

VEDĀNTA 20/20
INTRODUCTION TO VEDĀNTA
VARṆA DHARMA

Today we will start a new topic as the introduction of *VEDĀNTA 20/20* lecture series continues and the the topic is *varṇa dharma* or *varṇa āśrama vyavasthā*. It is very difficult to translate this term into English, *varṇa āśrama* scheme. In the previous two sessions, I talked about the four human goals, *puruṣārtha* and then about *śāstra*, scriptural literature. The primary aim of scriptures is to help human beings in accomplishing the four-fold human goals. *Śāstra*, the scripture wants to help those who take the assistance of *śāstra*. Whoever has faith in the *śāstra*, whoever is humble enough to take the help of *śāstra*, the scriptures provide valuable help in attaining the *puruṣārtha*. The four-fold goals may also be divided into *preyas* and *śreyas*.

For accomplishing these goals, the scriptures provide the particular infrastructure. If a country has to progress and be prosperous, it needs the necessary atmosphere and proper conditions. The nation cannot progress if roads are not there for transport of people and goods, if telephone and internet are not working, if adequate communication is not there, if the country does not have the necessary infrastructure. Our scriptures have understood the role and importance of the infrastructure; that is presented by the *veda*-s as *varṇa āśrama vyavasthā*, that is the infrastructure life. According to the scriptures this scheme is the ideal scheme in which the individual or the society can achieve all the four goals. You should remember when *veda*-s provide a scheme, they keep in mind both the spiritual and material goals of life.

The infrastructure that suits only the material success is not enough for the accomplishment of spiritual goals. So the scriptural infrastructure keeps in mind the balance of both. Mere material success is absolutely worthless.

Arjuna discovered that on the battlefield. Even though he was rich and famous and materially very well accomplished, his spiritual bankruptcy came to the fore when he faced a crisis in life. Therefore scriptures say the material success is extremely important, but it should be balanced and complemented by spiritual success also. What really matters is spiritual success. *Bṛhadāraṇya Upaniṣad* says a truly successful person is the one who has discovered his real spiritual self.

The social design or the social scheme given by the scriptures is called *varṇa āśrama vyavasthā*. It consists of two schemes, *varṇa vyavasthā* and *āśrama vyavasthā*. First we will take up the *varṇa* scheme for our study. Then we will take up the *āśrama* scheme. *Varṇa vyavasthā* is a social scheme that is meant for the growth of, prosperity of the society as a whole. *Varṇa vyavasthā* is a societal scheme. It is a macro scheme taking the society into account. *Āśrama vyavasthā* is a scheme in which the individual growth and success are kept in mind. The society must also be taken into account as a whole and the individual must also be taken into account. Individuals put together only form the society at large. A balance has to be struck between the individual and the society.

Varṇa vyavasthā is a social scheme and in this scheme, the whole humanity or society is classified into four groups or four classes. Each group is called a *varṇa*. The society is divided into four such groups which we call *varṇa vibhāgaḥ*. If the society is taken as one body, each group serves as an organ of the society. The four *varṇa*-s are *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *sūdra*. We will translate the word *varṇa* as groups for the time being. The etymological meaning, how it is derived I will give later.

The next question is what is the basis on which this grouping is made? A classification can be made on certain characteristics. I can divide all of you into two groups, say on gender as male and female. I can classify you based on your age, say under 35 and above 35. So whenever we talk of classification

there is a criterion, a basis. Once I know the basis I can determine to which group I belong. When you look at the classification, we find there are three different bases or conditions on which the society may be grouped. The groups will change, my status will change based on the norm of classification. The first norm on which the society can be classified is character, personality, inclination or trait. In *Samskṛta*, this is called *guṇa vibhāgaḥ*. *Guṇa vibhāgaḥ* is character based or personality based division of society. When you make such a division, we talk about four types of personality. On the basis of personality we can talk of *guṇa brāhmaṇaḥ*, *guṇa kṣatriyaḥ*, *guṇa vaiśyaḥ* or *guṇa śūdraḥ*. This is based purely on personality.

Next question is what makes me a *guṇa brāhmaṇa*? What personality trait makes me a *guṇa brāhmaṇa* or *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* or *śūdra*? The four traits that are given in the scriptures are as follows, the first one is spiritual personality, one in which one gravitates toward spirituality primarily. The one who loves spiritual pursuits, the one who loves withdrawal, the one who loves solitude, one who loves silence, the one who loves contemplation, the one who loves the pursuit of ultimate Reality is a *guṇa brāhmaṇa*. That alone appeals to that mind while all other things that all other people consider as important, for this person all that appears insignificant. Thus a spiritually oriented, silent, contemplative, solitude seeking, inquiry loving personality or trait is called *guṇa brāhmaṇatvam*. *Saṁnyāsa*, renunciation appeals to that mind. Solitude seems to be terrible loneliness for other people, a dreadful depressing state, this mind loves being alone. This I call a spiritual personality. Whoever enjoys this is a *guṇa brāhmaṇa*. The second personality is a dynamic personality which loves activity very much. It is just the opposite of the previous, outgoing, planning, energetic, highly motivated mind. This motivation is selfless motivation. The mind is interested in activity that are not self-centered. It is not selfish dynamism, but interested in contribution, serving, uplifting, helping the society. Such a selflessly motivated mind is called *guṇa kṣatriyaḥ* mind, a personality heavily contributing to the welfare

of the society.

The third type of personality that is also equally dynamic. He also cannot think of solitude just like the previous personality. This person cannot think of withdrawal; cannot think of *saṁnyāsa*. This mind is also highly dynamic and motivated, cannot sit quietly for a moment, cannot even think of silence, cannot think of solitude, cannot think of renunciation, cannot think of contemplation. This personality is still different from the previous one in that it is very much self-centered. This personality is a selfishly motivated mind. Every activity has to produce a benefit only for me and my family. I would like to amass wealth, I do not think about contributing to the society, but very active. This mind is *guṇa vaiśya* mind, a selfishly motivated dynamic mind.

The fourth type is a personality that is passive, lethargic, has no motivation at all. They are not motivated by either material success or spiritual growth. No *puruṣārtha* appeals to that mind, no *artha*, *kāma*, *dharma* or *mokṣa*. The mere goal of life is eating, sleeping, surviving and dying. This is a mind that is very close to an animal. This personality is a *guṇa śūdra* personality. Technically speaking *guṇa brāhmaṇatvam* is *sattva pradhāna*, *guṇa kṣatriyatvam* is *śuddha rajas pradhāna*, *guṇa vaiśyatvam* is *āsuddha rajas pradhāna* and finally the *guṇa śūdratvam* is *tamas pradhāna*. These are the four norms based on which we do the *guṇa vibhāga* or *guṇataḥ varṇa vibhāga*. We have to look at what kind of personality we have and identify to which group we belong. You need not declare it outside, but we can know where we stand.

Then the next norm for clarification is *karma vibhāga* that gives *karma varṇa vibhāga* based on profession, occupation or the contribution to the society. All possible professions are broadly classified into four. These are not air-tight divisions. There are overlaps, but for the sake of convenience, we identify four types of work. Each work is important to the growth of the society. The first one, the most important one, that is being neglected nowadays, is

scriptural learning and teaching. This is a very important work that requires dedicated pursuit and specialization. We saw, in the last class, how voluminous our scriptural literature is. It is very extensive and intensive. So many topics on philosophy has to be covered. At the same time what is discussed is very deep and profound. So much is discussed and so it is very extensive. Not only that, it is equally intensive. There are commentaries that go deeper into the texts and even commentaries on commentaries and notes on them. First studying *Sam̐skṛta*, you know how difficult that is. Unless there is somebody who exclusively dedicates his life to learn and teach, you cannot maintain and preserve.

So one important job to be done is studying the scriptures in their original. Not only we have to study the scriptures, but to maintain them, they have to taught. Can any lay person go and so this study? Even to study the 700 verses of *Bhagavad Gītā*, it takes several years. What to talk of *śruti*, *smṛti*, *purāṇa*, *itihāsa* and *bhāṣya*-s? Time is not there to even attend these classes. Even if they attend, they do not have time to review and reflect. How much time and energy is required! So the whole society cannot dedicate to the study. So we need a separate group to specialize only on that. They should not have any other job. Their only job is studying all the scriptures and teaching to the next generation. They have to teach the society also in a simplified manner, in a contemporary way using suitable methods. I cannot teach everything that is there in *Brahma Sūtra* to everyone. The whole society does not need that. Whatever is required for the society, that much knowledge somebody must give. For example knowledge of medicine. It is not necessary for everyone to be a doctor. You need some basis knowledge to lead a healthy life. In special situations you go consult a doctor. You need not study the whole medical science. We do need some medically trained people. They have dedicated their life to the medical profession. Similarly every other profession, be it legal, commerce, finance, governance, there are specialists who take up that profession.

Now the entire society cannot study the whole scriptures and need not study also. Therefore we need a group of people who dedicate their lives for the study of scriptures and propagation of the same. They should be able to interpret the scriptures as society changes. We have seen so much of technological change, people's mobility across the globe and so many other changes. We cannot look for specific instructions in *manu smṛti* current day situations. A knowledgeable person will be able to interpret what is said there to be adapt to the present day. If proper interpretation has to be done, that person should have a holistic vision. It is a separate work that requires lifelong commitment. They are the scriptural teachers of the society. That work is called *brāhmaṇa karma*. Whoever takes up that job is called *karma brāhmaṇaḥ*. His life is dedicated to scriptures, *vaidika karma*.

The class of the society devoted to the cultural growth of the nation studies the scriptures, propagates the scriptures and guides the other members of the society in morals and ethic. That class is the *brāhmaṇa* class. Their exclusive role is *paṭhanam*, *pāṭhanam*, and *ācaranam*. They should learn, they should teach and they themselves should follow. Their exclusive job is contributing to cultural growth, religious growth and spiritual growth. What we find today is that very few people take to this class. Even those in *brāhmaṇa* family move into to other profession such as politics and business. This is called *varṇsaṅkaraḥ*. *Droṇācārya* is a case in point. Born in a *brāhmaṇa* family, he became an expert in warfare. When such transition takes place, the nation goes down culturally. We end up with a society that has a cut throat philosophy, steal, cheat, kill and plunder, eat drink and be merry! We end up with a materialistic society. That will be the destruction of humanity.

The second type of profession or job or occupation that is very much sought after is all forms of public service, administration of the country, governing the society, maintenance of law and order, protecting the society, defending the country. All these will come under those activities that are meant for

providing the people and appropriate atmosphere for the citizens to pursue their goals. In the old days that came under the purview of the kings. Today it is the government of the people, for the people, by the people. In simple terms it can be called public service. Whoever has taken to that profession or *karma*, we call *karma kṣatriyaḥ*.

The third is the well known form of all commercial activities, business or trade. This is very important for equitable distribution and sharing of the wealth of the society. That *karma* is called *vaiśya karma*. Whoever takes to such activities is called *karma vaiśyaḥ*. Then comes the fourth and final. This is all forms of labor. The person in this group does not think, has no skills of leadership. They just do the work for some other person. They just support and serve the other three groups. They follow the leadership of the other groups. Whoever takes to such activities is called *karma śūdraḥ*. This is the second type of division according to profession called *karma vibhāga*.

The third type of division is purely based on birth or the family in which one is born. In *Samskṛta*, birth is called *jāti*. Based on birth, one can be a *jāti brāhmaṇa*, *jāti kṣatriya*, *jāti vaiśya* or *jāti śūdra*. Thus from three different norms the society may be classified. So a person is a *jāti brāhmaṇa* because she was born in a *brāhmaṇa* family, but she is elected to be the chief minister of her state. She becomes a *karma kṣatriya*. Suppose she exploits her position and amasses wealth, then she becomes a *guṇa vaiśya*. I kept saying suppose, suppose, suppose, but there is a perfect example in the former CM of *Tamil Nadu*, *Jayalalita*. Thus one and same person can be all three.

Now I would like to discuss the gradation. Is there any gradation in *varṇa*? Is one superior and the other inferior? As far as *jāti vibhāga* is concerned, all the four are equal by birth. One cannot claim to be superior to someone else. No one should claim to be better than anyone based on *jāti*. That is the caste system that has become the bane of Indian society. We as a society have made a mess of this classification. All are equal. Then what about profession?

Karma vibhāga-wise also all are equal. No profession is inferior, no job is superior, all work is equal. They are all equally important. It is from this angle only there is the famous *puruṣa sūkta mantra*, *brāhmaṇo'sya mukham āsīt, bāhū rājanya kṛtaḥ, ūrū tadasya yadvaiśyaḥ, padbhyāgr̥ṇ sūdro ajāyata*. This example is for *karma vibhāga*. Four organs have four different functions. All functions are equally important. If any organ does not do its function, the entire body collapses. Similarly the four *varṇa*-s have four different functions. All of them are necessary for the entire society to function well. *Brāhmaṇaḥ asya mukham āsīt* means the teaching profession. *Bāhū rājanya kṛtaḥ* means maintenance of law and order. *Ūrū tadasya yadvaiśyaḥ* means taking care of the economic strength of the society. *Padbhyāgr̥ṇ sūdro ajāyata* means all forms of labor, running. By saying all these four are the four parts of the Lord, we say all of them are equally sacred. You cannot say the feet are less sacred than the face. We worship the feet of the Lord. *Śaṅkarācārya* is called *Bhagavadpādaḥ* and not *Bhagavadśiraḥ*. We talk about *pāda pūja* and not *ūrū pūja* or *hasta pūja*. Therefore profession-wise there is no gradation.

There is gradation with regard to *guṇa vibhāga*. A *guṇa brāhmaṇa* is certainly superior to *guṇa kṣatriyaḥ* who is certainly superior to *guṇa vaiśya* who is certainly superior to *guṇa sūdra*. A *guṇa sūdra* is closer to animal and a *guṇa brāhmaṇa* is closer to God! Therefore character-wise superiority we have to acknowledge and who whoever has a higher character deserves respect. Even though *Prahlāda* was born in an *asura* family as a *kṣatriyaḥ*, he can become the most reverential person in our culture because of his noble character. Birth does not matter, character alone matters.

Next I want to discuss if we have a choice in determining our group? As far as *jāti* is concerned, we do not have a choice with regard to this birth. Scriptures do say that we do have a choice with regard to the next birth. *Śucīnām śrīmataṁ gehe, yogabhraṣṭo'bhijāyate* (*Gītā* 6.41), this birth we have already chosen, but next birth we can design based on our life style in this

birth. As far as profession is concerned, we do have a choice. We can choose our profession from any angle. I can choose based on my *svabhāva*, character. Or I can base it on my heredity. Or it can be money based. Our scriptures say that the ideal choice is the character based choice of profession. Then you will love your profession, it will not be a burden. *Karma yoga* can be ideally practiced if you love what your profession is. Second best basis is family based choice because you will have some inherent abilities having been born in that family, family support will also be there. The worst choice is you choose a profession because the only reason for your choice is that it is highly lucrative. When money becomes the only criterion, everything gets there will only be corruption. By and large our society was heredity based, but now it is slowly changing. I do not think the current trend is for the better because money has become the prime motivator. With regard to *guṇa*, we do have a choice. All the spiritual *sādhana*-s are to improve us to *guṇa brāhmanatvam*. We all should become ultimately a *guṇa brāhmaṇa*. There is choice also to do just that. It is called *varṇa* because we have a choice, *vṛyati iti varṇaḥ*. This is the *varṇa vyavastha*.

Now I will briefly mention about *āśrama vyavastha* and conclude. *Āśrama vyavastha* is the individual scheme in which the life is divided into four stages, *brahmacharya*, the student stage, *gṛhastha*, the family stage, *vānaprastha*, the hermit stage and *saṁnyāsa*, the monk stage. Education is the focus in the student stage, learning both material and spiritual goals. The family stage is for the pursuit of *artha* and *kāma* goals primarily. This second stage is material goal oriented. The third stage is transition stage where I prepare for spiritual goal. I gradually withdraw from material pursuits and prepare for spiritual pursuit. The fourth stage is when I am dedicated to spiritual pursuits. These are the four stages that everyone has to go through. All the spiritual *sādhana*-s are only these four stages. We will take it up as a separate topic and then we will understand this more. These two put together is called *varṇa āśrama vyavastha*. This is the infrastructure envisaged by the scriptures for the

accomplishment of both our material and spiritual goals.