

Not Caste In Stone

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Categories : [Renunciation of action through knowledge \(ch.4\)](#)

Date : January 3, 2014



Caste no bar: Mobility across caste lines was commonly accepted. The 63 Nayanmars, later canonised, hailed from different castes, strata and professions.

Jnana-karmasannyasa yoga/Topic of renunciation of action with knowledge(chapter 4)

Another topic he talks of in the fourth chapter is the much abused caste system. Let me make it clear at the outset that the caste system as practised in the past four centuries is obnoxious and has to be done away with. The sooner we junk it, the better it is. Having said that, Krishna talks about how the caste system was at the beginning of our civilisation when we had a caste system. There can never be a classless society, the communists have tried this. At least the ruler-ruled class will always be there if nothing else. Equality for all

as human beings, yes, is desirable but difference in terms of function, abilities, talents and skills will always be there.

Caturvarnyam maya srushtam gunakarmavibhagasah

Tasya kartaramapi mam viddhyakartaram avyayam (4.13)

Ancient Indian society was divided into four broad classes...I'm deliberately not using the word 'caste' here...

- 1) The intellectual class – lawyers, doctors, educators, teachers, judges, priests, men and women of letters, all these were considered the intellectual class, *Brahmans*. Today, the priest might not be considered in the intellectual class but in those days you needed twelve years of studies behind you to be a good priest. Intellectuals in any society are the most respected.
- 2) The warrior class – *Kshatriyas*. Their job was to maintain the rule of law right across the country and defend the country against external aggression etc; therefore, they lived a life dedicated to discipline, warrior arts, strategy politics, understanding dharma. They were specially taught to understand dharma much more than the ordinary man.
- 3) The next class was the business community, an important community because the *Vaishyas* were the producers of wealth. All those involved in business, industry, farming were *Vaishyas*.
- 4) All these need hands and legs to work. These were the *Shudras*. I would like to say here that the *Shudras* were not untouchables. They were those who could not set up a business or industry and, therefore, worked for that business or industry. Yes, some of them might have done menial jobs as well, and I do think, even today, the sweeper, the ward-boy who fumigates the operation theatre is as important as the surgeon who operates. If that job is not given importance, people will pick up all kinds of infections in the hospital.

All the four classes were equally important and that is exactly how it was. This was work-based division and there was pride in it because each person was proud of the skill his profession demanded from him. *Remember what we said earlier—the pursuit of karma-yoga also involves the pursuit of excellence, and when you excel in a job or skill there is a natural sense of pride in what you do. That excellence is achieved by an archer when he is able to hit bull's eye every time or by a sculptor who can produce a great work of art. It is exactly like what Mohamad Ali, the boxer, said when asked what would he be if not a boxer. He said, "I would be the best in whatever I did. If I was a garbage collector, I would be the best damn garbage collector in the world." That is what pride in one's work is—whatever you do, you do the best.*

There is another division based on the three *gunas*. We have seen that everyone's mental make-up consists of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. This is a paradigm for looking at *maya* as well as the mind of the human being. All things that are noble, intellectual are considered as *sattva*. Action and what helps action take place is called *rajas*, and laziness, inertia and indolence is the quality of *tamas*. Every mind will have *sattvic*, *rajasic* and *tamasic* qualities. According to the Indian way of thinking, irrespective of what you are doing, you are expected to aspire to become predominantly *sattvic*. We have looked at four classes based on action/*karma*, now we have the same division on the basis of *guna* qualities. Therefore, someone who is predominantly *sattvic* with *rajas* taking the second and *tamas* in third place was also called a *Brahmana* by *guna* and not by *karma*. Someone who is predominantly *rajasic* with *sattva* in second place and *tamas* in the third would be called a *Kshatriya* by *guna*. Someone who had *rajas* first, *tamas* second and *sattva* third would be considered a *Vaishya* by *guna*, someone who has *tamas* in the first place and *rajas* in second, *sattva* in third would be called *Shudra* by *guna*.

By following your own chosen path of action or lifestyle, you can achieve the highest, because once you are a Brahmana by guna, your mind is ready to know the truth.

So whenever a Brahmana is praised in the shastra, one must understand that we are praising a class not by action/karma, but we are praising the one who is Brahmana by guna. This led to many interesting permutations and combinations—you could be a *Brahmana* by *karma* and *guna*, you could be a *Brahmana* by *karma* and *Kshatriya* by *guna* because he is doing it for name and fame and nothing else. You could have the case of one who is a *Brahmana* by *karma* and *Vaishya* by *guna*, one who is completely commercial. *Brahmana* by *karma* and *Shudra* by *guna* because the person is lazy and indolent. In each of the four, you could have these *guna-karma* combinations—you could be a *Shudra* by *karma* and *Brahmana* by *guna*—a sweeper in the temple who is drawn to intellectual pursuits. We had so many saints in India who were doing simple jobs, but they could be considered *Brahmans* by *gunas* and were classified as saints. Like all the bhakti traditions in India of Namdev(weaver), Tukaram(farm worker), Kabir(weaver) or the some of the 63 shaiva saints from south India Kannapa Nayanar(hunter tribal) , cattaimuni(son of a prostitute) and many more.

So what is the point of all these divisions? The aim was to excel in whatever you were doing and use what you are doing to grow through a spirit of pursuit of excellence, taking care of priorities etc; so that all could be noble, intellectual and committed to *dharma* irrespective of one's profession.

By following your own chosen path of action or lifestyle, you can achieve the highest, because once you are a Brahmana by guna, your mind is ready to know the truth. It is very interesting to know that this was not always inherited. In fact, *gunas* can never be inherited, one has to grow into these *gunas*. Professions are inherited—doctors want their children to become doctors, lawyers have children who follow the same profession, etc. There is an advantage in this because people pick up the skills earlier in life. However, if someone wanted to change, there was no problem with that. This was the ancient caste system. I am not advocating the caste system...If the caste system is anything like it is practiced in India, then one has to junk it, it is obnoxious.

How did it get distorted like this?

Vyasa, who would be technically considered as an outcast—his father was a *rishi* and mother a fisher-woman and he was an illegitimate child—he is honoured as the guru of all gurus.

I believe that most distortions start from the top. Under foreign rule, whether it is Mughal or British, foreign rulers try to buy over the intellectuals. Any foreign ruler who wants to subjugate a society has to first get the intellectuals' co-operation and, therefore, has to corrupt the intellectuals first. When the intellectuals were corrupted and bought over, they considered themselves superior and the myth of the superiority of the *Brahmana* as a class came about. When the *Brahmans* were corrupted, the *Kshatriyas* were subjugated because they lost out in the war to the foreign ruler. With the degeneration of these two started the degeneration of the whole system, and we are now saddled with the caste system that we have today. *That is why you find that in pockets where the Brahminical culture was high, you will find the anti-Brahminical movement like the Dravida Kazakam movement in the south or Communism emerged. Kumbakonam was the heart of Brahminical culture and that is also the home of the Dravida Kazakam movement which is an anti-religion movement, an anti-Brahminical movement. This is also true of West Bengal and Kerala—Communism emerged as things at the top became distorted.* On its own, it would not have got distorted. Remember that every culture has a cycle of growth and decay; we were at our peak when other civilisations were in their infancy and then came the phase of decay when the foreign rulers walked in.

Swamiji, the belief that the caste system is hereditary.....how did that come about?

The four-fold system came about so that the whole society could function as a society and, at the same time, every member could have *moksha* as an ultimate goal. Because work was taken care of, what had to be done as a society was taken care of. Remember we were not apathetic towards society; we built a great civilisation that lasted thousands of years. Indian society was basically not very competitive. *There was a pursuit of excellence, and money was not the driving factor, moksha was the driving factor.* We needed

enough money, power, position etc to fulfill our desires, that was all that was necessary. In such a society, it was convenient for the carpenter's son to follow his father's profession because by the time he was three or four years old he had learnt to handle the hammer and chisel, by the time he was 10 he was a craftsman, by 18 he was a skilled artisan, by 50 he could produce masterpieces. And that is why we have so many beautiful temples and structures in India; skills were passed on at an early age and there was an advantage in this. So since many or most followed their parents profession there was a tendency to look at it as hereditary.

But did they have a choice?

Yes, look at the *Mahabharata*—Dronacharya was a *Brahman* by birth, in the sense that his father was a teacher by karma, but he was the greatest warrior of those times. Every prince had been trained by him. Vyasa, who would be technically considered as an outcast—his father was a *rishi* and mother a fisher-woman and he was an illegitimate child—he is honoured as the guru of all gurus. Satyawati, a fisher-woman, became the empress of Aryavarta. We have enough examples to show that one could move across the caste system. Many did not do that for the sake of convenience. In the last 300 years or so, when it all degenerated, the question of untouchability etc came up, but all this was not there before. How could there be? *When the spiritual tradition says that not just every being but every thing on earth is Ishwara, how can you even think of treating another human being as an untouchable? It goes against the very ethos of this knowledge. Even today, if you go to a village in India and ask someone about Ishwara, he is not going to look up and say, 'Up there'. He will say that everything is Ishwara even though he may not have understood this completely. The point is that the basic ethic survives even today.* It must have been even more deeply entrenched when this knowledge was more widespread; in an environment like this it is not possible to believe in untouchability. That is the sad and tragic paradox of what happened when the whole thing got distorted.

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Views – 377

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