

Social Evils and the Role of Dharma

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Abstract

Several types of social evils are said to be linked with dharma and said to be promoted by dharma. Those are: caste discrimination, the practice of untouchability, sati Dasharatha, devadaasiprathaa, infanticide and patriarchy or men-women inequality. Among these the most important one is caste discrimination which has a direct link with the Vedic literature and the Gita. The others are connected with religious practices and temperaments. The aim of this paper is to examine such charge of dharma to be the promoter of such evils.

Key words

Varna dharma, Sahasra sirsa purusa, svadharna, gunakarma vibhagasah

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There are six types of social evils that are directly or indirectly linked with dharma and said to be promoted by dharma. Those are: i) caste discrimination as the effects of the caste system followed being recommended by the dharma-scriptures ii) the practice of untouchability for which *Dalits* were the victims iii) *sati Dasharatha* iv) *devadaasiprathaa* v) infanticide and vi) patriarchy or men-women inequality. Now let us have a look at what extent dharma can be treated as a promoter of some social evils.

Dharma, caste discrimination and untouchability

So far as these two evils are concerned these two come under in one category in the sense of the high-low consideration which happens to be the key factor of the feeling of superiority to the extent of treating a group of people to be untouchables. This high-low consideration follows from the high-low consideration found in the caste system which is claimed to be the recommendations of the scriptures of Hindu dharma. According to Hindu scriptures Dr Ambedkar has developed hatred towards the Hindu scriptures and developed an interest in Buddhism where the caste distinction is absent. For these two social evils ‘dharma’ in the sense of ‘religious influence’ is held to be responsible. So, it has to be made clear: Do the Hindu scriptures recommend high-low status so far as the different castes are concerned? For this purpose, we shall have a fresh look at the concept of dharma and its influence in respect of the caste system (*varna-vyavasthaa*) as recommended in the prominent Hindu scriptures.

It was seen that the follow up of the *varna vyavastha* or *varna dharma* has landed the society in the cross road of the suicidal spot of morality and increase of high-low feelings among people of different castes, and also the treatment of ‘untouchables’ to some groups of people. The *varna-vyavastha* has been treated to be God’s gift and *varna dharma* to be followed unconditionally.

Most revered religious scriptures like, the *Vedas*, the *Upanisads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Bhagavata* have recommended the *varna* distinctions in a direct manner. Factually we have found that the feeling of the gradation in the castes and untouchability are there in practice. Some important people have suggested that our follow-up of ‘dharma’ is responsible for such a deplorable condition of the society. So first of all, the examination of the recommendation of unconditionally observing the *varna-dharma* as divine command will be taken up. To find out the divine recommendations in this context those would be as follows.

- i) There cannot be any doubt that our most adorable scriptures have mentioned about the sources of origin of four classes to be *Virata Purusa*, or Srikrishna who represents the Divine.

- ii) There is mentioning of four different organs (mouth, shoulder, thigh, foot) of the divine body to be the origin spot of four *varnas*.
- iii) It is also seen that the duty (dharma) allotted to a class (*varna*) has a functional link with the spot of origin of the class. For example, the duty to be performed by the brahmin class has a link with the mouth which is the spot of origin of the class.

These assertions prove that the scriptures are in support of the division of the classes. Now the question remains that to what extent the divine is also the source of discrimination? Since their functions are different obviously there is a distinction among classes. Had there been no difference why should there have been any division? But does the distinction also imply discrimination in gradation? If the answer is affirmative then there is divine sanction for the discrimination also. The answer to this question is very important for our purpose. Let us look at the views of some of the scholars on this matter.

In the common understanding it is taken for granted that the Vedic view runs as the *Parama Puruca* or *Virata Purusa* is the creator of this universe as well as the fourfold classes. The gradation is an obvious outcome of it having divine sanction. While concentrating on the Gita's stand in respect of the creation of *varnas*, there has been direct mention that Srikrishna says that he has created the *varnas* (*chaturvarnam mayaa srstaa- IV/13*). An easy understanding could be formed that what has been created by Sriksina himself should be followed most meticulously in order to avoid disregard to Srikrishna. So, the *varna* system has divine sanction.

On the one hand Prof. D.P. Chattopadhyay has expressed his concern towards this caste discrimination with the words that "The determinants of caste-heredity, restrictive rules of marriage, occupation and gradation praised and raised few, lowered many and separated humans from humans on the basis of the fiction of *varna*." ¹ Ambedkar holds the strong view that the caste discrimination is a contribution of the Hindu scriptures. On the other hand, Prof. Ganeswar Mishra has given a fresh understanding of the view of the *Purusa Sukta*, which is the initial source of the four-fold division of classes, and does not consider that discrimination has divine sanction. Sharma in his remark has stated that "in the beginning, caste was formed for the welfare of the society. Society was conceived as a body. Just as a body consists of four important parts mouth, arm, stomach and feet, so society had four constituents in the form of Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. We cannot belittle the importance either of the hand or of the feet. Each limb has to perform a definite function of the body. Similarly Brahmin ksatriyas, etc. had to perform works like teaching, protection, etc. for the benefit of the society. Hence, there is no question

of their being related to higher and lower strata.”² Thus there have been mixed reactions regarding the origin of classes and the origin of class to be the root of the caste gradation. Here it is intended to present the views of the recent scholars who are not prepared to accept the follow-up of *varnashrama dharma* to be responsible for the caste discrimination. According to these scholars the actual cause of the discrimination is the misunderstanding and misapplication of the scriptural views.

The views of some recent scholars

According to Prof. Ganeswar Misra the *Virata Purusa* of the *Puruca Sukta* does not stand for *Parama Purusa*. It represents the vast range of humanity, which has thousands of heads (*Sahasra sirsâ purucah*), thousands of eyes (*sahasrâkha*), etc. It is the society or the vast range of humanity that has been divided into four groups in order to meet the four essential needs of the social being. One such example can be mentioned here how he has pointed out regarding the origin of classes of people. In respect of the origin of the *brahmana* class he writes that “Since Brahma was found to be used as Veda the person aware of the Veda (*Brahmajna*) was called as *Brahmaa* or *braahmana*. This *Brahmaa* is not the creator God. This is the undeclared knowledge of the Veda. ... It was never on the basis of birth but only on the basis of profession and diligence. *Bhrahmanas* were created from mouth because of their relation with speaking and intelligence.”³ This shows that according to him the Vedic stand is not in support of the divine origin of the *varnas*.

He has explained in the manner that out of the vast majority of people those who were cultivating the mind and doing intellectual exercise they became *brâhmaGas*. In this manner the *brâhmaGas* were representing the mouth of the society. “*BrâhmaGas* were identified as having in-depth knowledge on *Brahma*. It was the consideration that someone is not a *brahmana* by virtue of his birth in a *brahmana* family. Someone is *brahmana* for his professional efficiency only. Likewise, those who were having enough strength to protect the society, the humanity and also dharma were treated as *kcatriyas*. The *kcatriyas* are the warriors and considered to represent the arms of the society. There was the necessity of a class of people to look after the economic growth of the society through internal and external trade. They were supposed to move one place to other to sale the surplus materials of their place and to procure the required materials for their place. These classes of people were known as the *vaishyas* representing thigh organ of the society. When there were three distinct classes of people engaging themselves in three different professions there was the need of labourers to extend services to them against wages. This class of people was known as *sudras* whose profession was to extend service to others. This class of people was representing the feet organs of the society. He

has clearly said that mouth, arms, thigh and feet are not the indication of any kind of gradation.”⁴

The sudras were named as *kcatra puruca*. They were not considered as lower in the order of classification. They were not either useless or inferior in any respect. Rather the labours of them were essential in the field for yielding crops. Their identifying mark of the sudra was initially not the parentage, rather the profession he chooses to his capacity and ability. He was enjoying full social status. They were also remaining present near yajnas to help in many works. So the sense of untouchability was not there. If it would have been there they would not have been in most pious ritual like *yajnas*. They were not taking direct part in *yajnas* because they were completely away from education. But they were treated to be the inevitable part of the society cannot be denied. The discrimination is later addition. In respect of the social evils concerning caste system Swami Ranganathananda has made his point clear by saying “Society needs organization-organization into groups- and these organizations we did in India as *first labour; then business, agriculture, industry; then we come to administration, defence, political affairs, etc.; then we come to high intellectual and spiritual guidance by a small group of people*. Every society has all the four groups. But what became wrong in India is that, in later ages, it became hereditary. That is evil number one. By hereditary means we cramped the system as it were. We gave more for some and less privileges for others. These two aspects ruined the whole system. So, remove those two evils and we shall find this is what is happening, and what is good, everywhere.”⁵

His explanation is found as in the early state the society or a social organization was depending on four varnas in the sense depending on the four types of people. They were named to be ‘braahmaGa, ksatriya, vaisya, sudra’ and it was followed in every society. The basis of selection to a class was “according to their inclination and capacity: *guGa*, karma, or according to their quality and action”. A family proceeds with the offsprings usually belonging to any one of these. If from a big family one chooses the military and another to business or to agriculture, and another wills to take up the job of labourer, then there was no problem. Various individuals were selecting to various karmas or professions ‘according to the inclinations of their minds, their aptitudes or *guGas*’. There was no bar to the freedom of the individual. To Ranganathananda it is “the original meaning of Sri Krishna’s statement on this particular subject”.

In this regard the view of Chinmayanada which we have already hinted previously that the then Brahmin intellectuals have interpreted this verse taking this first part of it only. They have never high-lighted on the second part of the verse

which contains the basis of the division in the expression *guna karma vibhagasah*. “*Vyasa*, in the very same line of the couplet, as though in the very same breath, describes the basis on which this classification was made, when he says, ‘by the differentiation of the mental quality and physical action (of the people)’. This complete definition of the *Varna* not only removes our present misunderstanding but also provides us with some data to understand its true significance. Not by birth is man a Brahmana (Brahmin); by cultivating good intentions and noble thoughts alone can we ever aspire to Brahmana-hood; nor can we pose as Brahmana merely because of our external physical marks, or bodily actions in the outer world. The definition insists that he alone is a Brahmana, whose thoughts are as much *sattvic*, as his actions are.”⁶ Accordingly a kshatriya possesses *rajasic* thoughts and actions and a Shudra lives a life of low endeavours having *tamasic* thoughts. If one can notice these natures then he can realize the basis of classification is according “to the differentiation of *guna* and *karma*”.

Let us look to the views of the most eminent commentator on the Gita, B. G. Tilak, who has viewed the Gita to be a treatise on Karma Yoga. He had high regard for the scriptural knowledge having no inclination towards the brahmnical advocacy towards theological understanding. Tilak’s view is that the mentioning of the division of class in the Gita is not with the intention that as God’s creation it will have an everlasting effect. It is a division where emphasis has been attached to karma (duty) and the division indicates that on the basis of the efficiency of karma one has to be decided to belong to a class. For the early state of the society four classes were enough which were brought into existence by the divine suggestion. There was a need for different classes of people to cater to the needs of different karmas. The question of higher karma or lower karma, or higher class and lower class does not arise in the context of the Gita and in the period the Gita was in composition. Tilak has written: “The arrangement of society in those days has been concisely explained in the Gitâ according to the division of ‘constituents of matter’ (*guna*) and Action. But this is not the principle idea of the Gitâ; and it must be borne in mind that the comprehensive doctrine of the Gitâ is that, even where this arrangement of four castes is not in vogue, or is not rigorously observed, a human being comes into existence to perform whatever duties come to his share, for the maintenance of society, according to the arrangement of society which may then be in vogue, as duties, desirelessly, courageously, and enthusiastically, for the public good, and not for the enjoyment of pleasure; and the opinion advanced by some that the Ethics expounded in the Gitâ is based on the arrangement of the four castes is not correct.”

Tilak's primary concern was to emphasize both the concepts, *varna-dharma* and *ashrama dharma*, as the message of the Gita. One should be aware of his *svadharmā*, which represents his *varna dharma* and also about the dharma of the different stages of life. If everyone in the society becomes aware of their duties in respect of *varna* and *ashrama* then the peace and harmony of the society can easily be achieved.⁸ Thus with reformative thinking of Tilak one will never find that he was in favour of the possibility of discrimination in the Gita.

In this regard Prof. Radhakrishnan considers that the fourfold class order has been designed for the purpose of social evolution of man. For him there is nothing 'absolute' or permanent in the caste system. He writes that "The emphasis is on *guna* (aptitude) and *karma* (function) and not *jati* (birth). The *varna* or the order to which we belong is independent of sex, birth or breeding. A class determined by temperament and vocation is not a caste birth and heredity."⁹ His understanding is in support of the functional grouping which will never be out of date. Radhakrishnan was very much against the present trend of atomistic society which is the result of the misunderstanding of the Gita. For him Gita's motto is always to establish unity. It is the wrong practice of the traditional caste system that has created a lot of classes and sub-classes opening the gate of diversity or 'the atomistic conception of society'. Radhakrishnan has made it clear by saying: "The Gita cannot be used to support the existing social order with its rigidity and confusion. It takes up the four and enlarges its scope and meaning. Man's outward life must express his inward being; the surface must reflect the profundity. Each individual has his inborn nature, *svabhāva*, and to make it effective in his life is his duty, *svadharmā*."¹⁰

Thus it is seen that Radhakrishnan considers the distinction of caste and outcaste or the caste discrimination to be 'artificial and unspiritual'. A spiritual text like, Gita can never advocate in support of the caste discrimination and has not supported it. The practice of discrimination is against the spirit of the Gita's conception of dharma in the sense, Srikrishna who descends to restore dharma can never promote discrimination which is *adharmā*.

When the above stand appears to be very much reasonable, we cannot accept that untouchability, which is a subsidiary to caste gradation, has dharmic sanctions. It has been the product of the Brahmanical interpretation of the dharma and *adharmā* but not the proper understanding of dharma as we have seen in our analysis. It may be made clear here that some scholars while searching for the reason for the practice of untouchability have overlooked the direct scriptural recommendations in support of the equality. In the *Ishopanisad* it has been clearly said that he who sees all beings in his own self and also sees the same self in all the beings he has no hatred.

It is the message of equality. It amounts to saying there is no difference between two human beings. Gandhi, who is a great admirer of the philosophy of the *Ishopanisad*, seems to have been influenced by this ideal to say that there is no high-low consideration between two humans. The equality message of the scriptures was not made public by those selfish pundits on the ground that it is Brahma-vidya which is not open for all.

Sati Dasharatha

Fortunately, this evil practice is not seen nowadays. But for a pretty long period it was in operation by giving a wrong interpretation to the concept of 'virtue'. A *sati* was treated as be virtuous lady if she was prepared to jump onto the funeral pyre of her husband. It was expressed not as an ordinary desire but as a holy desire. Those clever Brahmins were very much aware of the common people's ignorance about the holy and unholy distinction. They have given their interpretations in the name of scriptural sanction or the desire of God. Dharma which aims at the sustenance of the society cannot accommodate such an evil practice within its' moral vicinity. So, dharma cannot be blamed for this conversion of a blind belief to a *dharmic* principle by some ill-motivated clever people.

Devadaasiprathaa

This practice has been reduced to a great extent though not completely stopped. The practice has a direct link with the temples for which reason the concept of dharma comes to the picture. It is not a healthy practice. By this practice the individual is never exposed to a comfortable living. Rather the victim's life becomes a life of struggle very often having an unholy ending. So in the name of holy practice unholy happenings are witnessed.

In this practice the involvement of dharma can only be made by treating the practice to be a religious ritual. To this effect it can be said that all religious rituals are made for human pleasure or desire. No one knows whether God is pleased or displeased with observing the rituals. There is no scope for knowing that. In the name of holy ritual introducing one individual (female) as God's property and circumstantially converting it to public property can never be the matter of appreciation for any conception of God. So, as the rituals are human creations they can also be stopped by man if they are against human interest or dignity. Those can be tolerated if it does not affect the society in any other manner. But the dharma should not be blamed for that.

Infanticide

Infanticide as a social evil is a peculiar type. There is no common reason of infanticides was/are occurring at different places. The reason differs in different

cases. There are two types of infanticides witnessed in our society. Some acts are performed like religious functions or are performed in a very brutal manner. The acts of the second category are rare and confined to some particular areas and related to the mindset of the people involved. Under the second category two types of acts are seen to be performed. The usual one is to kill the child by suffocation and throw it away into water or into a well. The other one is brutal one to hang the live child, treated as an auspicious one, on a tree till it dies being eaten away by ants and bees. Searching after the dharma link (whether dharma-I or dharma-E) in this category of deeds is as good as searching for something black thing in a dark place. It means dharma in no way is related to this type of infanticide.

In the other type of infanticides, the reasons for infanticide differ from place to place. Out of the several reasons the most significant reason was to reduce the burden of the female child which has become less significant in current society. This inhuman practice was followed as a means to meet the needs of the family with the consideration that for higher benefit lower one can be sacrificed. The parents were thinking that as they are the sole owners of their child (like other properties of the house) they can do whatever they like. So, the loss of a child in the house to welcome the possibility of a male child in the future was easily digested by them and there was no hesitation to commit the act. The most significant factor is that they were not considering the act to be an immoral one or a vicious one. In order to escape from the feeling of committing an immoral act they were trying to add some religious link in the act and the involvement of dharma comes to the picture in this manner. The act is a purely utilitarian one, gradually turned into a superstition but made a religious one giving the name that it is an offering to God, or Goddess Ganga. And in order to establish the religious aspect of the act they select an auspicious day for the sacrifice of the child and the places like, *Triveni Sangam* of three holy rivers or the river Ganga, etc. They perform the act very much like that of a religious ceremony for which reason dharma comes to picture and is condemned. In fact dharma as a moral principle is far away from this social evil but never linked with his evil.

Patriarchy or men-women inequality

It may be pointed out here that in male dominated society women are deprived of many facilities including their freedom of living. This can be treated as one social evil. There has been some supposition of the dharma link of this evil for the consideration that obeying unconditionally to the command of the male partner is the dharma of the female partner. Nobody has ever asked who has fixed such a norm for the female partners? It is an arbitrary fixation of the dharma rule for the

women class by the intelligent male class who were shouldering the responsibility of framing moral laws for everyone. It is that vested interest of the male intelligentsia not to provide educational facilities to women that happens to be the main cause of this evil. In this way it is not a dharma-linked evil.

Epilogue:

The ambiguous use of the term as dharma can be held responsible for treating dharma to be responsible for the social evils. The sense of the popular use of ‘dharma’ bears the understanding of representing a religious sect bereft of its universal aspect or the aspects of true religion. This understanding of the concept is solely responsible for treating dharma as be promoter of the social evils. The proper understanding of the texts and the concept of dharma can never promote social evil.

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