

# Chapter XVII. Fourfold Social Division

## Creation of caste

Hindu *dharma* and its rules of life are based on caste (*varna*) and stage of life (*asrama*). Let us take first the principle of caste in religion. The word illusion (*maya*) used in *Vedanta* discussions has generally been the target for indifference, neglect, and criticism. So too, caste. Caste and the distinctions based on it are condemned as artifices of humanity. Likewise, illusion is condemned as against all reason, for it disregards the world, calling it illusion. The codes of law (*smrithi*) declare, “The four castes are created by Me (*chaathur varnyam, maya srishtam*)”; and the *Vedas* (*sruthi*) say, “The *brahmin* emerged from the face, the warriors rose from the arms, etc. (*brahmanosya mukham aseeth; baahuu-raajanyah krithah, etc.*)”. It is clear that the caste system is created by the Lord. If it is propagated that the caste system has brought about disastrous distinctions, the fault lies in misinterpretation of the word.

Does society now have genuine castes (*varnas*)? What exactly is caste? Is any attempt made to discover that fact? No. Caste (*varna*) is just a word. Every word has a meaning, and caste should mean something too, shouldn't it?

## Names and forms: handiwork of God

To prove that trees exist, the word “tree” is enough. A word is just sound, but it indicates something that exists. The sound “elephant” is 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 people 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 we want, whenever we need.

Word (*pada*) involves speech. In Sanskrit, every object in the world is called a “*padartha* (word-meaning)”. The hill is a heap of earth, indicated by the word “hill”. Similarly, the words *brahmin* and labourer (*sudra*) inform us that there were persons answering to those words. The questions “Who is a *brahmin*? Who is not a *brahmin*?” are irrelevant in this discussion. 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; the form, the meaning).

The *Vedas* (*sruthis*) declare: “Name and form are one single indivisible unit (*vaachaarambho vikaaro naamadheyam*)”, just as the following are: Siva and Parvathi, active and inert, object and image, the moon and moonlight. Yet, for dealing with the world, the word is all-important. Word arises from thought; thought is shaped by experience; experience depends on desire; and desire springs from ignorance (*a-jnana*), delusion (*maya*), lack of wisdom (*a-vidya*) or nature (*prakriti*), which are also fundamentally based on the Divine.

Since they are based on the divine Lord, who is the splendour of wisdom and the repository of innate glory, the darkness of delusion, ignorance, or nature 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 would be an absurd claim for people to pretend that they originated them. The All-powerful Lord alone has willed so. That is 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, each with a name. No one has discovered how or why these names got attached to these objects, nor is it possible to explain this. 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 mother and children, or words like righteousness (*dharma*), unrighteousness, 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 that 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 recognized by people 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 castes (*varnas*) were created by Me (*chaathur varnaym mayaa srishtham*), doesn't that also posit that there must have been castes that are denoted by the word and people who could be described as examples or representatives of that word? Don't these declarations make plain to us that the very God who created them grouped them on the basis of their tendencies and activities as castes?

### **Primal qualities created by innate desires**

So the word caste (*varna*) can be understood in all its bearings only if deep inquiry is made and clear thought is directed on it. The meaning of caste, the most common among the people and current everywhere, is “colour”. But how this word came to be attached to 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 *vri* means description, elaboration, and also the process of counting. The roots *r* and *rn* that form words like *ramana* mean enjoyment, pleasure, etc., so *varna* signifies “accepting with pleasure after elaborate consideration”.

Regarding “colour”, white, red, and black are the basic ones. Other colours are but derivatives. White symbolizes the pure (*sathwic*) tendency; red, the passionate (*rajasic*); and black, the dull (*thamasic*). That is the mystery of creation. Individuals take birth according to the tendencies they appreciate, aspire for, and adopt. So the castes 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 karma vibhaagasah*.

While the *Vedas* (*sruthis*) and the codes of law (*smrithi*) indicate so elaborately the causes that lead to the individual's birth, life, and death in particular castes, religions, families, and sections, people who are unable to understand them lay down theories according to their own limited intelligence and derive satisfaction therefrom.

What else is this but sheer ignorance? Or it may be egotist pride exhibiting that they know everything, for isn't egotism itself the progeny of ignorance? The conclusion is that caste, social status, family and even religion are determined by quality (*guna*) and *karma*. They are not amenable to human manipulation. The *Vedas* declare

so; they posit that it has been so decided by divine Will.

### **India: Holy land of Godward action**

India (Bharath) is designated as the Holy Land of Godward activity (*karma-bhumi* or *karma-kshetra*). All people everywhere are pilgrims trekking toward the Holy Land of Godward activity. *Karma* is the *sine qua non* of India; it holds forth the divinity of activity and turns all activity into spiritual discipline (*sadhana*). This is the reason for the names by which India is known.

The sacred scriptures (*sruthi*) of this land loudly proclaim that the individual is the architect of their own fate, high or low status in society, luxury or poverty, liberty or bondage. “Whatever form the person craves now, while alive in this world, that form the person attains after death (*Sa yatha krathurasmin loke purusho bhavathi; thathethah prathye bhavathi*)”, declare the *Vedas*. Therefore, it is clear that *karma* decides birth and that luxury or poverty, character, attitude, the level of intelligence, the joys and griefs of this life are the earnings gathered during previous lives. The inference is inevitable that the next life of the individual will be in consonance with the activities prompted by the level of intelligence that rules the person here and now.

### **Birth, progress based on desires, activities**

Some people, though of noble birth, engage themselves in evil deeds. Others, though born in castes considered low, are engaged in good deeds. Why? This problem agitates us often. Some people born as *brahmins* perform bad deeds; in other words, they descend into passionate (*rajasic*) and ignorant (*thamasic*) levels. People born in inferior castes rise into the pure (*sathwic*) level and do good deeds. *Brahmins* of the type mentioned are *brahmins* by birth only and not 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 coordination of birth and behaviour in castes.

People of pure (*sathwic*) nature are rare in the world. People have mostly passion (*rajas*), which colours the pure character. Such individuals, having attained noble birth, are involved in passionate (*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 people or discard another; they only proclaim the truth that exists.

Let us consider an example. Kausika was a warrior (*kshatriya*), that is to say, a person of passionate (*rajasic*) nature. However, as the result of his deeds in previous lives, pure (*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 that emanated from that level of consciousness is the *Gayatri*. He is known as Viswamitra, the friend (*mithra*) of all (*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 from it. Kausika was therefore a warrior by birth, but he became a *brahmin* by activity, 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.

### **Social divisions reflect time, place, circumstance**

Modern thinkers may have some doubt about this. This is quite natural. Let us see what that doubt is. When it is said that divine will laid down the castes, should they not exist in all lands? Surely, they should not be confined to this country, India (Bharath), they say. But there is no rule that whatever is created is necessarily to be found to exist everywhere! It is not possible to realize that expectation.

It is only 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 specialities. There is no rule that trees that grow in India should be found growing in other countries also. We cannot argue that stars that occupy the sky should exist also on the earth! No compulsion insists that fishes that live in water should also live on hills.

Only God 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 observation and study of what is patent will only lead to confusing doubts about castes. 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 speak whatever comes to mind, we can only characterize them as models of sheer ignorance.