

Vedic Perspectives on Varna Dharma

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Abstract

Sanatana Dharma refers to what is popularly known as Hinduism. However Sanatana Dharma means Everlasting (Sanatana) Principles (dharma) that holds and protects all of us together. The Sanaatana Dharma is universal in its relevance. The Vedic literature on which Sanaatana Dharma is based includes not only Vedas but also many other scriptures (Shaastras) that have Vedas as their basis. Sanaatana Dharma provides a vision and ways for fulfillment in human life. This Vedic vision is expressed through the chaturbhadra purushartha, namely the four-fold objectives which is applicable to any human being. These four-fold objectives are Dharma (Values), Artha (Wealth), Kaama (Desires) and Moksha (Bliss). It is important to note this order should not be changed. Also, the Artha and Kaama are bounded between Dharma and Moksha. In addition Artha and Kaama should always be in conjunction with Dharma.

The sages through their Vedic vision in the interest of the human society gave an organizational classification system based on natural process. It is known that diversity and classification is inherent in nature. Thus Vedic literature refers to unity in diversity. In the context of organizational classification in human society, the Vedic literature has recognized four fold classification namely Braahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shoodra known as the four varnas. It is very important to understand properly the nature and descriptions of these four varnas. Another important Vedic vision is the Aashrama Dharma, which refers to the various stages of human life. The aashramas also refers to the four stages namely student, householder and contemplative and renunciate stages.

Paper presented at the WAVES conference on Varna, Jati and Kula. New Jersey, July 29-31, 2011.

This paper deals with the details of various scriptural references and discussions about this varna system. The various references such as the Purusha Sookta, Vishnu Puraana, Bhagavad-Gita, Manusmriti, etc will be used. The underlying harmony on which this classification approach is based will be discussed. The scope of the varna classification system will be discussed in nature. The various characteristics and requirements that underlie the varna classification system will be discussed. The connection between varna, jaati and kula will be discussed. The connection between varna, purushaartha and aashrama dharma will be discussed. The paper will discuss the role of varna classification in Sanaantana Dharma.

Introduction

Sanaatana Dharma refers to what is popularly known as Hinduism. The word Hinduism came about by identifying the culture of people inhabiting on the banks of Sindhu river (Indus valley). In Sanaatana Dharma, the word Sanaatana refers to “ever lasting” and Dharma refers to “principles that govern and protect all of us in the world”.

In Mahabharata (Karna Parva 69-58), the verse says about Dharma as,

Dhaaranaat dharma Ityaahurdharmao dhaarayate prajaaha

Yat syaddhaarana samyuktam sa dharma iti nishchayaha

This means that the “dharma is that which has the ability to hold. Dharma holds and protects the people. Hence it is called dharma”.

Generally the word Hinduism gets compared to some other “ism” which may be identified with a single founder at a specific time in history. However, sanaatana dharma or Hinduism cannot be identified with a single founder at a specific time in history. So, it is very important to remember that whenever term Hinduism is thought about or referred, then it means Sanaatana Dharma

as a collection of eternal principles realized by various sages (rishis) at different times that govern and protect the entire world that includes all creatures and nature. It is important to note that the Sanaatana Dharma is based on the eternal and universal principles not just only on personalities.

It is important to use the original words of Sanskrit as they are found in the Vedic literature. It is well known that it is impossible to carry the original intention and meaning when translating a word from one language to another language. Several words or sentences would be required in English to properly understand the implied meanings of words in Sanskrit. For example, the word Dharma as noted above describes a definition. So Dharma cannot be translated into any one word in English. Similarly the word "Varna" cannot be translated into "caste" as commonly done. The word "caste" is originally from "casta" in Portuguese language. The implication of the word "caste" is setting up a hierarchy into society. However the word "Varna" does not indicate hierarchy rather it indicates interaction of guna (quality of a substance) and karma (function). Similarly the word "Veda" refers to "knowledge" coming from the verbal root "to know". In this paper in addition to Sanskrit words "Varna" and "Dharma", many other original words in Sanskrit are used with their definitions.

Sanatana Dharma

The foundation literature on which Sanaatana Dharma is based is referred as Vedas. The term Veda refers to knowledge and is four fold namely Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Saama Veda And Atharva Veda. This four fold Veda are also referred as Shruti. Which means 'heard'. Thus Vedas are the collection of mantras that are heard by Rishis (sages). The word "Rishi" is from the verbal root "to see". So a rishi is a seer through his (or her) deep insight. The Vedas are referred as transcendental to emphasize that in order to properly understand them, one need to comprehend at transcendental state of consciousness. The state of transcendental consciousness is achieved through the efforts of pure mind and intellect, which are achieved by spiritual practices, such as yoga, meditation, etc. The Vedic rishis were sages and seers who taught the Veda mantras to their disciples, who in turn taught to their disciples. This unbroken oral tradition of teaching from ancient times to current times has played a pivotal role in India in teaching the Vedic culture through its history. Hence Vedas, which are the collection of mantras about all

aspects of life, universe and God, are taken as an integrated body of validating reference for Sanaatana Dharma.

In Manu Smriti (2-6 and 2-10), the verses says,

Vedokhilo dharmamulam smritishee cha tadvidaam

Achaarashchaiva saadhoonamaatmanastushtireva cha (2-6)

This means “Veda, Smriti, conduct of cultured noble people and the spiritual satisfaction of the self are the validating reference for dharma”.

Shrutistu vedo vijneyo dharmashaastram tu vai smritihi

Te sarvartheshta meemaansye taabhyaam dharmo hi nirbabhou (2-10)

This means that “Shruti namely Vedas and Smriti are referred as scriptures for dharma. The Shruti (Vedas) and smriti are validating reference. Dharma is formed out of these references namely Shruti and Smriti”.

Hinduism or Sanaatana Dharma provides a vision and philosophy and way of life as culture. Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma is a religion because it accepts the existence of One Supreme Being (or GOD) and posts God as the ultimate goal of life. Hinduism provides the moral and ethical codes to make progress towards the goal of life namely God. The rituals and festivals are an integral part of Hinduism. Hinduism is a philosophy because it has provided knowledge about the nature of ultimate truth behind the human beings and universe based on a thorough rational analysis in a convincing manner. Hindu philosophy provides freedom for thinking and differences of opinion are respected. Hinduism is a culture because it manifests in the human life and society as customs, code of conduct in lives of people who follow the Vedic way of life.

The Sanaatana Dharma clearly provides the vision and guidance for a human being by providing four objectives of life and by pursuing which an individual can achieve fulfillment in life. These four objectives of life are known in Sanskrit as dharma, artha, kaama and moksha. Dharma is the principle, which holds all of us together and practice of which protects us here and hereafter. Artha is earning of material wealth through right means. Kaama is the enjoyment of right type of sensual pleasures. Moksha is freedom from all

undesirable fetters of life. It is to be noted that not only each objective is important but also their integration. In the view of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru,

“In enumerating four objectives of life, the order of dharma, artha, kaama and moksha are proper and should not be interchanged. This is because artha and kaama should be pursued within the bounds of dharma and moksha.”

Vedic Literature

The number of scriptures and other related works in Vedic and literary Sanskrit language on the various aspects of Sanaatana Dharma is very large. The roots of this large body of knowledge are the **Vedas** and Vedic literature. Vedas in addition to being collection of mantras they describe various aspects of knowledge on Supreme Being, various manifestations of the Supreme Being, cosmos, world, nature, life and species, arts, society etc. The Vedas (or shruti) as validating reference are collection of very large number of mantras. The sage Veda Vyaasa classified this large body of mantras into four Vedas namely Rig Veda (metrical mantras on various manifestations of Supreme Being), YajurVeda (prose-type mantras for rituals and sacrifices), Saama Veda (musical and metrical chants for rituals) and Atharva Veda (mantras for welfare of society and world). The ending portions of the Vedas are referred as Upanishads.

The **Smritis** include compositions of the codes and guidelines recommended by the sages such as Paraashara, Yaajnavalkya, Goutama, Manu etc. The Smritis are written to provide the Vedic knowledge for the success and spiritual development in life. Then the **Puraanas** are works that are instructive and are written based on the historical information. The Puraanas are written with a purpose convey Vedic principles to all sections of people. Then the **Itihaasas** are the historical literature that includes Ramayana of sage Vaalmiki and Mahabharata of sage Veda Vyaasa. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are described as the fifth Veda as they explain Vedic principles through illustrating examples, as Vedic principles are difficult to understand directly. Then the UpaVedas consist of AyurVeda for health and medicine, DhanurVeda for the science of archery and military, the Gandharva Veda for the music and arts and Arthashastra for science of economics and politics.

The **Vedaangas**, which deal with six areas, are auxiliary and pre-requisite for studying and practicing knowledge of the Vedas. They are Sheeksha that deals with science of proper articulation, euphony and

pronunciation of mantras. The Kalpa deals with Vedic rituals and procedures. The Vyaakarana deals with grammatical aspects of Vedic and literary Sanskrit. The Nirukta deals with etymology of words. The chandas deals with the science of prosody and aids in melodious pronunciation of Vedic mantras. The Jyotisha deals with the astronomical and astrological part for applications in Vedic rituals. The **Upaangas** are the philosophical systems referred to as **Darshanas** and are based on the Vedas. They are formulated by sages in cryptic statements called sootras. The Nyaaya of sage Gautama deals with the science of logic and metaphysics. The Vaisheshika of sage Kanaada provides a scientific view of the universe. The Saankhya of sage Kapila describes the universe and life through elements. The yoga of Patanjali describes the eight steps for psychophysical and spiritual development and fulfillment in life. The Poorva Meemansa of sage Jaimini describes the role and relevance of Vedic rituals. The Uttara Mimaansa (Vedanta) of sage Vyaasa on the basis of Upanishads deal with the understanding and realization of Brahman as one source. The **Prasthaanatrayi** refers to three sources that form the foundation of philosophy of Sanaatana Dharma. They are Upanishads, Brahmasootras and Bhagavad-Gita. Then there are additional important sources namely Tantra and Agamas. They are in conformity with the Vedas and Vedic vision. They deal with the occult part of the Vedas and the worship procedures, temple building and consecration of deities etc.

It is important to note that the Varna system has been dealt and discussed in large number of scriptures in various situations and contexts. In this article only some citations on Varnas are referred and discussed.

Diversity in the world

It is everyone's experience that there exists diversity in nature all around us in the world. Also there are different stages in the development of things in nature. For example, in the development of a tree and the fruit from that tree, there are different stages starting from the seed to the fruit. All these different stages and diverse products of a tree are harmoniously contributing to a unified purpose namely formation of the fruit. Thus the existence of varieties of things, animals and human beings are the facts of nature. It is to be noted that each entity in nature has certain internal constitution of fundamental subtle substances or elements (gunas) represented by their qualities. Correspondingly, the entity either has a utility or performs certain functions (karmas).

According a Vedic view, the fundamental subtle substances or elements constituting nature (prakriti) are three gunas namely Satva, Rajas and Tamas. Each of these gunas stands for a particular aspect of physical reality. Satva represents whatever is pure, clear and fine. Satva conduces to the production of knowledge and as also happiness. Rajas represent whatever is ever active. Rajas is also responsible to desires and ambitions, to fulfill one has to actively work. Tamas represents whatever is stolid and offers resistance. Tamas tends to sleep and inactivity.

It is to be noted that material things, animals and human beings possess these three gunas in various proportions. The classification of material things based on gunas is related to their role and utility. The four-fold varna system of classification namely braahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and shoordra are there even in material things found in nature. Even the musical notes are classified based on the varna system. It is important to note that the varna system classification does not indicate hierarchy. Every human being has these three gunas in some proportion. Also in human beings, the proportions of these gunas may vary dependent on stage of life and also due to the inherent freewill. The additional parameter in the case of human beings is the type of work (karma). It is important to see the dynamic interaction of guna and karma, which leads to differences in human beings who need to co-exist in a society. The classification of humans based on the varna system is given in Vedas and several Vedic scriptures. The varna and the corresponding dharma describe the various functions of human beings to peacefully co-exist in a society.

Four-fold classification of human society

The well-known ***Purusha Sookta*** with sixteen riks constitutes the ninetieth sookta of the tenth mandala in Rig-Veda samhita. This sookta refers to the creation of the world by Purusha. The riks (mantras) 11 and 12 are in the form of question and answer with reference to the four-fold classification. The riks are given by

Yat purusham vyadadhuhu katidhaavyakalpayan

Mukham kimasya koubaahu kaavooru paadaavuchyete rik (11)

Brahmonasya mukhamaaseet bahoo rajanyaha kritaha

Ooru tadasya yadvaishyaha padhbhyaagm shoodro ajaayata rik (12)

In the rik 11, the question is asked as “ when the gods (noted as saddhya devas) had employed Purusha as the sacrificial offering, what was his form like? Who appeared from purusha’s face (mouth), arms, thighs and feet”?

The next rik 12 gives the answers for the above question as ‘ through mouth (face), the beam of energy as Braahmana-varna needed for the spreading and strengthening the knowledge of Brahman came; through arms, the beam of energy as Kshatriya- varna needed for protection and to work in harmony with the braahmana varna came. Through the beam of energy as vaishya-varna needed for the well being of people came and through the feet the beam of energy as shoodra-varna needed for serving and strengthening the above three varnas mentioned above.

It is extremely important to realize that this four-fold varna representation is the conceptualization of how the various aspects of a human society can be organized for harmonious operation. This should not be taken as any hierarchical categorization leading into either superiority or inferiority complex. The Vedic literature never mentions head is more important than feet. In fact the Vedic literature emphasizes that each varna complements the other. Vedic seers were only interested in harmony of the society. This four-fold varna represents the type of work and the responsibilities corresponding to that varna. This four-fold representation is seen in several Vedic scriptures.

In the sixth canto of the first chapter of **Vishnu Puraana**, the verses 3 to 7 describe the formation of the four-fold classification. The verses 6 and 7 says

Brahmanaah Kshatriyaa Vaishyaaha Shoodrashcha Dvijasattama

Padoruvakshasthalato mukhatashashcha samudgatahaa

Yajna nishpattaye sarvametad brhamaa chakaara vai

Chaaturvarnyam mahaabhaaga yajnasaadhanamuttamam

This means, “The four varnas namely Braahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shoodra were formed (created) from the mouth (face), chest, thighs and feet respectively.”

The Lord Brahma classified this way for the performance of Yajna (noble fire sacrifices). The four-fold varna is an efficient means of operation. The devatas (gods) pleased with yajna will shower benefits such as rain, etc. for people.”

In ***Bhagavata Purana*** (11-17-13), it says

VipraKshatriyaVitShyudra mukhabahoorupadajaaha

Vairaaajat Purushaajaataa Ya Atmaachaara lakshanaaha

This means that “from the cosmic human being, the braahmanas manifested to represent the mouth (face), the kshatriyas manifested to represent the shoulders, the vaishyas manifested to represent the thighs and the shoodras manifested to represent the feet. The various varnas can be recognized from their instincts and work tendencies.”

In ***Valmiki Ramayana*** (Aranya kanda, 14-30), it says

Mukhato brahmana jaataha urasaha kshatriyaastathaa

Oorubhyaam jagnire vaishyaahaa padbhyaam shoodra iti shruithi

This means that “the braahmana came from the mouth (face), the kshatriya came from the shoulders, the vaishya came from the thighs and the shoodra came from the feet. This is told by the Shruti (Vedas).”

In the ***Mahabharata*** (Shanti parva, chapter 296, verse 6) it says

Mukhajaa brahmanastata baahujaah kshatriyaaha smritaahaa

Oorujaa dhanin rajan padajaahaa parichaarakaahaa

It means that “those who manifested from Brahma Prajaapati’s mouth (face) became brahmanas, those who manifested from Brahma Prajaapati’s shoulders became kshatriyas, those who manifested from Brahma Prajapati’s thighs

became vaishyas and those who manifested from Brahma Prajapati's feet became shoodras."

In another instance in ***Mahabharata*** in Shanti parva, the great warrior Bheeshma praises the Cosmic being as

Brahma vaktram bhujou kshatram kritsnamooroodaram vishaha

Padou yasyaashritaahaa shoodraastasmai varnaaatmane namaha

This means that "Salutations to the Cosmic Being for whom the mouth (face) is brahmana, shoulders are kshatriya, thighs are vaishya and the feet are represented by shoodras."

In ***Manusmriti*** (chapter 1, verse 31) it says

Lokaanam tu vivridhyartham mukhabaahoorupaadataha

Brahmanam kshatriyam vaishyan shoodran cha nivartayaat

This means "for the beneficial development of the world, the Brahma Prajapati formed (the various varnas from himself) namely braahmanas from his face, the kshatriyas from his shoulders, the vaishyas from his thighs and the shoodras from his feet.

Basis of four-fold classification of Society

It seen that several Vedic scriptures clearly provide the same four-fold classification of human society. It is also clear that this classification is based on the mutually complimentary roles of various varnas. The verse from Manusmriti (1-31) referred above states that this classification is for the benefit and the harmonious functioning of the society. Another well-known verse from Bhagavad-Gia (4-13) in which Lord Krishna says;

Chaturvarnyam maya srishtam guna karma vibhagashaha

Tasya kartaraaramapi mam viddhyakartaaramavyam

This means, “the four-fold varna is brought forth by Me (Lord Krishna) based on the frames of mind (gunas) of people and their aptitudes for various types work. Although I (Lord Krishna) am their cause, I am unchanged and beyond all actions”.

Here Lord Krishna is an incarnation of the Supreme Being referred as Brahman. Hence there is no discriminatory or selfish basis for the classification. The purpose is only that the society should function harmoniously and every human being spiritually progresses in his or her life.

Lord Krishna further describes in verses 18-41 to 18-44 of Bhagavad-Gita describes the various frames of minds of the four varnas and the nature of their work suited for them. The verse 18-41 says;

Brahmanakshatriyavishaam shoodraanam cha Parantapa

Karmaani pravibhaktaani svabhaavaprabhavaigunaiah

This means that “ Oh. Parantapa (Arjuna), then types of work for braahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shoodras are based on their inherent instincts and aptitudes”.

It is to be noted that the three gunas namely satva, rasjas and tamas are present in every human being in various proportions and can change as the person changes his/her life. However the classification is based on the sharing of the gunas in different proportions as a general guide. Satva guna is predominant in brahmanas. Rajo guna is predominant in kshatriyas and satva guna is secondary. In vaishyas the rajoguna is primary with tamo guna as secondary. In shoodras the tamoguna is primary with rajoguna as secondary.

The verse 18-42 says;

Shamo damastapaha shoucham kshantiraarjavameva cha

Jnaanam vijnaanamaastikyam brahmakarma svabhaavajam

The meaning of this verse (which include the nine qualities) “that define the work of a brahmana which are qualified by shama is control of inner urges of the senses, dama is the external control of the sensual urges, tapas is the

constant mental inquiry of nature of God, shoucham is the internal and external cleanliness, kshanti is patience and endurance, aarjavam is the simplicity and straight forwardness, jnaanam is wisdom and knowledge of scriptures, vijnaanam is the knowledge of the know-how of the process of attaining of spiritual knowledge and aastikyam is theistic knowledge of God.”

The verse 18-43 says;

Shouryam tejo dhritardaarkshyam yuddhechaapyapalaayanam

Daanameeshvarabhaavashcha kshaatram karmasvabhaavajam

The meaning of this verse (which include the seven qualities) “that define the work of a kshatriya which are shourya is the heroic quality, tejas is the radiance that inspires, dhriti is the stable strength, daarkshyam is the strong capability of administration, yuddhechaapyapalayanam is the not running away from the battle due to fear of death, daanam is the proper charity from the treasury and eeshvarabhaava is the acceptance of responsibility of protection of people and land.”

The verse 18-44 says;

Krishigourakshyavaanijyam vaishyakarma svabhaavajam

Paricharyaatmakam karma shoodrasyaapi svabhaavajam

The meaning of this verse is that “the natural instincts for the types of the work for vaishyas are agriculture, protection of cows and commercial trade. The natural instincts for the type of the work for shoodras are to do service.”

The Manusmriti (verses 1-87 to 1-91) also gives similar description of the types of work for the various varnas. These verses provide further details and compliment the verses from Bhagavad-Gita referred above. The verse (1-87) says

Sarvasyaasya tu sargasya guptyartham sa mahaadyutihi

Mukhabaahooroopajnaanaam prithakkarmaanyakalpayat

This verse means that “the Brahma with grandeur and radiance for the protection of His entire creation categorized various types of work for the various varnas namely braahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and shoodra who manifested from His face (mouth), shoulders (arms), thighs and feet respectively.”

In the verse (1-88) it says

Adhyaapanamadhyayanam yajanam yaajanam tathaa

Daanam pratigraham chaiva braahmanaamakalpayat

This verse means that “teaching, learning (studying), doing rituals, guiding and making others do rituals, giving charity, to worthy and receiving charity from worthy are the six types of work of brahmanas.”

The verse (1-89) says;

Prajaanam rakshanam daanamijyaadhyayanamevacha

Vishayeshtaprasaktishashcha kshatriyasya samaasataha

This verse means “taking care and protection of citizens, giving charity, doing rituals and fire sacrifices, learning, and non-indulgence in pleasures describe the work of kshatriyas.”

The verse (1-90) says

Pashoonaam rakshanam daanamijyaadhyayanamevacha

Vanik patham kuseedam cha vaishyasya krishimevacha

This verse means “that sustenance and protection of cows and animals, giving charity, doing rituals and fire sacrifices, learning, conducting trade on land and water, giving loans for interest and agriculture describe the work of vaishyas.”

The verse (1-91) says;

Ekameva tu shoodrasya prabhuhu karma samaadishat

Eteshaameva varnaanaam shushrooshaamanasooyayaa

This verse means “that the work shoodras is to provide service in carrying out the all the above types of works described.”

It is interesting to see that classification of karma can be viewed as teaching, protecting, financial and serving. Such four-fold functional groups can be seen in any organization. For example in a university, such a four-fold functional group can be seen. The group carrying out the function of teaching is faculty, the group carrying out the safety and protection is the administration. The group carrying out the financial function is the accounting group. The group carrying out the service function is the physical plant group. All the four groups are working for the harmonious operation and development of the university. This classification not only helps clearly the role of each group but also enables each group to be focus and be effective in their work.

Integration of society based on classification

The basis of the varna classification is clearly based on the guna and karma dynamics. It is also known that diversity exists in the society. Given this state of diversity some form of classification or categorization becomes essential. So the question is what form of classification is better. The classification based on internal constituents namely guna and karma provides a division of labor. It is interesting to note that in Plato’s Republic, the division of state into three classes namely philosophers-rulers, warriors and masses have been used. Any external basis of classification such as rich and poor, fair and dark skin, etc would not bring harmony in he society. It is important to note that in Vedic literature emphasizes that all the varnas should carry out their responsibilities. This is because the goal of a human being is to achieve spiritual fulfillment.

The four fold goals of life namely dharma, artha, kaama and moksha are common to all varnas. The moksha is the highest spiritual attainment and each human being can attain it. The path for achieving the same goals of spiritual development and fulfillment for each varna is different. In Bhagavad-Gita (18-46), Lord Krishna says;

Yatah pravrittirbhootaanaam yena sarvamidam tatam

Svakarmana tamabhyarchya siddhim vindati manavaha

This means that “when any human being through his or her karma, worships the Supreme Being from Whom this entire is sustained, then he or she will reach the spiritual fulfillment”.

This verse by Lord Krishna gives out clearly that every human being belonging to any varna can achieve the spiritual fulfillment. All varnas are equal and contribute to the harmony of the society. It is also important to note that the varna classification system has to work in harmony with the four ashramas namely stages of life. The four stages of life are brahamcharya (student-life), grihastha (householder-life), vaanaprastha (elderly-life) and sanyaasa (renunciate-life). Although the general path for a human being is go through all the four stages of life. However it is possible that certain individuals can go directly to sanyaasa (renunciate-life). It is to be noted that the renunciate-life has the spiritual focus. Anyone competent from any varna can enter renunciate-life to pursue spiritual development with a special focus. Essentially the varna system of classification interacts with the first three stages of life.

Another important aspect of varna system is that all varnas have responsibilities to uplift the society. Although there are differences in their karma (functions), the common noble qualities are required for all the varnas. For example, in Manusmriti, the verse (10-63) says;

Ahimsa satyamasteyam shouchamindriyanigrahaha

Etam saamaasikam dharmam chaaturvarnyebraevenmanuhu

This means that “People of all the four varnas must follow these five important things (dharma) namely non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, cleanliness and control of the senses.”

A similar code of conduct for the people of all varnas and aashramas is given by the sage Kautilya. The Arthashastra (1-3-13) says;

Sarveshaamahimsaa satyam shouchamanasooyanrishamsyam kshamaa cha

This means “the duties or conduct that is common to all people are non-violence, truthfulness, straightforwardness, non-jealousy, compassion and forbearance”.

These above verses clearly give the equal emphasis on all four varnas. Another issue that comes to discussion is the role of birth in the classification of varna.

A verse in Manusmriti (10-5) says;

Sarvavarnaeshu tulyaasu patneeshvakshatayoneeshu

Anulomyena sambhhotaa jaatyaa jneyaasta eva te

This means that “ the children born to the parents belonging to same varna obtains the same varna at birth.”

However it is to be noted that when a child is born into a family, the environment provided by the family will be the initial condition. As the child grows into a person, it becomes extremely important to develop the proper characteristics. If a person does not perform the karma and possess the corresponding varna characteristics, then that person would be moving away from the varna. The Vedic samskaaras are there to provide the proper samskaaras corresponding to the varnas. For example, a child born to braahmana parents has to go through upanayana samskaara (sacred thread ritual) and perform sandhyaa karma and other rituals to become a dvija.

A verse in Mahabharata (Vana parva, 180-25,26)

Na vai shoodra bhavetcchoodro braahmano na cha braahmanaha

Yatraitallakshyate sarpa vrittam sa braahamanaha smritaha

This means that “just by birth alone one cannot become shoodra or a braahmana, It is on the basis of conduct that is to be decided a braahmana or shoodra”. There have been many examples in Vedic literature that any person with noble character who has attained excellence in knowledge and realization have been respected and revered by the Hindu society.

The varna classification is also linked to jaati, which is derived from the root “jaata” which means “born into”. Another term is “kula” which refers to lineage or ancestry is also related to varna. However the varna system is the basic classification that influences both jaati and kula.

Concluding remarks

The diversity and differences in the world is a fact. However a proper classification of things with mutually complimentary roles is essential to harmonious operation of society. The Vedas and Vedic literature have provided the varna system of classification. The varna system has sustained and provided stability in Hindu society for thousands of years. As seen from the above discussions, the varna system in harmony with the four-fold goals of life namely dharma, artha, kaama and moksha and four stages of life namely brahmacharya, grishta, vaanaprastha and sanyaasa has provided a framework for the Hindu society.

However, in the recent and modern times there has been misunderstanding and misuse of the varna system. This has resulted in several conflicts at all levels. Thus it is essential for all concerned to engage in deeper understanding of the Vedic culture because it gives a vision and methods for harmony. A Veda mantra says

Samaani va aakootihi samaanaa hridayaani vaha

Samaanamastu vo manaha yathaa vaha suhaasati

This means that sages advise us by saying “May all of your determination be unitary; May all your hearts be unitary; may all of your minds be unitary and; May all live together with peace and harmony.”

Acknowledgement: The author wishes to acknowledge the help of Mr. Chetan Bhatt and Mr. Vivek Vasanth.

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