

English

The concept of Varna in Bhagavad Geeta

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The Concept of Varna in Bhagavad Gita

Nature has endowed all matter with three elemental qualities or Gunas: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. These qualities are predominant in any mass of matter - they shape its caliber or character (Swabhava). One's caliber or character determines one's angle of vision for acquiring knowledge by imbibing and assimilating facts about oneself and the world around. An individual's judgement is fashioned on the basis of his knowledge and his action is impelled by his judgement of men and matters. Action (Karma) thus manifests the predominant elemental quality inherent in an individual - it is the expression of his natural propensities.

The Gunas are graded according to the degree of consciousness possessed by the individual. They are the glasses through which the individual's mind and intellect open up to the world outside, and the colour of the glasses lend colour to his vision. Only a few are conscious of their divine origin and divine destiny; they realise the scheme behind the creation, the unity behind diversity and so they behave in harmony with the laws of Nature. They are Sattvik. In contrast to them, there exist many that are totally inconscient of the divine origin or goal and are confined to their physical consciousness. For them, "I" is the center of the universe. Blind to the eternal stream of life or any broader view, their vision is limited to the individual's life span. They are in the darkness (Tamas). Their outlook is totally perverted (The Gita XVIII-16, 22 & 33.). In between these two extremes are some who though incapable of taking in the totality of the picture, do take a partial yet broader view of life than the Tamasik and direct their energies for fulfillment of their respective ideas and ideals. The quality of Rajas is predominant in them. (Gita: XVIII-21).

Four Shades

These three degrees of consciousness give rise to four shades of human character: The four varnas spoken of in the Gita, for the people with Rajas

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consciousness split up into two columns, some directing their activities in support of Sattva and some of Tamas. The natural propensities of each of these shades drive them to act in consonance with its degree of consciousness. Society thus stands composed naturally into four categories of people, which can be discriminated without much effort by the test of their elemental qualities and their actions prompted by natural propensities.

Chaturvarnam Maya Srustam Gunakarma Vibhagashah

Thus are the four shades of colour categorized by four grades of consciousness: The Brahmin, The Kshatriya, The Vaishya and The Sudra.

The character traits of each of these categories are different along with their knowledge, realization and beliefs which are natural to each of them (Swabhavam). Hence their actions take different forms. The Brahmin has the most developed consciousness, the divine consciousness. He lives in it and lives for it. The Kshatriya consciousness is narrower and extends to his clan or country for which he is prepared to lay down his life. The Vaishya consciousness is narrower still; it is confined to his family members, to his kith and kin. He works and acquires for them subordinating all other interests to that of his small unit. The Sudra is concerned solely about himself. The one concentrated in self lives for himself and is heedless of the consequences of his action on others. He is prepared to ignore all other interests whether of family or the country, let alone the divine.

Scientific Grouping

This categorization of the society into four grades of people on the basis of the individual's degree of consciousness as reflected in his natural inclinations and propensities (Pravritti) is a scientific one that can be tested objectively. It follows logically that the leadership of the society should be with the section that has the most developed consciousness whereas its upkeep should be left to people who have the country's interest uppermost in their

mind. The Vaishya or Sudra consciousness should not be allowed to meddle in affairs of the State, for their natural propensities would prompt them to subordinate and sacrifice the interests of the society and of the State for their respective narrower units of family or the individual. Let them earn, amass and enjoy, but their aspirations should reach no higher. The Brahmin should steer the society with sound advice and give all activities proper direction in consonance with the laws of Nature while the Kshatriya should defend the country and its law and order with faithful execution and military prowess. The Vaishya should add to the material prosperity of the society and the Sudra should contribute his labour and services for social welfare. This followed a natural order and allowed for an orderly development of society.

No Condemnation

The Gita while exhorting that each category should pursue activities most suited to it according to the natural propensities of each, dispels all criticism that this categorization would condemn for life term any section of the society to a lower grade of work by declaring that all work is divine and the categorization is confined to consciousness and not to activities by any of the sections. The Gita, while clarifying that the categorization was for an orderly development of society further, indicates how, even during their lifespan, the people with lower degree of consciousness could develop to higher consciousness. The Sudra steeped in ego can dilute his self centered attitude by service to fellow beings (Paricharyatmaka Karma). The Vaishya can widen his consciousness by developing sympathy for plant life, cattle life and business dealings (of course fair) with people beyond his clan or country (Krusi Gourrakhya-Banijya). The Kshatriya can take a step in furtherance of his consciousness by cultivating heroism, velour firmness, dexterity, confrontation with the enemy in the battlefield without consideration for one's life, liberty etc. generosity and commanding obedience to laws of Nature as supreme. The Brahmin’s duties in keeping with his own nature are serenity, self-restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness and also uprightness knowledge realization and

belief in a Divine order.

Degeneration

This scientific categorization based on propensities (Pravritti) degenerated into a perverted classification of society on professional (Vrutti) basis, giving rise to the caste system. The duty aspect was ignored and the right aspect asserted. A Brahmin, though fallen and no longer reflecting the supreme degree of consciousness in his outlook or activities, continued to be a Brahmin as he was such by profession. An element of heredity entered into professional rights making matters worse. Instead of developing, society got stagnated - degenerating life and liberties. Social and religious leaders have time and again made massive attempts to eradicate the evils born out of such unscientific classification of society on caste basis, but society has not yet been set on right rails. Reacting violently from the degradation into caste-ism, which is no doubt one of the worst forms of exploitation, society seems to have oscillated to the other end where its sense of discrimination between degrees of human consciousness seems to have been lost. This lands society in another dark region where one is blind to the colours with which Nature taints human character and creates the four types, with distinct viewpoints and propensities for different grades of work. An order of society based on Nature's discrimination is scientific, sensible and sound. All other experiments lead to chaos.

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