

17. Colour and Caste

Hindu Dharma and its rules of life are based on Varna (caste) and *Asrama* (stage of life). Let us take first the principle of Varna in religion. The word Maya used in Vedantha discussions has generally been the target for indifference, neglect and criticism. So too Varna. Varna and the distinctions based on it are condemned as the artifices of man. Maya is condemned likewise as against all reason, for it disregards the world calling it illusion. The Smrithi declares, “*Chaathur varnyam, maya srshtam*” (the four varnas are created by Me); the Sruthi says, “*Brahmanosya mukham aseeth; baahoorajanyah krthah*, etc.” (The *Brahmin* emerged from the face, the *Kshatriyas* rose from the arms). It is clear Varna is created by the Lord. Nevertheless, if it is propagated that the Varna system has brought about disastrous distinctions, the fault lies in misinterpreting the word.

Are there in society now genuine Varnas? What exactly is Varna? Is any attempt made to discover that fact? No. Varna is just a word. Every word has a meaning and Varna too ought to mean something, should it not? To prove that trees exist, the word “tree” is enough. A word is just sound but it indicates something existing. The sound “elephant” is the proof of the existence of that animal. So too, when the sounds, “cat,” “dog,” “fox” are heard, the forms of those animals present themselves before the mind’s eye. The sounds were there even before us. We were born into the tangle of sounds. We did not originate them. We require groups of men and things if there is a wish to originate sound and shape it into a meaningful word. So, for every current word, a meaning must adhere. We cannot impose on it the meaning we choose. The words with their implications are there already, even before our birth. We just use them, whichever way we want, whenever we need.

Word involves speech. It means *Pada*, in Sanskrit. Every object in the world is called in Sanskrit, a “*Padaartha*,” “word-meaning.” The hill is the heap of earth indicated by the word “hill.” Similarly, the word *Brahmin* and *Sudra* inform us that there were persons answering to those words. The questions “Who is a Brahmin? Who is not a Brahmin?” are irrelevant now. What is being made known is only the conceptions of “word” and “meaning.” The entire Cosmos is subsumed under “word” and “meaning”; it is sheer Name and Form (the Name being the Word, and the Form, the Meaning).

The Sruthis (Vedas) declare so. “*Vaachaa-rambhanam Vikaaro Naamadheyam.*” “Name and Form are one single indivisible unit” just as Shiva and Parvathi, Active and Inert, Object and Image, the Moon and Moonlight. Yet, for dealing with the world, the Word is all-important. The word arises from thought. Thought is shaped by experience. Experience depends on desire and desire springs from Ignorance, Ajnana, Maya, Avidya or Prakriti, which too is fundamentally based on the Divine.

Since it is based on the Divine Lord who is the Splendour of Wisdom, the repository of Innate Glory, the darkness of Maya, Ignorance, Avidya or Prakriti should not overpower us. Where light is present, darkness has no place. The Lord declared, “I shall become Many” and that Will resulted in the Cosmos and is directing It forever. Therefore, Name and Form are the results of that Will, and not of any human will. It will be an absurd claim if man pretends that He originated them. The All-powerful Lord alone has willed so. That is the reason why He is designated as the Supreme. To the question, “Does God exist?” the existence of the word God is the indisputable proof.

The world consists of multifarious objects and each has a name. No one has discovered how or why these names get attached to these objects. Nor is it possible to explain the how and why. Even if an attempt is made, the result can be only a guess and not the truth. So it is best to conclude that it is divinely descended. Words used between birth and

death, or current before birth or after death, words indicating the mother and the children, or words like Righteousness (Dharma), Unrighteousness (Adharma), Heaven (*Swarga*) and Hell (Naraka) are certainly not human artifices but divine dispensations. The Vedas are the authority for this declaration.

Let us consider one point. Can anyone quote a single instance either in this world or some other of a mere word which does not convey a meaning? No. It is impossible. Each word has a meaning. That meaning denotes a decision by God. It is only when this is recognised by men that they can grasp the mystery of life.

So when it is declared that the Brahmin manifested from the face “*Brahmanaasya mukham aaseeth*” or that the four varnas have been created by Me, *chaathur varnaym Mayaa Srshtam*, does it not also posit that there must have been Varnas which are denoted by the word and persons who could be described as examples of representatives of that word? Do not these declarations make plain to us that the very God who created them grouped them on the basis of their tendencies and activities as Varnas?

So the word Varna can be understood in all its bearings only if deep inquiry is made and clean thought is directed on it. The meaning of Varna, the most common among the people and current everywhere, is “colour.” But how this word came to be attached with that meaning is not known to many. This has to be known in order to grasp the true

significance of the word. In the word Varna, the root *Vr* means “description” “elaboration,” also the process of “counting.” The roots *r*, *rn*, which form such words as *ramana* mean “enjoyment, pleasure, etc.” Therefore, Varna signifies “accepting with pleasure after elaborate consideration.”

As regards “colour” white, red and black are the basic ones. Other colours are but derivatives. The white symbolises the Sathwic tendency, the red, the Rajasic and the black, the Thamasic. That is the mystery of creation. Individuals take birth according to the tendencies they appreciate, aspire for and adopt. So the Varnas into which they are born are determined by themselves and not by any external authority. Which particular tendency they choose to cultivate depends on their intellectual level. It is generally believed that desires shape the intelligence. Intelligence moulds the activities and activities decide the character and nature of life. This is the correct interpretation of the expression “*Guna* (quality, attribute) *Karma Vibhaagasah*.” While the Sruthi and the Smrithi texts indicate so elaborately the causes that lead to the individual’s birth, life and death in particular castes, religion, families and sections, persons who are unable to understand the same lay down theories according to their own limited intelligence and derive satisfaction therefrom.

What else is this but sheer ignorance? Or it may be egoist pride exhibiting that they know everything, for, is not

egoism itself the progeny of ignorance? The conclusion is that caste, social status, family and even religion are determined by *Guna* (quality, attributes) and Karma. They are not amenable to human manipulation. The Vedas declare so. They posit that it has been so decided by Divine Will.

Bharath is designated as *Karma-bhoomi*, or *Karma-Kshethra*, the Holy Land of Godward Activity. All men everywhere are pilgrims trekking towards the Holy Land of Godward Activity. Karma is the *sine qua non* of Bharath. It holds forth the divinity of activity and turns all activity into spiritual sadhana. This is the reason for the names by which Bharath is known.

The sacred scriptures of this land (Sruthi) loudly proclaim that the individual is the architect of his own fate, high or low status in society, luxury or poverty, liberty or bondage. “*Sa yatha Krathurasmin loke purusho bhavathi; thathe thah prathye bhavathi*”: “Whatever form the person craves for now while alive in this world, that form he attains after death”: Sruthi declares thus. Therefore it is clear that Karma decides Janma, and that the luxury or poverty, the character and attitude, the level of intelligence, the joys and grief of this life are the earnings gathered during previous lives. The inference therefore is inevitable that the next life of the individual will be in consonance with the activities prompted by the level of intelligence which rules the person here and now. Some persons though of noble birth engage themselves in evil deeds. Others, though born in castes

considered low, are engaged in good deeds. How does this happen? This is a problem that agitates us often. Persons born as Brahmins perform bad deeds; in other words, they descend into Rajasic and Tamasic levels. Persons born in inferior castes rise into the Sathwic level and do good deeds. Brahmins of the type mentioned are only Janma Brahmins and not Karma Brahmins—Brahmins by birth and not Brahmins by virtue of their deeds. The others are low only by birth and not low at all by virtue of their deeds. The Vedas require co-ordination of birth and behaviour in castes.

Persons of pure Sathwic nature are rare in the world. They have mostly Rajas colouring and Sathwic character. Such individuals having attained noble birth are involved in Rajasic activities. They declare by their deeds that they are of mixed caste. The Vedas have not ignored such examples of mixed nature and the consequent effects on caste. The Vedas are impartial. They are not prejudiced against one and favourable to another. They do not elevate one set of persons or discard another, they only proclaim the truth that exists.

Let us consider an example. Kausika was a Kshatriya, that is to say, a person of Rajasic nature. However, as the result of his deeds in previous lives, Sathwic tendencies and attitudes entered his consciousness and he went about adhering strictly to truth. He transformed himself and sublimated his consciousness into a pure state. The mantra that he uttered, and which emanated from that level of

consciousness is the Gayatri. He is known as Viswamitra, the *mitra* (friend) of the entire *Viswa*, for he became the well-wisher of the entire world! Brahmins have accepted and acclaimed that mantra as a Divine Gift. They have revered and recited it and derived immense Bliss. Kausika was therefore a Janma Kshatriya but he became a Karma-Brahmin and he was accepted as such by the Vedas, which emanated from the Voice of God. Thus it is clear that the Vedas proclaim the Path to all mankind without prejudice, partiality or sense of distinction. They pay attention only to the thoughts and acts of the individual.

About this, modern thinkers may have some doubt. This is quite natural. Let us see what that doubt is. When it is said that Divine Will has laid down the varnas, should they not exist in all lands? Surely, they should not be confined to this country, Bharath, they say. But there is no rule that whatever is created should necessarily be found to exist everywhere! It is not possible to realise that expectation.

It is but natural that restrictions and preferences concerning the process of living comprising the code have to be established with reference to each region, its atmosphere and climate, its peculiarities and specialties. There is no rule that trees that grow in Bharath should be found growing in other countries also. We cannot argue that stars which occupy the sky should exist also on the earth! There is no compulsion which insists that fishes that live in water should also live on hills.

God alone knows and decides what should happen to which, and where and why. All else are powerless. Events like birth are determined by circumstances of space, time, causation and the like. They are not bound by our needs or reactions, favourable or unfavourable. For this reason, mere observations and study of what is patent will only lead to confusing doubts about Varnas. Such doubts are inevitable for they are bred by the ego. The core of reality is separate and distinct from the fabrications of the ego. When people start acting according to the whims of fancy and speaking whatever comes to mind, we can only characterise them as models of sheer ignorance.

