

## VARNADHARMA THROUGH THE PRISM OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Varnadharmā is the duties prescribed by Manu in *Manusmṛiti* chapter ten for different varnas in the society. The word 'varna' had evolved from Sanskrit 'vari' meaning varana or choice. Hence, 'varna' is that which a person chooses according to his ability.

Varna system has been propounded as one of the most scientific social organizations. A drift of changes has always been evinced in social organizations down the ages. For example, till the last millennium Indian society was predominantly rural, agricultural and individualistic. It was individualistic in the sense that people were self-dependent. They themselves produced their food, weaved their clothing, prepared medicines and imparted education at home. But gradually with the advancement of knowledge, scientific and industrial, society has also changed concurrently. It became predominantly urban and industrial and started growing increasingly collective. It became collective in the sense that one did not depend upon one's own self for all his needs and different people engaged themselves in different vocations in order to fulfil the various needs of the people e.g. businessman to cater daily needs, doctors for curing patients, engineers for construction work, educational institutions for imparting proper education etc. In this way, now a days society has gradually divided and subdivided into different segments; each segment consists of persons having specialized knowledge and technical know-how. Therefore, they are able to perform their functions better than average persons.

Contrary to the present social conditions, centuries earlier during the age of Manu, population was thin and the life style of the people were different. Social needs were few and not so diverse and complicated as compared to the

present day society; consequently not so many specialized professions as we find today. Therefore, professions were broadly divided into four classes :

- (i) related to education
- (ii) related to politics
- (iii) related to business ; and
- (iv) related to labour.

One who engaged himself in the acquisition of knowledge and imparting his skills to others was called a Brahmin, the others as Kshatriya, or Vaishya or Sudra according to the function they chose to perform according to their abilities and aptitudes. Every man was free to choose his own profession. Even in those times as all the varnas had equal role to play in any society, so more or less the society was formed of various varnas who each had equal importance because the power to uphold the society and its development was decentralized in various varnas. This paper intends to enquire into the very basis of decentralization thereby tracing the elements of social justice in the said system.

#### **Varnadharma Vis-A-Vis Social Justice**

The division of labour in varnadharma has been traced in the natural and necessary division of social functions, of co-operation for the common good among the different orders of co-ordinate standing. "The functional basis of the concept of varna was always stressed. Plato thought that greatest possible happiness of the community as a whole was promoted by its being divided into these orders- rulers, auxiliaries and craftsman, roughly corresponding to the Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaisya of the Hindu system".<sup>1</sup> It is supposed to be based on the principles of natural justice which encourages the survival of good elements and discourages the survival of bad elements.

The meaning of 'dharma' varies according to the context. Broadly, dharma stands for certain sustaining principles. Dharma not only sustains the individual as well as different groups in the society but it also upholds the society as a whole. R. N. Dandekar asserts that, "The concept of dharma is all-comprehensive and may be broadly speaking, said to comprise precepts which aim at securing the material and the spiritual sustenance and growth of the individual and the society".<sup>2</sup>

Society is a world comprising individual persons, each intrinsically valuable. "The end of any national society is to foster and encourage in and through partnership, the highest possible development of all the capacities of personality in all of its members; and this end is the justice or 'right ordering' of such a society, and may accordingly be called by the name of social justice."<sup>3</sup> Social justice fosters and encourages the general personal development of the people. Hence it is a balance between the individual's right and social control. It ensures the fulfilment of the legitimate expectations of the individual under the existing laws. It is also an assurance to provide him benefits and protection in case of any violation or encroachment of one's rights.

Varnadharm is supposed to ensure just distribution of duties and responsibilities in accordance with one's talents and aptitudes. Thereupon, social justice becomes relevant in the context of varnadharm. As long as an individual works within the sphere of varnadharm, he is said to be free. Freedom in this context is not unbridled, nor are the rights given to the individual or a group unlimited. People, in general, are said to be strictly bound by the duties assigned to them (dharma) in accordance with their respective varna. The concept of adhikara (competence and eligibility) both in respect of Vedic rituals and Vedic knowledge, is also intimately associated with that of varnadharm. It is therefore quite understandable why Mahatma Gandhi laid so much emphasis on this and declares that "this law of Varna and Ashrama is to be traced to our most ancient scriptures the Vedas and so no one who calls himself a Hindu may ignore it"<sup>4</sup>

Now, social justice can be ensured only if everyone performs the function for which he is best suited and everyone gets his due in accordance with his function, no more, no less. Everyone ought to perform the one function in the community for which his nature best suited him. Well, that principle, or some form of it is justice.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of this harmonious intergration whenever there is imbalance i.e. any particular element transgresses its limits, the society distintegrates and thereby tends towards destruction. This is true of justice which Plato upheld as it is true of varnadharm in the Indian context. But, what is the *criterion of the determination of varna - by birth or by guna and karma*. The theory that varna is determined by birth has been the basis of the prevalent caste system in Hindu society. The Bhagavadgita speaks of four varnas to be determined

by *guna* and *karma*. But, how is the *guna* and *karma* determined? Leaving aside the much debatable caste system, we intend to discuss the stand of *guna* and *karma* as the basis of varna.

### **Paradox Of Social Justice In Varnadharmā**

What appears to be a form of social justice according to varnadharmā is, as a matter of fact, injustice to a large section of society which is deprived of the opportunity to grow freely and develop their *gunas* and *karmanas* (aptitudes and talents). Justice can be ensured if an equal treatment is meted out to people irrespective of the fact, whether they inherit certain abilities or not. The concept of fairness, according to John Rawls, is fundamental to justice.<sup>6</sup>

The emphasis of *guna* and *karma* is based upon the theory, which has been named as the 'hierarchy of intelligence'. This theory classifies people according to their intelligence for which they propose intelligence tests. Although in that age, when varnadharmā sprouted, no clear cut IQ test was in vogue but there is no denying the fact that stress on intelligence was the bedrock of varnadharmā. Varna society appears to be a hierarchical society, based upon real differences between people, and thereby granting them position and status in the society. Those accomplished with highest intelligence were called Brahmins and allocated learning and intellectual pursuits thereby attaining highest respect and position in the society, Kshatriya's to soldiering and protection of the community, internal and external; Vaishyas to agriculture, industry and trade and the Shudra to keeping the environment fresh through cleanliness.

Well, there is no compelling reason for assuming that a difference in ability between two people justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to their interests. It is against the basic ethical principle of *equality*. Intelligence is irrelevant to the consideration of interests; for all that counts are the interests themselves. Peter Singer has clarified this view in the following ways;

Intelligence has nothing to do with many important interests that humans have like the interest in avoiding pain, in developing one's abilities, in satisfying basic needs for food and shelter, in enjoying friendly and loving relations with others : and in being free to pursue one's projects without unnecessary interference from others.<sup>6</sup>

As Varnadharmha prevents people in satisfying these interests in hierarchical manner and the benefits it confers on the people on the higher level in hierarchy is hardly comparable in importance to the harm it does to the people with marginal intelligence. Intelligence was given topmost priority in varna society because it was thought that this factor will lead to occupational excellence.

Now, the question is; what affects intelligence ? Can't it be primarily explained by the difference in environment ? Isn't it due to the deprived social and educational situation in which the Shudras find themselves ? Certainly the environment in which a Shudra child finds himself at his home produces hinderance in the development of his personality as well as his abilities.

In varnadharmha society, large difference in respect and social status was commonly thought to be alright as long as they were brought into being under conditions of equal opportunity. The idea is that there is no injustice in a Brahmin or Kshatriya earning social status of income and respect, and a Shudra being deprived of these things as long as the Shudra had his chance to be where the Brahmin or Kshatriya got elevation. Thus in varnadharmha life seems to be a kind of race in which it is fitting that the winners should get the prizes, so long as they get equal start.

### **Varnadharmha : A Code Of Professional Ethics**

Varnadharmha constitutes the professional ethics of those days. If we analyse the code prepared by Indian seers we find that each division had two-fold functions, one related to the self and the other to the society. The first was mainly related to the acquisition of proficiency in the job or skill one has adopted and also the means for one's sustenance and betterment, the second was related to the welfare of the society. Interpreted in this light varnadharmhas are nothing but professional ethics.

Analysing the modern professional ethics we find two main factors common in them. The moral ideal has two basic factors, one related to the betterment of the self and the other to the welfare of the society. The first including :

(i) efficiency in the job or skill that one has chosen, and the provision of means for the physical and economic betterment of the self.

(ii) the second is the service of the society.

These two factors lie at the root of varnadharmha also. So these factors may be

symbolized as (s)  $fxps$ . Here 'x' is the variable for any profession, 'f' is its function and 'p' stands for perfection in the function and 's' stands for social welfare which must be the ideal of any profession. If any one factor is missing or selfish ends take the place of social welfare the code is violated leading to corruption and other evils in the society.

In varna system the question of values prevailed. Values generated according to the perspectives of the people of the time. The values of *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* gained importance according to the place in hierarchy. Perhaps in the light of these four purusharthas, varna society attributed importance to the works of different category i.e. the Shudras were placed lowest and the Brahmins were accorded topmost place. It may be that those who were related to education got a better status in the society than the rest because education is at the root of all professions. Even today we need to be educated whatever profession we adopt. People entering any profession without proper education or training are quacks or simpletons who fail in their mission or pollute the profession. So education was considered as basic profession and got precedence over the other.

When the nomadic aryaans settled down to cultivate, a stable society developed around villages, which had people of all occupations producing daily necessities. These crafts and occupations were transferred from one generation to the other and in time came to be known as *castes*. Over years the caste system became very rigid with individual custom and regulations for each caste. Mobility from one caste to the other was prohibited. As the orthodoxy of the priesthood class grew, learning became its monopoly, and it terrorised other sections in the name of scriptures and Gods. Initially in the division of labour, importance of social well being was equal, which has been forgotten. With the importance attached to different professions the concept of superiority and inferiority got precedence with regard to different professions. Originally, although the value of karma was established there was not such social distinction and thereupon no social injustice in the varna system. Social injustice prevailed in the establishment of the hierarchy, as in hierarchy some were placed higher and some lower and thereupon indignity was attached to certain types of work. As a result the interests of the people engaged in the works which were placed lower in the hierarchy started being overseen. Had the rewards been based on needs instead of ability the paradox could have been resolved. Marxist slogan fits here : "From each according to his ability to each according to his needs." Agreeing to Marxist view Jeffery Gray, a psychologist at Oxford University, writes that to pay people differently for 'upper class' and 'lower class' jobs is a 'wasteful' use of resources

in the guise of 'incentives' which either tempts people to do what is beyond their powers or rewards them more for what they would do anyway.<sup>7</sup>

Allowing a majority of people to suffer from the trauma of indignity while a few are allowed to live in dignity with a complex of being superior to the rest of the society is a severe transgression of social justice. Dharma in this context would consist in the eradication of imbalance wherever it is found, not only in economic matter but also in the field of education, employment and opportunities to each and every person in the society.

To sum up, the base of varna has been profession. In ancient Indian days society was simple. There was no such complicated compartmentalization of labour as today. Therefore, four types of divisions were made in which each and every division was essential and valuable. The care of environment, health etc. was taken by the Shudras, but no indignity was attached to it. But gradually certain types of work related to intelligence etc. gained importance and thereupon the question of dignity was attached to it. Thus it deprived a large section of society from the basic ethical principle of equality.

Therefore, it is perhaps not too much to say that the fundamentals of social justice - the principle of equality and fraternity - was although originally protected in the varnadharmā, but the changes in the society, due to selfish ends and wrong emphasis upon the ethical code, led to the marginalization of people attached to certain types of works thereby causing them the trauma of social injustice. It is generally believed that the evils of caste system are inherently the evils of varnadharmā. But as I have already shown that this is not the fact. Varnadharmā has, in principle, a sound and moral footing, and if practiced in right spirit, endows equal status and importance, commanding opportunities to all the varnas.

#### NOTES

- 1 K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, "Manu & Kautilya", in *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western*, ed. by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan (London, George Allan and Unwin Ltd., 1952), p.109.
- 2 R. N. Dandekar, *Exercise in Indology*, (Delhi, 1981)
- 3 Barker, *Principles of Social And Political Theory*, p. 123
- 4 M. K. Gandhi, *My Varnashrama Dharma* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1956), p.106.

- 5 Conford, *The Republic of Plato*, p.124.
- 6 John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness," *The Philosophical Review*, vol LXVII, April, 1958.
- 7 Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991), p.21.
- 8 Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 38-39.