and master of the senses. Devoted to the welfare of others, pure in being, and full of compassion for all living beings. Peaceful in mind, righteous in conduct, firm in discipline, free from cruelty and pettiness. Free from deceit and illusion, devoid of anger and greed, satisfied in knowledge and clarity, straightforward, and a clear revealer of truth." (*Vārāhī Tantra*, 2nd Pāṭala, vv. 26–29).

What is striking about this description is that it says almost nothing about what the *ācārya* knows in the technical sense, and everything about what the *ācārya* is. The authority to guide does not derive from the accumulation of expertise or the conferral of institutional credentials. It derives from a quality of being: the absence of self-interest, the presence of compassion for all living beings, freedom from the distortions of ego, greed, and fear. These are not spiritual ornaments added on top of competence. They are the conditions that make genuine guidance possible at all. A person who is knowledgeable but driven by self-interest will use knowledge in service of that interest. A person who is knowledgeable and free from self-interest will use knowledge in service of the whole.

The distinction between expertise and wisdom is one that virtually every civilisational lineage has recognised in its own way. What the *puruṣārtha* tradition contributes is a precise and testable description of what that distinction actually consists of, not in abstract terms but in concrete qualities of conduct, disposition, and inner life. These are not qualities that can be conferred by an institution or acquired through a curriculum. They are cultivated through a life lived in alignment with *dharma*, and they are recognisable, by those with sufficient discernment, in how a person actually moves through the world.

The *saṁśaya* here is pointed, and it is meant to be. Who has the authority to define global goals? Institutional position is not sufficient. Technical expertise is not sufficient. Even genuine good intentions are not sufficient, because intentions unsupported by genuine freedom from ego and self-interest are unstable, bending under pressure toward the familiar priorities of

power. The tradition argues that where such beings are not present, the least that can be done is to draw upon the accumulated wisdom of traditions established by those who were: the *śabda-pramāṇa*, the testimony of those who have genuinely seen and understood. To ignore that testimony entirely, while constructing goals that will shape the lives of billions, is not neutrality. It is a choice, and one whose consequences are worth examining honestly.

5. The Power Problem

A final doubt concerns the relation of global policymaking to power. Is the discourse on sustainability genuinely a collective effort to safeguard life, or is it also, at least in part, a means of perpetuating the structural advantages of a few powerful actors, cloaked in the moral authority of universality?

The question is not new and it is not confined to any single tradition. When a framework of goals is constructed by a small group of institutions, adopted through processes in which richer and more powerful states exercise disproportionate influence, and then presented as universal, the gap between the claim and the reality deserves scrutiny. Common goals, guidelines for humanity, shared visions of preservation and sustainability: these are not neutral descriptions. They are moral assertions, and moral assertions require moral grounding. The question is whether that grounding is genuine or whether it is borrowed, a universality claimed rather than earned through actual dialogue across the full range of human civilisations and knowledge systems.

The *puruṣārtha* tradition holds that the individual and the collective are not in opposition. The *jīva* is irreducibly individual, with its own *svadharma*, its own karmic history, its own path toward *mokṣa*. At the same time, no *jīva* exists in isolation. Life is constituted by relationship, obligation, and interdependence. The framework of the *puruṣārthas* holds both of these truths simultaneously: it is addressed to the individual, but it is always an individual embedded in family, community, and cosmos. True unity, in this understanding, does not erase individual particularity. It arises through the right ordering of relationships, which is *dharma*.

And *dharma* was established precisely to prevent a specific failure mode. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* is explicit about this:

*sa naiva vyabhavat, tac chreyorūpam atyāsrjata dharmam | tad etat kṣatrasya kṣatram
yad dharmah, tasmād dharmād param nāsti | atho abalīyān balīyāmsam āśamsate
dharmena, yathā rājñāivam | yo vai sa dharmah satyaṃ vai tat |*

"He did not prevail; therefore he created *dharma*, the form of the highest good. *Dharma* is the power of powers, the sovereignty of sovereignty; thus there is nothing higher than *dharma*. Even the weak hopes to overcome the strong through *dharma*, as one might appeal to a king. What indeed is *dharma*? It is truth." (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.14).

The failure mode that *dharma* was established to prevent is *matsya-nyāya*: the law of the big fish devouring the small. In a world without an ordering principle higher than power, the strong consume the weak and call it natural. *Dharma* is the principle that says: there is something higher than power. Even the weakest being has a claim, and that claim is not contingent on the willingness of the powerful to recognise it. This is not idealism. It is the most practically serious observation one can make about the conditions necessary for any sustainable order. A system in which the strong can always reshape the rules in their favour will not hold. Only a principle genuinely above power can hold it.

The *saṁśaya* here is therefore precise: does the current architecture of global goal-setting embody *dharma* in this sense? Does it genuinely enable the weak to hold the strong accountable, or does it reproduce *matsya-nyāya* in the more refined and therefore more durable form of institutional procedure? When decision-making is concentrated in a few powerful bodies, when the knowledge systems of billions of people are excluded from the construction of goals that will govern their lives, when sustainability is celebrated as a neutral and scientific concept while *dharma*, which has meant the same thing for far longer, is dismissed as cultural or religious, something worth examining is happening. That dismissal is not a philosophical conclusion. It is a political act, and recognising it as such is the beginning of a more honest conversation.

The doubt, to be clear, is not whether the SDGs are bad. Their intent, eradicating hunger, reducing poverty, ensuring education, protecting the living world, is genuinely noble. The question is whether they are complete. Whether they are grounded in a deep enough account of what a human being is, what development actually means, and what principle is capable of holding power accountable when power would prefer to be accountable to nothing. The *puruṣārthas* and the *dharma* that orders them are offered here as a contribution to that grounding, not as its replacement, but as something without which it remains incomplete.

It is with this question alive that we turn to the *pūrvapakṣa*: an examination of the SDGs on their own terms, as fully and fairly as possible.

PURVAPAKSHA: A STUDY OF THE OPPONENT'S VIEWPOINT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) did not emerge overnight in 2015; they are the product of a long lineage of global deliberations on environment, development, and human well-being. To appreciate their force as the most widely accepted framework of global aims today, it is important to trace this trajectory.

The first milestone was the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, which placed ecological concerns on the global agenda. It marked the recognition

that environmental issues were no longer local but planetary, requiring cooperation beyond national borders.

The second decisive step came with the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland. Its 1987 report, *Our Common Future*, introduced the now-classic definition of “sustainable development” as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This formulation, striking in its simplicity, shaped decades of subsequent discourse.

In 1992, the Rio Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) produced Agenda 21, a comprehensive action plan integrating environmental sustainability with social and economic development. It was here that the social dimension was formally brought into the sustainability framework, completing what is now recognised as the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental (Klorane Botanical Foundation, n.d.; United Nations, 1992).

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) followed in 2000, representing a narrower but more measurable agenda focused on poverty, education, health, and gender equality. While limited in scope, the MDGs demonstrated the power of time-bound, indicator-based targets to mobilize international action (Dashoor, 2025).

By 2012, at the Rio+20 Summit, there was a growing recognition that a new framework was required, broader than the MDGs, yet integrating the lessons of previous decades. The conference launched a process to develop Sustainable Development Goals that would build upon the MDGs and converge with a post-2015 development agenda, one that would extend beyond the confines of environmental policy into a truly cross-cutting global framework (IISD, n.d.; ECLAC, n.d.).

This culminated in September 2015, when the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, containing 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 associated targets. Framed as a “plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity,” the SDGs sought to balance economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection under the banner of universality: goals for all nations, rich and poor alike.

In this sense, the SDGs represent the most ambitious and widely endorsed global framework of aims to date. They are the outcome of nearly half a century of international dialogue and institutional experimentation, carrying both the weight of precedent and the hope of a new consensus.

The Content of the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, is organized around 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. These goals are framed as “integrated

and indivisible,” recognizing the interdependence of human well-being, economic growth, and ecological balance. While their scope is wide, they may be grouped into four broad thematic clusters:

Basic Human Needs and Dignity

Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Economic Prosperity and Infrastructure

Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.

Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.

Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries.

Planetary Sustainability

Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all.

Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.

Goal 15: Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss.

Peace, Justice, and Global Partnership

Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

Taken together, the SDGs amount to a comprehensive blueprint for global governance. They integrate economic, social, and environmental concerns within a single framework, while also recognizing the role of institutions and partnerships in implementation. The preamble to Agenda 2030 declares them a “plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity,” emphasizing universality: the goals apply not only to developing countries but to all nations, rich and poor alike.

The SDGs are thus both idealistic and pragmatic, idealistic in their articulation of a global common vision, and pragmatic in their reliance on measurable targets and indicators for monitoring progress. Their breadth has been celebrated as unprecedented, even as their complexity has been criticized as unwieldy.

What the SDGs Have Built

The principle that no person is to be left behind has expanded the scope of international moral responsibility in a historically significant way. For the first time, wealthy and powerful nations are formally bound within the same framework of developmental obligation as poorer and more vulnerable ones. The acknowledgement that development is not only a problem of the global South but a universal condition requiring universal attention represents a meaningful shift in how the international community understands its shared obligations.

The attention the SDGs direct toward urgent human concerns is well placed. Poverty, hunger, preventable disease, gender inequality, and the accelerating degradation of the living systems that sustain all life: these are genuine crises affecting billions of human beings and countless other species. The SDGs have mobilised resources, research, institutional attention, and political will toward these crises at a scale that is historically unprecedented. Universities have redesigned curricula around them. Corporations have restructured sustainability reporting in relation to them. Philanthropic institutions have reoriented major funding programmes toward them.

Governments have embedded SDG commitments into national planning processes. The shared vocabulary the framework provides has made it possible for actors with very different interests and institutional mandates to coordinate their efforts within a common architecture of purpose.

The integration of economic, social, and environmental dimensions into a single framework reflects hard-won learning from decades of developmental practice. Earlier frameworks that addressed economic growth without attending to its environmental consequences, or that addressed poverty without attending to gender, found that their gains were partial and often self-undermining. The SDGs' insistence that these dimensions are indivisible, that genuine development cannot be achieved in one domain at the expense of another, represents a more mature and more systemic understanding of how human welfare is actually constituted.

The accountability generated by measurable targets, however imperfect the picture any set of indicators offers, has created real and sustained pressure on governments and institutions that would otherwise be answerable to nothing beyond their immediate political interests. The ability to track, compare, and publicly report on progress toward specific goals has changed the terms of political conversation in many countries in ways that have had tangible effects on policy and resource allocation.

The Challenges

The architects and practitioners of the SDG framework are themselves clear-eyed about the challenges that accompany an undertaking of this ambition and complexity. These are not external objections but honest observations from within the framework's own ongoing practice.

Implementation is uneven and often falls short of what the goals require. Many nations, particularly in the global South, face structural conditions, including debt burdens, trade inequalities, and limited institutional capacity, that make meaningful progress toward the targets genuinely difficult, regardless of political will. The resources that the goals require have not always been forthcoming from those best positioned to provide them.

The relationship between measurable indicators and the underlying realities they are meant to represent is always complex, and the SDG framework is no exception. Some dimensions of human welfare are more easily captured by available data than others. Progress on an indicator does not always translate into progress on the condition the indicator is meant to reflect. The ongoing work of refining the indicator framework is a recognition of this complexity rather than a resolution of it.

Some goals, when pursued simultaneously, can pull in different directions. Economic growth and climate action, industrialisation and ecosystem protection, energy access and emissions reduction: these are genuine tensions that the framework's insistence on integration does not automatically resolve. Navigating these tensions in practice requires judgement, prioritisation, and difficult trade-offs that the framework describes but does not fully resolve.

The sheer breadth of seventeen goals and 169 targets reflects both the genuine complexity of the challenge and the political process through which the agenda was constructed. A framework shaped by negotiation among 193 member states will inevitably reflect the breadth of their concerns. The challenge of translating that breadth into a coherent and prioritised theory of change is one that practitioners continue to work through.

Finally, the SDGs acknowledge that their implementation depends on the existing structures of global institutions, financial systems, and state capacity. These structures carry their own histories, their own distributions of power, and their own embedded interests. Working through them toward genuinely equitable outcomes requires sustained attention to the ways in which existing structures can both enable and constrain the goals they are meant to serve.

A Note on This *Pūrvapakṣa*

A full scholarly engagement with the SDG literature, its empirical record, its internal debates, and the considerable body of work dedicated to understanding and strengthening the framework would require a study of its own. That undertaking is beyond the scope of this paper.

The purpose of this *pūrvapakṣa* is not to evaluate the SDGs as a policy programme. It is to understand them clearly and on their own terms: what they say, what they assume, what they have achieved, and what they aspire to. The SDG framework is a genuine and serious attempt to address the conditions of human welfare at a planetary scale. It deserves to be understood as such before it is placed in dialogue with other frameworks.

It is that dialogue which carries us toward the *uttarapakṣa* (the concluding arguments). The question the *puruṣārtha* tradition brings to this conversation is not whether the SDGs address the right concerns. Many of the concerns they address are urgent and real. The question is one of foundation: what is the nature of the being for whom these conditions are being created? What does development mean when understood from the perspective of that being's deepest nature and ultimate telos? And what might a framework of human goals look like if it began from that question rather than arriving at it, if at all, only as an afterthought? It is to those questions that we now turn.

KṚTAJÑATĀ: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Before turning to the *uttarapakṣa*, I wish to acknowledge and offer my gratitude, respect, and love to all who have worked, and continue to work, toward making the world a better place. I extend this gratitude especially to the United Nations, whose efforts to articulate and pursue collective goals for humanity are unprecedented. I hold no malice, no intent to disparage these goals.

At the same time, I must note with regret that the Bhāratīya knowledge systems, and the vast reservoir of wisdom they contain, have not been positioned globally in the way they deserve. The responsibility for this is ours: those who are closest to these waters must be the first to drink, and then invite others to share in their fulfillment. If this has not happened, the limitation lies not in the world outside, but in our own inability to present these treasures with clarity and conviction.

Knowledge, wherever it arises, for the welfare of the world, must be read, understood, and integrated into the challenges of the present. There is *aparā-vidyā* (worldly knowledge) and *parā-vidyā* (transcendental knowledge). Some may rank them as higher or lower, but the wise know them to be like the two wings of a bird: without both, the bird cannot fly. In the same way, I see all knowledge, whether born in Bhārat or beyond, as expressions of *Sarasvatī* (a form of *prakṛti* representing the cognitive potency of consciousness) herself, as the flowing grace of *Śiva* (*puruṣa*) and *Śakti* (*prakṛti*).

When I reflect on the human journey, of individuals, of nations, of the United Nations itself, I see in it the natural tendency of the *puruṣa* toward fulfillment. For *puruṣa* is of the nature of *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda*, (being, consciousness, and bliss). Even through mistakes and limitations, this aspiration toward happiness, fulfillment, and meaning remains the thread of continuity.

By grace, I have been given an opportunity to glimpse these connections and to present here what I understand as the best of knowledge, knowledge revealed by the *ṛṣis* (an individual whose consciousness is aligned with universal consciousness), by *Mahādeva* (another name for *Śiva* as the supreme luminous consciousness underlying existence) himself, knowledge that continues to flow through life, education, the guidance of teachers and companions, and the encounter with every being.

With this spirit, with love and goodwill, I now turn to the *uttarapakṣa*. Here I will present the Consciousness-Based Goals (CBGs), *puruṣārthas* as the true framework of development. They are spoken not for the triumph of one tradition over another, but for the welfare of the *puruṣa* present in the heart of every being, for the *ānanda* of *Śiva*, and for the unhindered, beautiful play of *prakṛti* in her calm and grandeur. May we, our planet, and the *bhuvanas* (fields of manifested consciousness) of *Bhuvaneśvarī* (a form of *prakṛti* representing the governing consciousness of manifested realms) be prosperous.

UTTARAPAKSHA: THE CONCLUDING ARGUMENTS OR DISCUSSION

As is customary in Bhāratīya learning traditions, I begin this *uttarapakṣa* with the *Śānti Mantra* from the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, which invokes protection, shared strength, and harmony in study, a fitting frame for the dialogue (*samvāda*) between SDGs and *puruṣārthas*.

om saha nāv avatu /
saha nau bhunaktu /
saha vīryam karavāvahai /
tejasvināv adhītam astu mā vidviṣāvahai //
om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ //
“Om. May we be protected together.
May we be nourished together.
May we work together with great strength.
May our study be luminous and fruitful.
May we not have enmity toward one another.
Om. Peace, peace, peace.”

Now we enter the *uttarapakṣa*: the affirmative, constructive reply to the *samśaya*. The question that opens this enquiry is perennial and intimate, *ko 'ham?* Who am I? From what source does this I arise, and to what destiny does it tend? These questions are not speculative luxuries; they are practical and political. How we answer them determines what we call progress, which lives we prioritize, and how we measure the success of our actions.

If the SDGs ask what should be changed in the world, the *puruṣārthas* ask who is being changed and by what inner law that change is possible. The *uttarapakṣa* proposes that the basis for setting human (and planetary) goals should be the nature and telos of the *puruṣa*, the conscious principle present in every being, and the cosmic order (*ṛta*) through which life is sustained. From that foundation follow aims, means, metrics, pedagogy, and institutions that support genuine upward movement (*purogati*) of life rather than mere external adjustments.

Tattva: The Ontological Foundations of the *Puruṣārtha* Framework

Every framework of human goals, whether individual or collective, rests upon an implicit or explicit understanding of reality, an ontology. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for instance, assume a reality defined by measurable socio-economic and environmental conditions. In contrast, the framework of Consciousness-Based Goals (CBGs), rooted in the *puruṣārthas*, rests upon the *tattva* (fundamental principles or reality) of Bhāratīya thought. This section presents these foundational principles, not in exhaustive depth, but sufficiently to anchor the subsequent inquiry into the *puruṣārthas* as a comprehensive model for human development.

Tat – That Which Is

The philosophical inquiry of the Bhāratīya traditions begins with *Tat*, literally "That," signifying the ultimate, unconditioned reality. *Tat* is the singular, eternal ground of being that exists before creation, sustains it, and remains after its dissolution. It is the source from which all phenomena emerge and to which they return. The 15th-century poet Pothana, in his celebrated Telugu rendering of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Skandha 8, *Gajēndramokṣa*), offers a sublime description of this principle through the prayer of the elephant king:

Telugu:

లోకంబులు లోకేశులు
లోకస్థులుఁ దెగినతుది నలోకంబగు పెం
జీకటి కవ్వలనెవ్వం
డేకాకృతి వెలుంగు నతని నే సేవింతున్

Transliteration (IAST):

lōkambulu lōkēśulu
lōkasthulu degina duḍina lōkambu bagu pēm
jīkaṭi kavvala nevvam
ḍēkākr̥ti veluṅgu natani nē sēvintun ||

Translation:

“When the worlds, their rulers, and all beings within them perish,
And vast, dense darkness spreads everywhere,
Beyond that darkness shines That One, the undivided, eternal Light.
That alone do I worship and serve.”

This *Tat* is not a distant, abstract entity; it is the very essence of the Self. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, one of the most ancient Vedāntic texts, famously proclaims this identity through the *mahāvākya* (great utterance):

tat tvam asi śvetaketo

“That thou art, O Śvetaketu.” (*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8.7)

Thus, *Tat* is simultaneously cosmic and intimate, the unmanifest source of all worlds and the innermost core of the individual. This non-dual understanding implies that any goals we set for human progress must ultimately harmonize with this fundamental reality, lest they remain partial, superficial, and ultimately binding.

The *Puruṣārtha* Framework in Governance and Civilisational Life

The *puruṣārthas* have roots in the living architecture of a civilisation. For centuries, the aims of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa* were expressed through concrete institutions: systems of social organisation, governance, ritual life, education, and economic exchange that were developed and refined across generations of lived experience. Understanding how this worked historically opens a genuine conversation about what such a framework might offer to contemporary governance thinking.

The central question this tradition puts to any system of governance is a direct one: can administration be designed to actively enable every individual within its care to discover and fulfil the aims of their own existence? The *puruṣārtha* framework suggests that this is precisely what governance is for.

The *Puruṣārtha* Framework as the Structure of Human Life

The *puruṣārthas* describe what the *jīva*, the living embodied conscious Self, already seeks. Every human being, in every culture and period of history, seeks some form of order and rightness in their life. Every human being requires material means to sustain themselves. Every human being experiences desire and the reach toward fulfilment. And every human being seeks freedom from suffering, from compulsion, from the weight of an un-lived life. *Dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa* are the structure of human wanting itself, named with precision and arranged into a coherent account of what it means to be alive.

Dharma is the ordering principle within which the other three become coherent. *Artha* within *dharma* sustains the conditions on which life depends. *Kāma* within *dharma* produces genuine fulfilment rather than escalating compulsion. And *mokṣa* pursued through the fulfilment of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma* represents the completion of a fully lived life. The *Mahābhārata*'s insistence that all three must be pursued together is a systems observation: the four *puruṣārthas* form an ecology, sustaining one another in balance and collapsing when one is pursued at the expense of the others.

Dharma: The Principle That Governance Serves

Dharma derives from the root *dhṛ*, to hold, to sustain, to uphold. It is that which holds things together: the self, the family, the community, the natural world, and the cosmos. It is the human expression of *ṛta*, the lawful order intrinsic to existence, expressed in the specific duties, relationships, and obligations of each life.

Sāmānya-dharma names the universal obligations binding on every human being regardless of position or circumstance: non-harm (*ahimsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), purity (*śauca*), and contentment (*santoṣa*). These are the minimum conditions of a life lived in genuine alignment with the order that sustains it.

Svadharmā, one's own nature and duty, is the recognition that every *jīva* carries an inherent nature shaped by the accumulated *saṃskāras* of its entire journey across lifetimes. To act in accordance with *svadharmā* is to act from one's deepest nature rather than from social pressure, fear, or imitation. The *Bhagavad Gītā* describes the suffering of a being that is alive against its own nature.

Today, governance is largely designed around managing poverty, crime, health crises, and economic output. These are real and urgent concerns. A *dharma*-oriented governance asks something prior: what does this person need in order to live as themselves, to fulfil their obligations, and to contribute genuinely to the world? That shift in orientation changes the entire design of policy. Consider how governments currently provide tax exemptions for donations made to charitable organisations, or subsidies for education, housing, and healthcare. These are based on categories of economic need. A *dharma*-oriented policy would extend this logic into a richer set of human obligations. A father who cannot afford to educate his child is unable to fulfil one of the most fundamental dimensions of his *dharma* as a householder.

Imagine a governance system in which he could approach the state not merely as an applicant for a poverty-based subsidy but as a human being seeking support in fulfilling a recognised obligation, and receive it on those grounds. That shift in framing, from need-based charity to obligation-based support, is what a *puruṣārtha*-oriented policy produces. It treats the human being as a responsible agent with duties to fulfil, not as a problem to be managed.

Rājadharmā, the duties of governance, specifies what rulers and institutions are obligated to provide. Governance, in this understanding, is a form of *sevā*, service. The ruler is the custodian of the conditions in which every *jīva* under their care can pursue its own *svadharmā* and work through its own karmic obligations. The administration does not define the good life for its citizens. It creates the conditions in which each citizen can discover and live their own.

***Varṇa*: The Recognition of Natural Inclination**

Because the *jīva* is continuous across lifetimes, every human being arrives in each birth already shaped: carrying particular capacities, tendencies, and orientations of intelligence and will that are the expression of everything they have been and done before. *Varṇa* is the recognition of this fact. Human beings naturally incline toward different kinds of activity and different kinds of contribution, and a well-ordered society honours and cultivates these inclinations.

The four *varṇas* describe four fundamental orientations that any complex civilisation requires. The orientation toward knowledge and its transmission (*brāhmaṇa*), the orientation toward governance, protection, and the exercise of righteous force (*kṣatriya*), the orientation toward production, trade, and the management of material resources (*vaiśya*), and the orientation toward service and skilled craft (*śūdra*). Every functioning society requires all four. The *varṇa* framework names them, assigns them specific responsibilities and protections, and locates them within a framework of *dharmic* obligation that prevents any one from dominating the others without accountability.

A person discovers their *varṇa* through honest attention to their own *guṇas* and tendencies: what they are naturally drawn toward, what kinds of activity produce genuine fulfilment, what contributions they are actually capable of making to the whole. The *jīva*, being continuous, carries the imprints of its inclinations across births. What appears as natural talent or deep interest is the surface expression of a much longer history of development. A governance system oriented around this understanding creates educational structures broad enough to allow genuine self-discovery, economic systems flexible enough to reward genuine contribution across all four orientations, and social structures that honour each orientation as essential to the whole.

***Āśrama*: The Architecture of a Human Life**

The *āśrama* system adds a temporal dimension to the framework of *varṇa*. It recognises that a human life passes through stages, each with its own orientation, its own responsibilities, and its own relationship to the *puruṣārthas*.

The student stage (*brahmacarya*) is oriented toward learning: acquiring the knowledge, discipline, and understanding of *dharma* that will make the rest of life coherent. The householder stage (*gṛhastha*) is oriented toward the full engagement with *artha* and *kāma* within the framework of *dharma*: earning honestly, maintaining a family, raising children, and participating in the social and economic life of the community. The forest-dweller stage (*vānaprastha*) marks a gradual withdrawal from the obligations of householder life and a turning of attention toward the deeper questions of meaning and the cultivation of the inner life. The renunciant stage (*sannyāsa*) is the final stage, in which the *jīva*, having fulfilled its worldly obligations, turns entirely toward *mokṣa*.

Administration that takes the *āśrama* framework seriously designs a differentiated architecture that supports the student in learning, the householder in building a life of genuine *dharmic* engagement, the elder in withdrawal and the sharing of wisdom, and the renunciant in the final completion of their journey. Each stage is honoured as essential, and the transition between stages is supported. Current governance systems have some of this: scholarships for students, pension systems for the elderly. A *puruṣārtha*-oriented administration would extend this into a more complete architecture, recognising the obligations and needs of each stage of life and designing support structures accordingly.

Artha*: Transactions That Balance the Ledger of *Karma

Artha is the material means necessary to sustain *dharma* and *kāma* in embodied life. It is not wealth for its own sake but the material dimension of a life oriented toward purpose. Every transaction in life participates in the larger economy of *karma*. A life is constituted by a web of obligations and debts, the *pañca ṛṇas*, the five debts that every human being carries simply by virtue of being born into the web of existence.

These are the debt to the *ṛṣis*, the teachers and knowledge-holders who transmitted understanding; the debt to the *pitṛs*, the ancestors whose lives made one's own possible; the debt to the *devas*, the cosmic principles and forces that sustain the natural world; the debt to fellow human beings, whose labour and care support daily life; and the debt to all other living beings, whose existence is interwoven with one's own.

Artha rightly pursued is the material dimension of discharging these debts: earning honestly, giving generously, maintaining the conditions of family and community, and contributing to the larger social fabric. It is a form of karmic accounting: the gradual balancing of a ledger that extends far beyond any single lifetime.

Consider what this means in practical governance terms. An employee who is overworked and underpaid is a *jīva* whose *artha* is being extracted rather than exchanged. The employment relationship, in a *puruṣārtha*-oriented framework, is a transaction that must balance the karmic ledger of both parties. A company that underpays its workers is not merely creating economic inequality; it is accumulating a karmic debt that the framework would require it to discharge. Labour law, in this understanding, becomes an expression of *dharma*: the state's obligation to ensure that economic transactions are genuine exchanges rather than forms of extraction. Wage legislation, collective bargaining rights, and employee welfare standards are not merely economic regulations; they are instruments through which the state enforces the *dharmic* dimension of *artha* in the commercial sphere.

The *pañca-mahāyajñas* can be actively supported through policy design. Governance systems already provide tax relief for charitable donations. A *puruṣārtha*-oriented policy would extend this into a comprehensive framework of incentives: tax relief for contributions to the transmission of knowledge (*brahma-yajña*), for the care of elders and ancestors (*pitṛ-yajña*), for ecological conservation (*bhūta-yajña*), for community feeding and hospitality programmes (*manuṣya-yajña*), and for ritual and cultural maintenance (*deva-yajña*). These incentives would make the practice of the five great obligations not an exceptional act of generosity but the natural expression of a life embedded in the web of existence. The goal is to ensure that the generation of prosperity is itself an act of debt-discharge, and that the economic life of the community actively enables the practice of the *pañca-mahāyajñas* rather than making it progressively harder.

***Kāma*: Fulfilment Without Fear, Guilt, or Shame**

Kāma is desire, longing, pleasure, and the reach toward fulfilment in all its forms: aesthetic, sensory, relational, creative, and erotic. It is the life-energy of wanting itself, the force that makes a being reach beyond what it already has toward what it does not yet possess.

Consider the lives most people actually live. A working professional wakes early, commutes, spends the bulk of their waking hours performing tasks they were assigned rather than chose, returns home exhausted, and falls asleep to repeat the cycle. There is no time for beauty, for play, for the cultivation of pleasure, for the arts, for the richness of relational life. This is not a life from which *kāma* is absent; it is a life in which *kāma* has been systematically crowded out by the demands of economic survival. The stress, the sense of flatness, the vague dissatisfaction that characterises modern life in both wealthy and developing nations, is in large part the consequence of a civilisation that has organised itself around *artha* and forgotten *kāma*.

A *puruṣārtha*-oriented governance takes *kāma* seriously as a dimension of human welfare. It recognises that human beings require not only material sustenance but beauty, pleasure, play, aesthetic experience, and the richness of cultural and relational life. This means designing working conditions that leave genuine time for living: reasonable working hours, mandatory rest, the legal protection of time for family and leisure and cultural participation. It means

actively supporting the arts and ensuring that artistic expression is available to everyone, not merely to those wealthy enough to afford it. It means understanding entertainment, the arts, music, dance, storytelling, and all the forms through which human beings celebrate and process their experience, as a dimension of public welfare rather than a private luxury.

The entertainment industry, oriented toward *rasa*, the classical framework of aesthetic experience and emotional resonance developed in Indian aesthetics, would produce very different content than an industry oriented purely toward profit. *Rasa* is the experience of deep aesthetic resonance: the quality of being genuinely moved, of having one's inner life touched and expanded by an encounter with beauty or truth. A governance framework that understood *kāma* through the lens of *rasa* would create incentive structures that reward entertainment which genuinely nourishes the inner life, which produces *rasānubhūti*, the experience of genuine aesthetic fulfilment, rather than merely stimulating and sedating. Tax incentives for the production of arts that cultivate *rasa*, support for classical art forms, educational curricula that include aesthetic training alongside academic subjects: these are the policy instruments through which *kāma* becomes a dimension of governance rather than an afterthought.

When a citizen says to the state: I am a human being who requires not only food and shelter but beauty, pleasure, and the conditions for a rich inner and relational life, and I am asking you to create and protect those conditions, that is the *puruṣārtha* framework speaking through the language of governance. It is a claim that the whole human being, not merely the economic unit, is the subject of governance.

***Mokṣa*: The Horizon That Orders Everything Else**

Mokṣa provides the horizon within which all the other *puruṣārthas* find their ultimate meaning. It is the *jīva*'s recognition of its own deepest nature: the dissolution of the confusion between the witness and what is witnessed, between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, between the light and the mirror.

Mokṣa arrives through the fulfilment of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*, through their completion. The *jīva* that has lived a life of genuine *dharmic* order, that has earned and given honestly, loved and enjoyed and created fully, and discharged its obligations to the web of existence in which it lives, arrives at *mokṣa* through completion. The mechanism of this completion is the discharge of the *pañca ṛṇas* through the daily practice of the *pañca-mahāyajñas*.

Brahma-yajña is the daily offering of study and the transmission of knowledge: the maintenance of the living stream of understanding that connects each *jīva* to the teachers who first received and transmitted it. *Pitṛ-yajña* is the offering of care to ancestors and elders, the maintenance of the lineage of life across generations. *Deva-yajña* is the offering to the cosmic principles through ritual and the maintenance of the natural order. *Manuṣya-yajña* is the offering of hospitality and care to fellow human beings: the daily practice of recognising the *jīva* in every face one encounters. *Bhūta-yajña* is the offering to all other living beings,

expressed in practices of non-harm and the active maintenance of the conditions of life for non-human species.

Administration oriented toward enabling *mokṣa* as a genuine societal horizon would design incentive structures that make the practice of the *pañca-mahāyajñas* easier. Time for study and the transmission of knowledge. Systems of elder care that honour the *pitṛ-yajña* dimension of life. Ecological management frameworks that express *bhūta-yajña* in institutional form. Community structures that make *manuṣya-yajña* a natural expression of social life. And the maintenance and support of the ritual and cultural life through which *deva-yajña* is practised. The goal is a society in which the daily discharge of the five obligations is not an exceptional achievement but the natural texture of a life well-supported by its institutional environment.

A NOTE ON FUTURE DIRECTION

The *puruṣārtha* framework as an organising principle of civilisational life deserves sustained and rigorous scholarly attention in its own right: careful historical study of the institutions described, close textual analysis of the governance frameworks they embodied, and serious comparative work that places them in dialogue with contemporary governance theory and practice. The work of translating their principles into forms appropriate to the conditions of the present, with all the complexity and diversity that the present involves, requires dedicated interdisciplinary effort: bringing together scholars of classical Indian thought, contemporary political theorists, development practitioners, and the communities whose lives such frameworks would most directly affect.

The goal of this paper is to bring the *puruṣārtha* framework into serious view as a resource for governance thinking: to demonstrate that it carries genuine conceptual depth, demonstrated civilisational capability, and a coherent vision of human development that complements and deepens what contemporary frameworks currently provide. The work of contextualisation, adaptation, and institutional is both necessary and genuinely worth doing, and this paper is offered as a beginning of that conversation.

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