

DHARMĀRTHA MĀRGA **Path of Modern Gurus**

John Peter Vallabadoss ♦

Abstract: The rise of modern gurus taking inspiration from ancient wisdom is a unique phenomenon in contemporary world. In the Vedic tradition of India, both *dharma* and *artha* are two of the supreme goals of human life. *Dharmārtha Mārga* is the path conceived and paved by modern gurus catering to the aspirations of human beings for material growth without compromising spiritual values. Reading the signs of the time, the modern gurus have been successfully addressing the needs of their contemporaries striking a balance between pursuit of material wealth (*artha*) and of spirituality (*dharma*). The paper intends to highlight and critically appraise the dialectics at play in their discourse, the interplay of the spiritual and the material. We intend to throw light on the integrated path (*dharmārtha mārga*) paved by modern gurus successfully bringing together the material prosperity and spirituality. Their path emphasizes that anything spiritual need not be devoid of materiality. In and through the physical, the spirituality emerges.

Keywords: *Artha, Dharma, Material Wealth, New Age Gurus, Self-Emancipation, Service, Spirituality*

1. Introduction

The rise of modern gurus inspiring people with ancient wisdom for day-to-day issues is a unique phenomenon in contemporary

♦**Dr John Peter Vallabadoss**, a Capuchin priest, holds a doctorate in Indian Philosophy from Madras University and has served as Lecturer in Philosophy and Dean of Studies at St. Joseph's Philosophical College, Kotagiri and consultant in philosophy at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi. Presently, he is the Registrar and Professor at Department of Philosophy, Vijnananilayam Degree College, Eluru, and Treasurer of the Association of Christian Philosophers of India (ACPI).

world. Modern gurus and their movements are best understood as collective responses to the stress of modernization and the challenge of foreign ideologies. The needs that arise in people and responses given by the gurus draw academic attention in our times. Studying their movements is seen within a paradigm of modernization and change, where they meet the emotional and spiritual needs of those caught up by the impact of recent developments in the society, especially from the twentieth century onwards. Reading the signs of the time the gurus from religious, spiritual, and secular spheres have been successfully addressing these needs of the people. Mind management, leadership, human resource management, conflict resolution techniques, stress management, personal excellence, successful living, psycho-spiritual wellbeing, material progress, and spiritual uplift, etc., have become popular themes in their writings, public talks, workshops, training programmes, retreats and spiritual camps. While restricting our scope to the study of religious gurus from India¹ we attempt to explore the dynamics at play in their life and activities with their message catering to people's spiritual and material wellbeing. As we enumerate the unique phenomenon of guru movements with their features, we critically analyse their leaning towards traditional wisdom and material prosperity. At the end of our analysis, we would come across a blend of the spiritual and the physical in their way of teaching and lifestyle.

2. General Characteristics of Gurus and Their Movements

The guru phenomenon is a product of our times. The emergence of New Age movements reflects socio-religious situations in the second half of the twentieth century in the West. Indian spiritual masters, well-informed or educated in Western language and

¹In dealing with modern gurus, we restrict only to religious gurus of India, leaving out vast majority of Western gurus who are either initiated in the spiritual heritage of these gurus or self-trained masters. For want of space, we also try not to study in this essay the 'secular' and 'management-corporate' gurus and trainers, and the New Age movements of the West.

culture, sensed a vacuum in the West and articulated Indian spiritual wisdom as an answer to the needs of people in the West. These movements heralded a new epoch for those suffered under pressures of modernity to turn to the possibility of achieving personal transformation through their own efforts.

In the process of liberating themselves from the neurosis imposed by society, what the protagonists of the counter-culture discovered was not a paradise of their inner world but their own naked selves condemned to live with an existential angst in a meaningless and cruel world.²

Some gurus and their movements claim to have heralded ‘new age’, ‘new era’, ‘new way’, ‘new religion’, or ‘new spirituality’. Exploring whether there is a common interaction and appreciation of each other is out of the scope of this essay. Yet, in public, there is a certain common trend followed in all of them, i.e., a hermeneutical discourse. “Undeniably, all have in common an engagement with the Indian tradition of spirituality.”³ The promise of spiritual treasures by Eastern religious traditions, especially of Hinduism and Buddhism, with self-awareness, harmony, freedom from dogmas and social customs, attracted many to these gurus. Shift to the Eastern sources and to the gurus brought in a new interest in esoteric traditions.⁴

These movements have become the answer to the deepest needs of a few generations of immigrants from different countries and cultures in search of better jobs and better living conditions in foreign land, living in strange situations with a feeling of rootlessness. When organized religions failed to address the quest for rootedness, identity, inter-connectedness and belongingness, the new way of life with identity and freedom, spiritual experience and material comfort, integration

²Jacob Parappally, “The New Age Spirituality: A Quest to Break Boundaries,” *Jnanadeepa* 7, 2 (July 2004), 63.

³Antony Copley, “A Study in Religious Leadership and Cultism” in *Gurus and Their Followers: New Religious Reform Movements in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 3.

⁴D. S. Toolan, “Harmonic Convergences and All That: New Age Spirituality,” *The Way* 32 (January 1992), 37.

of the physical and the mystical, offered by New Age gurus became a safe haven. It opened up infinite possibilities to become meaningful.⁵

The charisma of gurus becomes central to their success. It is an immense confidence in their new revelation that they are convinced of discovering answers to various problems in life. Their followers believe that the gurus know answers that are charismatic and persuasive. They become mild, gentle, good, kindly leaders with personalities of unshakeable conviction. They are seen to offer 'holistic' and 'all-embracing' answers to problems. These religious movements originally laid claim to being a secular science of psychic relief and material concerns, instead of a religious cult. Western advocates of spiritualism, transcendentalism, occultism, and theosophy claimed to heal humans of their spiritual, psychological, and physical sicknesses and successfully blended Eastern traditional wisdom in their therapeutic exercises. In these gurus, we identify various trends from self-deification to claims of avatar (incarnation), to denying the very title of a guru or leader. There is always interdependence between guru and his followers, which gives the movements the appearance of a cult claiming modern scientific worldview and spiritual insight.⁶

The immensely persuasive leadership of the Gurus enables them to win disciples over to their vision of life that is flexible, pragmatic, and universal that caters to the needs of modern humanity. There are gurus who are more of self-advertising in their style of promoting their ideals and, at the same time, are more of traditionalist self-effacing as playing the role of a guru as in Indian ancient culture. The gurus and their movements encouraged and accommodated change, and contributed to cultural revivalism by way of challenge and synthesis giving shape to a fashion or a new outlook. For them progress could be achieved "by turning back to the righteous past."⁷ Most of them

⁵Parappally, "The New Age Spirituality," 64.

⁶Copley, "A Study in Religious Leadership and Cultism," 6, 26.

⁷Kenneth Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, Cambridge: University Press, 1989, 210-213.

are interestingly conservative movements, which are “defensively orthodox.”⁸ There are vivid differences from the tones of gurus in the colonial and postcolonial periods, from apologetic through assertive to aggressive in proclaiming the glorious past of ancient culture of India and its scriptures. They have taken up the task of preservation of the scriptural heritage of India and spreading the teachings of ancient sages through publication of literature. With the lofty aim of imparting spiritual knowledge through these modern means, they have reached out to thousands of people and have been exercising a positive influence over numerous people throughout the world. In the age of universal awakening, unification, harmonization, and emancipation, the gurus prepare ascetic scholars to be well-trained in scriptures and are posted in foreign countries as well.

Self-conscious gurus adopted western organizational models for their movements, borrowing ideas from the West and its religious traditions. The impact of colonial and Christian missionary model of organization is seen in these movements especially in the adaptation of community living, common prayer, preaching, monastical style of governance, and overall function of the organization. From the Hindu renaissance period, the trend of these movements was to go beyond religious and theological questions and to involve more in social and political matters. Impact of modernity and profound questioning of traditional forms of belief led their attachment to ideals of social transformation with social concerns, healthcare, and educational services.

3. *Atmaseva and Manavaseva*

Striving for inner peace and tranquillity in stress-filled life, many have been attracted to mystical philosophies and practices. The practice of yoga and meditation has proved to be a powerful combination. When the wobbling body becomes steadier and the disturbed mind becomes calmer, meditative techniques taught by gurus provide a deep sense of relaxation. They are taught to

⁸Copley, “Preface,” *Gurus and Their Followers*, xii.

draw inner strength to manage difficult situations and to keep smiling. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar says: "The truth about ourselves and our lives need to be updated. We need to revisit them and ask ourselves these questions again and again, 'What do I want?' 'Am I doing the right thing?' 'Am I happy?'"⁹ The mind often oscillates between the past and future, causing worry and anticipation. Desires, fear, cravings, and aversions grip the mind. To drop the conflicts in the mind, it is essential to bring the mind to the present moment. The gurus address the concerns of the contemporary humanity and seek to serve their followers' individual mental and spiritual welfare.

Inner journey does not stop in having relation only with God, but proceeds to enhance relationship with fellow human beings and with the creation. We can build up spirituality or mysticism only on the basis of human relationships, as Tagore emphasizes in his writings, especially in *Gitanjali*.¹⁰ While serving oneself, contemporary mystic is expected to be a humanistic at the same time. Being established in the Self, one's inner peace spreads outward, and makes one a more responsible human being full of caring, sharing, and loving. While addressing the concerns of individuals for their self-emancipation, gurus advocate service to humanity.

Many gurus and their movements have started rendering number of formal and informal services to society, through medical, educational, charitable institutions. Vivekananda's promotion of service to humanity in and through Ramakrishna movement became a major initiative and directive vision in colonial India. In Vivekananda, one witnesses a blend of strategies designed to ameliorate social conditions of India of his day with traditional Hindu structures – a change and synthesis of value within Hinduism of India.¹¹ Swami Akhandananda

⁹"The Art of Living," <<http://www.artofliving.org/in-en/yoga/yoga-benefits/yoga-and-spirituality>> (18 November 2014).

¹⁰V. Bhattacharya, *Relevance of Tagore*, Delhi: Metropolitan, 1979, 56.

¹¹Gwilym Beckerlegge, "Swami Akhandananda's *Sevavrata* (Vow of Service) and the Earliest Expressions of Service to Humanity in the Ramakrishna Math and Mission," in *Gurus and Their Followers*, 60-62

speaks of his letter to Vivekananda on service to humanity, as follows:

I began to count the days in expectation of a reply, and thought of many things that Swamiji might write. If he were to write: ‘you are Sannyasin. Why bother your head with mundane problems? Remain satisfied with your scriptures, spiritual practices and travels,’ I would have left India...¹²

In his response, Vivekananda wrote: “... develop spirituality and philanthropy... Go from door to door amongst the poor and lower classes ... to provide both religious and general education.”¹³

Many gurus have spearheaded in this direction of combining spiritual and social service. Change in understanding of *sannyasa* (life of a monk) as such from self-liberation to salvation of all is a welcome change in the New Age movements. Gurus and their disciples not only look for personal wealth, prosperity, and wellbeing, but also turn to service to humanity. Life of service to humanity (*manavaseva*) is made compatible with the discipline of *sannyasa*.

Although the gurus offer a grand vision of a global village and full communion with all, irrespective of race, religion, sex, caste, etc., question arises as to how far the universal values of justice and equality can be promoted in practical organization of the movements and their followers. Again, while acknowledging selfless service of many gurus and their followers, we critically see that the goal of *manavaseva* is mostly motivated by self-sanctification or self-relief as a projection of self and self-gratification. Roy Wallis identifies two fundamental characteristics of New Age movements, namely, “epistemological individualism” and “an ideology of revelational indeterminacy.” Both traits assert the individual as the locus of determination of truth and affirm the plurality of

¹²Swami Nirmayananda, *The Call of the Spirit*, Mylapore: Ramakrishna Math, 1984, 72.

¹³Vivekananda, *Collected Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. VI, 289-95.

ways.¹⁴ Ultimately, serving the self becomes predominant even though there are establishments for social, educational, and charitable works

4. Asceticism and Wealthy Establishments: Unholy Alliance?

Elements of renunciation, asceticism, and service reign supreme in traditional Ashram way of life, and they are revived in guru movements. Guru teaches the disciples self-realization and God realization through asceticism and concentration. A religious person is fundamentally a seeker, *sādhaka*, a person who renounces everything and dedicates to a relentless quest for God-experience. Sadhus or gurus and their communities hold on to the values of asceticism but function differently in the rapidly changing society. They teach that service and *sādhana* (exercises/practices) are the means for *siddhi*, self-realization. Spiritual evolution is quicker when service to humankind is undertaken with proper inclination and attitude. Critically looking at the social activities of gurus, B. D. Tripathi comments:

Sadhus have now realized that the present-day society will patronize them only when they serve the people not only spiritually but also in worldly terms. It is because of this growing realization in the Sadhus' community that many ascetics and ascetic organizations have started undertaking social services in their own humble ways.¹⁵

Divine Life Society founded in 1983 has one of its objectives, as "to wage spiritual war against growing materialism and to be practical in all the spheres of life."¹⁶ Traditionally, sadhus have no connection or relationship with the material world and they withdraw from all worldly concerns and keep no relationships, even with their families. Many modern gurus, however, go

¹⁴Roy Wallis, "Reflections on When Prophecy Fails," *Zetetic Scholar* 4 (1979), 119-136, cited in H. Urban, "The Cult of Ecstasy: Tantrism, New Age, and the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism," *History of Religions* 39, 3 (February, 2000), 276.

¹⁵B. D. Tripathi, *Sadhus of India: The Sociological View*, Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing, 2004, 190.

¹⁶Tripathi, *Sadhus of India*, 195.

around building beautiful meditation halls, collecting funds and charging fees for the courses they offer. Actually, the content of these courses have been around in tradition; not something that they discovered and then decided to give to the world. Spirituality and knowledge from a guru were traditionally considered to be for all and were not distributed with a profit motive. Certainly, there are many gurus in the present day India who practice spirituality in an ascetic manner, simply and with no call for attention towards themselves. When some gurus started to promote spirituality with new techniques and new methods, it was accessible to the rich and elite. When new techniques and methods enter the elite category by becoming available only to a certain class by virtue of pricing, question arises about what happens to the common people who do not have access to such methods.¹⁷

Modern gurus have coupled asceticism and wealth. Gurus who propagate spiritual value of asceticism are also seen to be advocating material possession and large establishments. Some openly proclaim themselves to be rich. For instance, Osho Rajneesh was called ‘spiritual materialist,’ ‘multimillionaire mystic,’ and so on, and lived like an emperor with many Rolls Royce cars. His famous words, “Jesus Saves, Moses Invests and Rajneesh spends,” describes his way of life. He is said to have frowned upon poverty, as he believed that human beings are potentially rich but fail to actualize their potentialities. The poor alone are responsible for their wretchedness, and nobody else. He called himself guru of the rich and not of the poor, condemning Christ and Gandhi for glorifying poverty.¹⁸ Osho says: “I do not condemn wealth. Wealth is a perfect means which can enhance people in every way and make life rich in all ways. The materially poor can never become spiritual.”¹⁹ Possessing, acquiring, and spending wealth are not bad; how one has to

¹⁷Hansen Thomas, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 200, 102.

¹⁸Tripathi, *Sadhus of India*, 245.

¹⁹Osho Rajneesh, as cited in L. Grafstein, “Messianic Capitalism,” *New Republic* 20 (February 1984), 14.

have the pursuit of wealth and to have the attitude towards it are to be properly understood.

The alliance of asceticism and wealth in guru movements is seen as contradictory. Concepts like individual human self as sacred and even identical with divine are upheld in Indian traditions. Western modernity promotes values such as freedom, authenticity, self-responsibility, self-reliance, self-determinism, equality, and self as having value in and of itself.²⁰ Some writers like Harvey Cox hold a view that twain of Western culture with its emphasis on individualism and consumerism cannot meet the mystical Eastern wisdom of 'egolessness' and 'detachment'. The values in these traditions are contradictory in nature.²¹ Modern guru movements successfully combine both arguing that one is not opposed to the other. Perfect balancing is needed between pursuit of wealth with moral and spiritual values. The guru movements developed certain dynamism of absorbing and integrating even opposing and contradicting views of life and ways of life, giving space for all possible worldviews and ideologies that claim to promote human wellbeing and cosmic harmony.²²

5. Spirituality for Sale: Success of Market Forces

The guru movements are quickly abandoning their initial aggressive countercultural rejection of materialism and sacralization of material prosperity and capitalism. In an answer to the question of marketing and spirituality, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar claimed that business and spirituality moved in opposite directions but, at the same time, he acknowledged that "Market means the needs of the people, and the need of the

²⁰Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and Sacralization of Modernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, 169.

²¹Harvey Cox, *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism*, New York: Simon and Shuster, 1977, 139, cited in Jacob Parappally, "The New Age Spirituality," 59.

²²Parappally, "The New Age Spirituality," 59.

people is happiness, peace, beauty.”²³ Indu Jain, one of the owners of the Times Group of Companies, appealed to P. Chidambaram, former Finance Minister, for the recognition of the economic potential of the spiritual market that was just waiting to be tapped.²⁴ Contemporary society offers a market for the professionals in the New Age spirituality, newly found enthusiasts like management gurus, Human Resource Development trainers, Alternative Educational Programme experts, and specialists in alternative medicine. Marketing the traditional religious values and virtues to all without any religious obligations becomes strategy of the gurus. These new gurus reintroduced ‘youngsters’ to the old ways of spirituality, to praying, to meditating, and to dancing with spiritual fervour rather than at the local disco to more western beats. There is reintroduction of forgotten ways of spirituality into society.²⁵

Various attempts are made to harmonize spirituality with material prosperity where capitalism provides them inalienable right to private property and individual’s unbridled freedom to acquire, possess, and dispose wealth. Capitalism turns out to be not only an ally supporting its ideology but also giving it a religious legitimacy.

The innate nature of humans for transcendence is identified with the individual’s success in having material prosperity... Capitalism appropriated everything of the New Age spirituality and domesticated it to serve its own purposes. Capitalist ideology can easily manipulate the New Age spirituality and postmodern philosophy to expand its hold on the people of the global market, not for the unfolding of human persons or for the enhancement of communion among humans themselves or relation between humans and

²³Francois Gautier, *The Guru of Joy: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and the Art of Living India*, Carlsbad, California: Hay House Inc., 2008, 18.

²⁴David Stephen, “The Guru of Joy,” *India Today*, 12 November 2001, 5.

²⁵Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in postcolonial Bombay*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, 102.

the cosmos, but to expand the world of Mammon to benefit a few individuals.²⁶

Capitalism has cleverly aligned itself with the quest for transcendence and freedom by interpreting and re-orienting it to mean that this quest is for material prosperity, which is also spirituality. Forced to compete with other business and industries, religion itself tends to become another consumer product within the supermarket of values where a believer is free to choose from among a wide array of possible beliefs for one's own personal development.²⁷ Religion itself becomes a commodity. Gurus and their movements look like a supermarket with varieties of goods for spiritual, mental, and material needs.²⁸ From inner-worldly asceticism a paradigm shift takes place in the New Age movements where consumerism, physical pleasure and hedonism become value. There is no apology for commercialization of spirituality. As illustrated above, modern gurus are criticized thoroughly for selling spirituality and giving into consumeristic culture and market forces.

Agreeing with this criticism, we move forward to show how Indian spirituality has always been considerate with the question of material concerns of humans. Showing that spirituality of India is not deprived of materiality, gurus pave a new path called *dharmārtha mārga*.

6. 'Spiritual India': Without Material Concerns?

Each guru has played an influential role in one's own time and still attracts a large number of devotees. Gurus have successful strategies of creation of history and establishment of ancient roots, as many followers are found to be revering and worshiping their gurus as a living incarnation of God, invested with possession of undefined and amorphous ancient knowledge.²⁹ The guru movements are gathering masses of followers with advocating a return to 'Indian roots'. The new

²⁶Parappally, "The New Age Spirituality," 65.

²⁷Urban, "The Cult of Ecstasy," 297.

²⁸Parappally, "The New Age Spirituality," 64.

²⁹Gautier, *The Guru of Joy*, 45.

gurus’ movements present themselves as giving all people a sense of rootedness. When we analyze the presentation of Indian past by colonial writers and historians on Indian traditions, we find a stereotype of projecting India only as ‘spiritual’, ‘idealistic’, etc. We need to question the validity of these long-cherished conclusions from the idealistic point of view and propose a re-examination of certain standard interpretations of the ancient Indian past. For instance, with convenient dogmatism and over-simplification of Indian traditions stalwarts like S. N. Dasgupta, S. Radhakrishnan, and many other orientalist and Indologists have shown highly consistent interpretation of the entire Indian philosophical heritage from the uncompromisingly idealistic point of view. It has enjoyed the widest popularity both in and outside the academic circles. We need to critically evaluate the reiterated claim that the tradition of India is of unbroken idealism or spiritualism. Vedic-Vedantic tradition alone is not the Indian roots; Tantra, Samkhya, Ajivika, Bhutavada, Indian materialism, etc., which enjoy an existence-in-itself in the ancient Indian past cannot be overlooked. Indian roots are both material and spiritual.

The Sramanic tradition in India includes two streams of thought like naturalistic-materialistic and ascetical. Sramanic asceticism offered by Buddhism and Jainism owed its origin in *Kshatriya* activism. As rulers with political power, *Kshatriyas* were concerned about distribution of wealth, if not generation of the same. *Karma*, action, thus, becomes a fundamental category of Sramanic philosophical discourse. Sramanic guidelines for production of social wealth, its appropriation and distribution among people highlight the significance of the *Kshatriya* activism. Inability to distinguish good and bad action and failure to face the intricate dialectics become the reason for Jaina option of asceticism where going beyond the forms of action is held to be the remedy of the problem.

The Jaina refutation of all action suggests that every action is one at the same time creative and destructive. Facing such a paradoxical situation ... Jainism inevitably accepts to formulate an ideal of going beyond both. Asceticism emerges

as a metaphysical project when an impossible contradiction appears at the 'physical realm'.³⁰

Adapting a middle path Buddhism avoided two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. Abandoning cruel asceticism, Buddha said: "May there not be now some other way to wisdom?"³¹ The 'Right Conduct', one of the eightfold path of Buddha for *Nirvāna*, is to be understood along with the denial of extreme asceticism. He advocated meritorious acts, *vinaya*.³² In Sramanic tradition, material asceticism, ontological asceticism, and theoretical asceticism crop up as way of life towards liberation.

Much acclaimed philosophy of action in *Bhagavad-gītā*, the 'desireless action', does not have anything to do with non-action (*Gīta* II.47). Kṛṣṇa does not ask Arjuna to kill all desires; on the contrary, he says that he himself is desire, which is not opposed to *dharma*, the universal ethical order (*Gīta* VII.11). Attuning one's desires with the processes of the ethical order does not mean to kill all desires but to channel desires.³³ Integrating the knowledge, activity, and emotion, Indian systems look for a holistic way of life. The way of knowledge and way of action do not satisfy human needs for love, trust, and faith. Human beings are not only intellectual and active beings but also emotional creatures. *Jñāna* (knowledge) *mārga*, *karma* (action) *mārga*, and *bhakti* (devotion) *mārga* have a common characteristic of the transition from outwardness to inwardness.

May be non-Indians simply projected their own spiritual needs onto the Indian spiritual tradition. There is nothing uniquely Indian about spiritual pursuits, nor is India's

³⁰N. Muthumohan, "The Sramanic Asceticism and Its Attitude to Wealth," *Satyanilayam* 10 (August 2006), 81.

³¹Refer, T. W. Rhys Davids, trans., *The Questions of King Milinda*, Part II, Verse IV.6.20, of *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. XXXVI, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982, 60.

³²Muthumohan, "The Sramanic Asceticism," 82.

³³P. T. Raju, "Religion and Spiritual Values in Indian Thought" in *The Indian Mind: Essentials of Indian Philosophy and Culture*, Charles A. Moore, ed., Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2008, 190.

culture uniquely spiritual... India has a strongly materialist drive. Vivekananda was surely wrong to polarize a materialist West and a spiritual East.³⁴

Both West and East are composite cultures as “the reality being more complex as both cultures contain strong ‘spiritual’ and ‘material’ factors.”³⁵ Guru movements with their quest for Indian rootedness are reviving the Indian traditions of coupling materialism with spiritualism, asceticism with activism.

7. Dharmārtha Mārga: Towards an Integrated Path

In the Vedic tradition, too, both *dharma* and *artha* are among the goals of human life. Traditional teachings point out to fourfold goals of human life (*puruṣārtha*): wealth, pleasure, righteousness and liberation. “Both the desire for worldly happiness and the desire for the highest good are legitimate desires, and they are always present” (*Kātha-upaniṣad*, I.ii.2). The means to their fulfilment are the warp and the woof of the fabric of Indian thought. “Desire for the contemplative life, which is cherished at a certain stage of spiritual growth, arises only after a man has gone through all the material enjoyments provided by the society.”³⁶ In answering a question, “How can spirituality and worldliness be in harmony?” Dalai Lama said, “... in the case of a worldly act inspired by noble sentiments, for instance, if the attitude or intentions of a person involved in running the economy of a country or a place are inspired by kindness or concern for the welfare of others, it is then a simple matter to integrate the spiritual with the secular.”³⁷

Indian thinkers, including the non-dualists, are not indifferent to the world but they take the world to be very real in a certain important sense. They point out that the fulfilment of

³⁴Copley, “A Study in Religious Leadership and Cultism,” 4-5.

³⁵Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge: University Press, 1996, 258.

³⁶Swami Nikhilananda, “The Realistic Aspect of Indian Spirituality” in *The Indian Mind*, 217.

³⁷Dalai Lama, *Beyond Dogma: The Challenge of the Modern World*, New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1996, 149.

social obligations is indispensable for the attainment of spiritual experience. Thinkers and saints never failed to exhort their religious devotees to perform their social duties and keep faith in the ultimate triumph of righteousness and truth. India has not always been a land of poverty. When India was spiritually great, she was also materially prosperous, ethically great and culturally creative. Traditional spiritual and cultural heritage of the India's past cannot be left to promote stagnation, but to be reformulated with ideals of modernity to suit the conditions of our age.³⁸ God-realization, self-realization, and quest for Truth, spiritual union, material prosperity, and life of comfort and pleasure become the goals of life.

For any religion ... that considers itself to be a way of life and every man a wayfarer (*mārgayāmin*) all values of life ... are spiritual, provided they are recognized and realized as oriented toward the innermost spirit... If religious life is the same as spiritual life ... then, on the one hand, all values that are apparently secular must contain reference or directedness to the spirit, on the other hand, the spirit must support and encourage their pursuit and realization.³⁹

The gurus, following truly Indian traditions, promote spirituality with materiality and pave a new way, namely, *Dharmārtha Mārga*, as the path followed by modern gurus catering to human aspirations for material growth without compromising spiritual values.

8. Conclusion

As we have highlighted the dialectics at play in the discourse of contemporary Indian gurus, the interplay of the spiritual and the material enables a wonderful integration of the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of life. In an attempt to seeking and proposing solutions for contemporary issues in and through the ancient spiritual and religious texts and traditions, the gurus have engaged themselves in a hermeneutical exercise. On the one hand, we appreciate the tools used in such efforts and, on

³⁸Nikhilananda, "The Realistic Aspect of Indian Spirituality," 216-217.

³⁹Raju, "Religion and Spiritual Values in Indian Thought," 183.

the other hand, we could be critical about the sustainability and success of such hermeneutics.

Human restlessness and the longing for one’s own wellbeing are major factors attended to within these New Age movements. Many foster a consumer approach to religion, catering to the consumer mentality looking for instant material and spiritual gratification. Spiritual composure, physical health, and economic wellbeing became the promised products people look for. Gurus have become like retail outlets opened by the supermarket-chains, advertising a blend of Western cult of individualism and Eastern wisdom and techniques to discover the individual self, promise of transcendence, and infinite communion. These contemporary responses to the human longing for harmony, belongingness, communion, and freedom from religious and socio-cultural prohibitions are necessitated to lead to spiritual, psychological, and physical wellbeing of contemporary humanity.

Although the trend of gurus and their movements look like fallen into the hands of market forces, making them relevant to contemporary society driven by global context of consumerism, individualism, and material prosperity, the blend of spirituality and materiality is a welcome change, as it does not exclude each other. If pursuit of *artha* (wealth) is promoted within the ambit of regulating spiritual and moral principle of celebration of *dharma* (virtues), the path of the gurus is justified. *Dharmārthamārga* is an innovative response of the gurus to contemporary aspirations.