

Varna Judged by Birth or by Symptoms?

In the bhagavad-gita Lord Krishna says that in varnasrama system varna is judged by symptoms or quality (*guna-karma vibhagasah*). Acaryas say that this guna is sattva-raja-tama guna and karma is according to verses *samo-damo-taps-saucam...* But in scriptures to practically apply varnasrama in society like Manu smṛti, puranas, itihāsas, it is usually found that the prime (or sometimes the only) way to judge one's varna is by birth. In Bhagavata canto 7, Ch.11, Narada Muni says *yasya-ya-laksana-proktam puṁso varnabhivyānjakam...* i.e. varna is to be judged by symptoms. Also many vidvāns argue that it is not possible to judge varna by symptoms as they are not manifest from 7 years of age, the age at which upanayana samskara is recommended. In Gaudiya Sampradaya from the time of, and in line of, Bhaktivinoda Thakura it is believed that varna is to be judged (and was judged) by symptoms not by birth. Founder Acharya of ISKCON Sri Srimad A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada repeats this point very exhaustively and holds that not understanding this point the whole varnasrama system has fallen apart in present age. This paper will analyze this particular issue not only in light of sastras but also in light of observations.

The key point to understand this system is to accept that there is life beyond death i.e. the principle of reincarnation of soul and that soul is eternal, changing material body one after another. If we do not accept this then it will be like trying to understand electron microscope without accepting the existence of electron. Thus I would expect that the readers would keep their own beliefs etc. against this principle on side for a time being and at least theoretically accept the existence of reincarnation (punarjanma) in line with Bhagavad-gita 2.13. According to this understanding, living symptoms are manifested in a body due to living soul inside it. Body itself is dead matter but it seems living because soul is inside it, just as a car moves because a driver is inside it. At the time of death the soul changes its old body and takes up new one and this process is called punarjanma. The new body that it takes up is based on the status of total cumulative reactions of his karma (activities) till date and he is placed in suitable living body to be born as its child. Srimad Bhagavatam explains this procedure specifically for getting new human body –

karmaṇā daiva-netreṇa jantur dehopapattaye|

striyāḥ praviṣṭa udaram puṁso retaḥ-kaṇāśrayaḥ|| SB 3.31.1||

“Under the supervision of the Supreme Lord and according to the result of his work, the living entity, the soul, is made to enter into the womb of a woman through the particle of male semen to assume a particular type of body.”

Here the word ‘karmana’ is very important. Every living soul has a karmic status accumulated for many lifetimes and thus has a particular nature developed according to that. Actually the soul is covered with linga-sarira or subtle body made up of mind, intelligence, and false-ego elements and this body always stay with the soul (till he is liberated); at death only the gross body is left by the soul but the subtle body accompanies the soul. Thus all karmic makeup is with him and that determines his prakṛti or svabhava. Now this svabhava is exactly what he wants to do in this world at that particular time duration and thus he is given a body suitable for fulfilling those desires. For that he is put in the suitable womb so as to develop a suitable body. Similarly the qualification of the womb selected for the soul is had by determining the consciousness of the mother and father at the time of sexual intercourse for begetting the child. For instance if husband and wife are in sattva-guna at the time of sexual intercourse then the soul

with sattva-pradhana consciousness (karmic makeup) will be placed in the womb and then the gross body will develop accordingly. Thus it can be concluded that the child's mentality and svabhava will exactly reflect that of his parents at the time of begetting him. For instance in the house of great demon Hiranyakasipu took birth great devotee child Prahlada because Hiranyakasipu was surcharged with visnu-mantra in his consciousness at the time of begetting Prahlada (reference can be had by personally contacting me). Similarly in the house of devotee Kashyapa Muni took birth demons Hiranyaksa and Hiranyakasipu because the wife (and to some extent husband also) was blinded by lust at the time of begetting them.

So this is basically the principle that is working. Actually to manage any society all the four varnas (departments) are needed – this is scientific. You need brain, you need hands, you need belly, and you need legs. Thus it is mentioned that brahmanas, ksatriyas, vaisyas, and sudras are brain, hands, belly and legs of virata rupa. This is not to demean anyone but to state that any society needs these departments. Now it is logical that different departments and works will need different qualities in people – a very powerful person may not necessarily perform well in understanding things and planning long term future of community. Similarly very intelligent person may be very weak and not be able to give labor power to society or protect the society or be very weak in earning livelihood. Thus varnasrama system is system developed by Lord Krishna (from the beginning of universe) by arranging people born of different propensities in different fitting works. Thus it is *guna-karma vibhagasah* – classified in karma according to guna. Any sane man will be able to understand that it cannot be by birth – a doctor's son is not necessarily fit to become a doctor.

Then what about the whole tradition of judging one's varna by birth alone and the sastras mentioning this as the main criterion? Are they all mistaken? Is this a long misconception infiltrated in hindu society? what about the ācāryas commenting and following the same process? And practically, what about such a long, steady situation of such a society happy in many aspects, after all they have stood the test of time?

Yes, for understanding this I explained the science of punarjanma. You can imagine that if you are a Brahmin and one of your son is of ksatriya svabhava, one is vaisya svabhava, one is sudra svabhava, and only one is Brahmin svabhava. How will you feel? what will be the arrangement in your house like? which common rules will you establish in house? How will you train your children – in sastras, in weapons, in agriculture etc. or in paricarya? Moreover symptoms of your child will manifest after about 12 years till then you cannot give any specific training with certainty. Now imagine that in the whole society this situation is prevalent. It will just create chaos and there cannot be any stable family life or social life. Thus the varnasrama system had the rule of samskaras established by the Lord Himself. Thus in Bhagavatam we find -- *samskāra yatrāvicchinnāḥ sa dvijo 'jo jagāda yam* (SB 7.11.13). The principle is that if one is performing samskaras enjoined for his varna then the child that is born of him will be of the same varna. Let us understand the science behind samskaras. Samskara also means impression. This impression is on the mind and consciousness. Thus if you relate this to the process of begetting a child then it is quite clear that one who is performing samskaras in his life, he is more probably steady in his own svabhava and thus it is more likely that at the time of begetting a child he will be of the same consciousness and thus child born will be also of the same svabhava. Samskaras do not only mean the anusthanas (rituals) that are performed but it includes all the karmas that a person performs. Thus the daily schedule of any varna is governed by codes of law mentioned in Dharma-sastras and puranas. This makes one's consciousness more stable in a particular level without fluctuating much (of course

occasional deflections are there) throughout life. If there is no regular governance of schedule then we see that throughout the day our consciousness passes through a wide variety of stages. Thus it becomes very difficult to judge what will be the consciousness at the time of begetting a child and thus the child's varna is not judged by parent's work. So, many thousand years ago the whole society was so organized (majority of individuals following their prescribed work properly and performing all their samskara rituals also) that it was very easy to determine what the svabhava of child will be even before he takes birth. Thus it became very easy to manage such a society. This doesn't mean that judging symptoms was neglected. In Bhagavata –

śrī-rājovāca

apy eṣa vaṁśyān rājarṣīn puṇya-ślokān mahātmanaḥ |

anuvartitā svid yaśasā sādhu-vādena sattamāḥ||SB 1.12.18||

“O great souls, will he become as saintly a king, as pious in his very name and as famous and glorified in his achievements, as others who appeared in this great royal family?”

Thus we see that although birth was the primary criterion to judge, but symptoms were not neglected. But it was that even if by birth one may be qualified he must have qualities to fit his occupation (varna). This is very logical – birth being a thumb rule but real rule is qualities. Thus as mentioned in the book by His Divine Grace Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura “Brahmana and Vaisnava,” there are hundreds of cases of brahmanas becoming ksatriya and ksatriyas becoming brahmanas to the extent that some brahmana kulas have sprung up from ksatriyas, and some ksatriya kulas have sprung up from brahmanas. I will not repeat these examples here. Similarly in the verse –

yasya yal lakṣaṇaṁ proktaṁ puṁso varṇābhivyañjakam|

yad anyatrāpi drśyeta tat tenaiva vinirdiśet||SB 7.11.35||

“If one shows the symptoms of being a brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya or śūdra, as described above, even if he has appeared in a different class, he should be accepted according to those symptoms of classification.”

The word ‘api’ mentioned here is very important. This shows that the common practice was to judge by birth but it is warned here that one should not be misled by this and thus if a child of brahmana shows the symptom of vaisya he should be engaged accordingly (as vaisya). If otherwise is done then it will create disturbance in society and his own life and thus gradually destroy the steadiness of society.

After the kaliyuga started its influence gradually it became more difficult for different varnas to follow their dharma strictly and also they became lazy to follow these principles (as is mentioned in prayena-alpayusah sabhya verse SB 1.1.10). Thus although there was destruction of samskaras (not only rituals but daily regime and mental consciousness) for different varnas the children of such people passed on to their father's occupation (neglecting the laksana aspect) and they in turn degraded the system gradually. This is a very gradual influence. It may have seemed vyavaharik (practical) that just for the sake of few differently born child one disturbs the whole society's procedure (of judging varna based on birth) and thus to assign the varna to such a child also according to birth. This will not have big influence on society till very less percentage of such cases happen. But gradually such neglect increases bad population in

society and at a particular time it becomes a nuisance clearly exposing the failure of varnasrama system in society. Thus till about 200 years ago varnasrama system was still in much good shape (although the heart of it, nivr̥tti marga, was devastated) and thus majority of ācāryas did support judging varna primarily based on birth. But from 1700's it started becoming evident in the whole society that this society cannot work long – it has hypocrisy and exploitation by the higher classes. This was because more than half the persons of higher classes were not fit for that post and thus there started a social revolution by Indians themselves searching for alternative. Ram Mohan roy, Dayananda Sarasvati, Keshabchandra sen, etc are a few to name. Sri Bhaktivinoda Thakura of Gaudiya Sampradaya was the first to bring this point in his preaching that society has to be based on varnas decided by qualities and not birth.

As of today there is no samskara in place and thus there is no certainty of what a kind of child will be born to what parent. In our gurukula we have two brothers from same parent and both are completely opposite in their svabhava – one is very expert in sastras and intelligence, other is just a nuisance if academically taught but very good in agriculture and cows. Their father accepted that he had different consciousnesses at the time of begetting them. There is another such case also. By our experience of children in our gurukula we find in 90% of cases children are not of the svabhava of their father.

Thus to judge varna based on birth today is just insane (unless you are sure of their father's following all samskaras and his own dharma from generation after generation). Thus today symptom is the only means of judging varna. This is confirmed by Sukadeva in his commentary Siddhanta-pradipa on Srimad Bhagavatam 7.11.35 –

yadyapi prajāpatipravartitā varṇā mukhyāḥ tathāpi kālakṛtasankarādidośataḥ tanniścayābhāve satyādi lakṣaṇena tattatkule brāhmaṇādi niścayaḥ kartavyaḥ| anya varṇa lakṣaṇa dṛśyeta tarhi tena lakṣaṇenāpi tam varṇitam vijānīyādityāḥ - yasyeti| yasya puṁso varṇābhivyaśjakam yallakṣaṇam yadyadi anyatra varṇāntare'pi dṛśyeta tadvarṇātaram tenaiva lakṣaṇādi nimittena vinirdiśet “na vyaṁ viṣṇo brāhmaṇāḥ smo abrāhmaṇā vā ye yajāmahe” iti śrutih “jātiratra mahāsarpa manuṣyatve mahāmate| sankarātsarvavarṇānām duṣparīkṣyete me matih| tasmāt śīlam pradhāneṣṭam vidurvai sattva darśinaḥ” iti smṛtiśca atra anusandheyā|

This doesn't mean that judging varna based on birth is not required. This will be another mistake. For a society to work properly, efficiently, and steadily varna based on birth is must. But because at the present moment varna cannot be judged based on birth, its real criterion laksana is to be given emphasis otherwise it is not possible to manage society properly at all. Once the system of regular duties and samskara rituals is regularized then in a few generations again the system of judging varna based on birth must be established. This should also be backed up by confirming varna (svabhava) by seeing the symptoms.

In practice, the position of brahmana and ksatriya is given much more importance as these have the future of community in hand. If some unqualified person takes up any of these positions then whole society will be exploited and destroyed. Thus utmost care was (and is to be) taken in designating these varnas. Even if born of brahmana or ksatriya family the qualities of such a child are closely monitored. If not up to the mark then he is not given the post. Thus we do hear that often one was ostracized from brahmana lineage. This is in line with *yasya-yallaksana-prokta* verse. But usually the up gradation from vaisya and sudra to brahmana and ksatriya is not much seen although qualification may be there. This also is logical because there is no need to do so for the society and there may be a risk if the qualification is not up to the mark

(after all judging involves mistakes also). In principle this type of up gradation is accepted by Mahabharata –

śūdra-yonau hi jātasya sad-guṇānupatiṣṭhataḥ/

ārjave vartamānasya brāhmaṇyam abhijāyate//Vana-parva 203.11-12//

“If a person born in a śūdra family has developed the qualities of a brāhmaṇa, such as satya [truthfulness], śama [peacefulness], dama [self-control] and ārjava [simplicity], he attains the exalted position of a brāhmaṇa.”

[Similar is mentioned in Anusasana-parva Ch.163]

But in practice you find many instances of Brahmana converted to Ksatriya and vice-versa but not vaisya or sudra converted to brahmana. The main reason for this is the practical rule that till the well qualified persons are available in brahmana and ksatriya kulas, there is no need to upgrade someone to these posts. One may say then that such a person’s well being is neglected in this case. Yes, this is practical according to Mahabharata – *tyajetekam kulasyarthe, gramasyarthe kulam tyajet, gramam janapadasyarthe, atmarthe prthivim tyajet*. This is logical also. Moreover it is not a complete rejection of such a person but he can go on following duties of his family and work in sattva-guna by doing it in consciousness of duty and being not attached to the fruit (as per Bhagavad-gita).

The idea that there was a lot of exploitation in ancient Indian society by brahmanas and ksatriyas is partly true because highly qualified persons are needed for these posts and the principle of selflessness is the main quality that they are trained into for many years in gurukula. But as there started a neglect of qualification, many unqualified persons usurped the post and thus it is expected that exploitation of citizens would increase. It is this vitiated state of varnasrama that the Britishers saw and recorded. Thus to us, who are taught in the education system established by British (by Thomas Mc Caulay), this vitiated picture of varnasrama was taught as the real picture of varnasrama mentioned in scriptures.

One argument may be that absolute power should not be given as it is given to king as the saying goes “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Yes this is true for the one not trained in principles of samo, damo, etc. For one who is properly trained into this absolute power makes wonders in the society and makes society very happy – economically, politically, socially, and spiritually. Democracy is no solution for monarchy, because the panel to take decision of future of society are usually not very qualified and moreover even if qualified there will always be different opinions and thus it is very difficult to get something good pass out. After abolishing monarchy democracy has not improved the condition of citizen any more. Previously usually in all villages people did not lock or bolt their doors even if they go out of station for months and there will be no theft. I have practically seen this in Ireland also. In Newzealand, there was a system to distribute newspapers in which on the roadside there will be a table of newspapers and a money box and no man standing there. People would take up news paper and deposit money in the box and there was no theft registered in this. It is also seen in the time of Hitler how fast was the progress of Germany in technology; but the problem was that Hitler was cruel and not trained – if he would have been very selfless and act according to sastras then he would have proved a great ruler. Anyways, this is a side issue for this paper and a lot of clarification and discussion is needed in order to be able to practically explain it to you. Thus I end my article here with following conclusion.

Conclusion:

According to sastras and logic varna is fixed by symptoms or qualities and works are assigned according to that. The rule of judging varna based on birth is a sub-rule based on the assumption that samskaras are being properly followed in the whole lineage and everyone is strictly following their duties. In absence of such a case in society varna can only be judged based on symptoms and not birth. It is to be understood that it was not merely a sentiment but it was very logical and all samskaras have connection to full procedure of varnasrama. Thus fighting just based on one statement of sastras and other will be fruitless but we can come to conclusion by understanding why samskaras were there and how it all worked.

Thankyou,

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