

Varna, Caste and duty in the Bhagavad Gita

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Abstract

The word *Varna* determines a group of people in the society, where we are bound to each other in a same group. Bhagavad Gita says the concept of *Varna* decided on the basis of our *action* as it is prescribed by the society. *Varna* is divided on numbers, that is *four Varna (Brahmana, Kshitra, Vaishya, Shudra)* and it determines our body color. On the other hand *Caste* is a small group of people where there is no mobility like *Varna*, though it has sub - castes. *Caste* is based on local ritual and occupation. So, both are slightly co related to each other. Both are based on action. In this paper I would like to explain the *duty* according to *Varna* and *Caste*. In addition, also I would like to explain the duty as Bhagavad Gita says. And there will be a study that, is it possible to implement or not in our practical life.

Keywords – Varna, Brahmana, Kshitra, Vaishya, Shudra, Caste, duty.

Mahabharata is the only witness where we get all narratives of battle between Kaurava and Pandava. As we know both of them belong to Kshatriya Varna. Arjuna was a warrior who belonged to this same varna. Kshatriya varna is the warrior class in the varna system of our society. Krishna inspired him to perform his duty. Krishna inspired to perform the duty in the battle field and to make the war successful. Here these two words 'varna' and 'Kshatriya' denote the structure of our society as we are living till now. Generally, we used to say Brahman jati or Brahman caste, and Kshatriya jati or Kshatriya caste and so on instead of Brahman or Kshatriya Varna. We are not very much fond of Varna like caste or jati. Thus the question is whether the meaning of Varna and caste or jati is synonymous?

“The English word ‘caste’ is used to denote both varna and *jati*, which are words, used and understood by those from the Hindu culture. Varna usually refers to one of the four main categories into which Hindu society is traditionally divided. Generally, *Jati* refers to a much smaller group. For example, the various groups which have evolved out of the four varna - castes or out of the many outcaste and untouchable groups would be considered *jati*.”ⁱ So the word caste and Varna carries the same meaning.

Varna or caste is a system where the different castes are placed in a vertical series, one above the other. According to Manu (the mythical Indian lawgiver), the Brahmin, or we can say the upper class, is placed at the first rank; below him is the Kshatriya or the warrior class where Arjuna belongs; below Kshatriya is the Vaishya; after Vaishya is the Sudra, and then Ati-Sudra (the Untouchables). This system of rank and gradation is a permanent social relationship among the classes. (*B R Ambedkar, Writings and speeches*, Vol 3, p.25).

In this social relation, every varna or caste has its duty. For Arjuna, fighting is a mandatory duty; it is his duty (swadharma), which should never be denied being a Kshatriya. It is compulsory because he belongs to the Kshatriya caste or we can say warrior class. It is his duty (swadharma) because he was born in a Kshatriya family. All Kshatriya’s swadharma is to fight. Arjuna must have the quality to fight because his caste has been divided based on quality. But here, an important question can be asked to Krishna: how can someone know his swadharma?

Krishna replied, “The four-fold Varna system was created by me, based on the differentiation of guna and karma.”ⁱⁱ So, according to Krishna, one’s swadharma acquires based on his guna or quality and karma or action. Shri Krishna addressed this point briefly in this verse. He says humans are classified into four categories: Brahman, Kshatriya, vaishya and shudra. These four categories are based on the three Gunas, Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas and the corresponding action that each guna prompts us to do.

These three qualities and their corresponding actions are as follows. Raja is expressed as an activity or agitation, or unrest. Tamas says lack of enthusiasm or laziness. Sattva’s

quality defines knowledge and peace. So we must perform self-analysis to understand how our quality behaves within us. 'A Brahman who is specially engaged for gaining knowledge, faith, sharing knowledge will usually have a prominence of sattva.'ⁱⁱⁱ 'A Kshatriya who shows courage likes to organize and protect people, face challenges, take risks, try new things will have a promontory of sattva and rajas.'^{iv} Vaishya, the third caste in this classification who likes to be creative and produce something, will have a prominence of rajas and tamas. A Shudra who wants to execute tasks but requires a lot of motivation will have the importance of tamas.

As Krishna told Arjuna, "Sattva binds one to material happiness; rajas conditions the soul toward actions; and tamas clouds wisdom and binds one to delusion."^v

So, Arjuna should perform his karma (fight) because he has the quality (rajas), and it is his swadharma as Kshatriya. Here again, a question is whether Arjuna had the quality of fighting before his birth or gained that quality after he was born? If he had that quality by birth, it is his innate quality that he got within his birth. But if he gained daily as he grew up, it is his achieved quality by own. Both of these two are not hereditary. Because, if the first generation is a doctor, the next generation doesn't need to become a doctor. Although being a Kshatriya, Arjuna's father Pandu was not a prominent fighter. But Arjuna belonging to the same family, was a renounced soldier; which denotes the quality which man does not acquire by birth. Instead, the quality of man gains by his ability. After being born day by day, Arjuna developed the skill of fighting. Nobody can say that before he was born, in his mother's womb, he was the owner of the quality of the fight. After born, a quality of fighting was founded in Arjuna's character. If a person in the present generation is a farmer, then his son/daughter next-generation may be a teacher. Spent skill and quality manifested in him. The above-discussed two spheres are not problematic with caste. Because in these two, there is no fixed rule that generation after generation must go through the same occupation. Arjuna would be pleased if he could make his decision as he wanted. Nobody might have been wounded and died because of the war.

But, the problem occurs with Krishna's statement; the four castes already have been divided by him based on quality and action. The question is, how can it be decided that Arjuna had the quality to fight just after birth? As Krishna says to Arjuna, you have the quality to fight because you are a Kshatriya. Here another significant question must be asked about Arjuna: whether the caste will come first or the quality of fighting? About a neonate, nobody can say what kind of quality he has at present and what he will have in future? Then it can be stated whether a child's quality will come first as an identity or he will be identified based on his heredity?

In the reply, it has been said, "A being is born, as a man according to the qualities and actions of his previous birth. So, his caste is decided by birth. Thus marriages etc. should be decided by caste."^{vi} Thus Krishna recognized rebirth, by which he wanted to explain hereditary duty. But, again, the same problem is created. Based on the debate, we recognize that Arjuna had the quality of fighting due to his heredity. But why should he perform the same as his last generation had done? According to Krishna, Arjuna must fight because of heredity. If it is obtained by previous birth, how can it be decided that the person belongs to the same caste in both birth, previous and present? Previous birth and previous caste are not the same. Because suppose in previous birth someone belonged to shudra and he was a good army. In the last birth, he had the quality to fight very well. But, at his present birth, he belongs to a Brahmin family and has the same quality. Thus, how the present delivery is identical to the previous birth and quality will never be identical.

This philosophy of Krishna about caste duty is not suitable for building a good society. If nobody can choose what occupation he will have in future, if people would be in a barrier for the last generation, then it is very harmful to a healthy society. The duty of Arjuna, as Krishna says, denotes the deontological theory of action where man has to perform his duty only for the sake of duty. It may harm others, but man must fulfill his duty at any cost.

But suppose, "I was born a sweeper, and I will die a sweeper! I cannot become anything better, though I have the capacity; society tells me, remain there, remain there.'

Not only does society say so, Swami Vivekananda says, the Brahmana power made an agreement with the Kshatriya power to keep all others down".^{vii}

Continuing this argument, it is also stated that if we talk about the three qualities of sattva, rajas, and tamas, another contradiction will occur. A contradiction of quality and karma happens because "It is wrong to suppose that in a given person some qualities are present and others absent. On the contrary, the truth is that all. Qualities are present in every person, and this truth is not diminished in any way; some tendency predominates to the extent of being the only one that is apparent. So well established is this truth that a tendency which may be dominant in a man at one time may be quite different from and even the direct opposite of the tendency that may be dominant at another time."^{viii}

"But, by discrimination based on genetic conditions, we have ruined our people, arrested their development all these centuries." ^{ix}As we can tell, "This shloka was heavily misinterpreted to support the incorrect notion that varna is determined by birth."^x

Conclusion

So, as we have said in the introduction about the quality of a man will assign his duty or not. After discussion about all we can say the quality of a man is inherent or we can say it innate. But, when he is grown up and become established in his own life, it is different. We may see that, somebody have the quality of business but he belongs to a Brahmin family by birth. That means as Bhagavad Gita told that, four varna was made according to quality is contradictory. If not, then why in spite of having a particular quality, people are belonging to another varna, will raise a question mark. Therefore, the line by Lord Krishna four- fold varna creation on the basis of quality and action is not possible to implement in our practical life.

Reference

ⁱPaggifr, Luigi sx. *Caste & untouchability - A study-research paper in the Indian Subcontinent*. Museo d'Arte Cinese ed Etnografico di Parma.2002.p.30.

ⁱⁱचातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः । *Bhagavad Gita*,4.13.

ⁱⁱⁱशमो दमस्तपः शौचं क्षान्तिरार्जवमेव च ।

ज्ञानं विज्ञानमास्तिक्यं ब्रह्मकर्म स्वभावजम् ॥ *Bhagavad Gita*,18.42.

^{iv}शौर्यं तेजो धृतिर्दाक्ष्यं युद्धे चाप्यपलायनम् ।

दानमीश्वरभावश्च क्षात्रं कर्म स्वभावजम् ॥ *Bhagavad Gita*, 18.43.

^vसत्त्वं सुखे सञ्जयति रजः कर्मणि भारत ।

ज्ञानमावृत्य तु तमः प्रमादे सञ्जयत्युत ॥*Bhagavad Gita*,14.9.

^{vi} Swami, Ramsukhdas. *Srimad Bhagavad Gita sadhaka-sanjivani*. Gorakhpur: Gitapress India, Vol – II. p.1951.

^{vii} Swami, Ranganathananda. *Universal message of the Bhagavad Gita*. Kolkata: Advaita ashram, Vol -3. 2013. P. 308.

^{viii}Pandit, Nalini. “Ambedkar and the "Bhagwat Gita". *journal: Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 27, No. 20/21 May16-23/1992, p.1065.

^{ix} Swami, Ranganathananda. *Universal message of the Bhagavad Gita*, vol -3, Kolkata: Advaita ashram, 2013. P.307.

^x<https://gitajourney.com/category/4-13/>