VARNASHRAMADHARMA AND PRESENT SOCIETY: A STUDY IN GANDHIAN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Khanin Barman
Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Madhya Kamrup College, Chenga, Barpeta, Assam, India.

Abstarct
Varnashramadharma, as the inevitable principle for maintaining Hindu society, stands for the spirit of egalitarianism as in this system no varna is found superior or inferior. It depends on one's qualities, not on birth. The Bhagavad Gita also speaks of varna only in terms of one's gunas (aptitude), karma (work) and the psychological disposition of the individual or his inherent quality born of nature. It is, thus, implied that in varna-dharma, guna and not birth is important. But in latter days around these four varnas or classes, many sub-castes grew up with innumerable prejudices and evil motives, which created barriers among these classes. Mahatma Gandhi, as a humanist, thus, finds himself unable to tolerate these evils. This problem now becomes a serious problem in our society. Therefore, there is a need to revisit the philosophy of varnashramadharma in global society. The paper highlights all these key issues and tries to find out the problems that the society is suffering in regard to prevailing caste system. Along with that the paper tries to find out whether Varnashramadharma at all relevance in present society.

Key words: Varna, Ashrama, Hindu society, Problem, Relevance.

INTRODUCTION
In ancient India *varnashramadharma* was regarded as the inevitable principle for maintaining a well-ordered Hindu society. The earliest reference of this system is found in the *Purus.a Sū ktu* of the Rgveda. In this system we find four *varnas* as well as four *ashramas*, which together are known as *varnashramadharma.* This system stands for the spirit of egalitarianism as in this system no *varna* is found superior or inferior. It depends on one's qualities, not on birth. But in latter days around these four *varnas* or classes, many sub-castes grew up with innumerable prejudices and evil motives, which created barriers among these classes. Therefore, there is a need to revisit the philosophy of *varnashramadharma* in modern society.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY
The study is conducted to the following objectives:
1. To study the basic philosophy of *varnashramadharma* and focus its relevance in the context of present society and
2. To evaluate the effects of Gandhi's initiatives to this end.

METHODOLOGY
In this paper the study is basically based on secondary data. The data is taken from different research reports, journals, websites and research papers as well as M. K. Gandhi's own works.

MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF *VARNASHRAMADHARMA* IN ANCIENT SOCIETY
The four *varnas,* as we found in *varnashramadharma,* are the four basic natures of the human being. It refers to the four orders of the society. The four *varnas* are *Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras*. It is an all embracing classification of the human beings on the basis of innate propensities (*pravrttis*), which are, according to Vedic psychology, *sattva, rajas, and tamas.* It is, thus, implied that *varna* system does not stand for the professions (*vrttis)* of life. One can change the profession, but not one's innate nature. When *varna* is interpreted as a profession and not as a propensity, the *jati* or caste system comes in. Vedic sociology speaks of *varna* system, but not *jati* system. The *Bhagavad Gita* also speaks of *varna* only in terms of one's *gunas* (aptitude), karma (work) and the psychological disposition of the individual or his inherent quality born of nature. It is, thus, implied that in *varna-dharma*, *guna* and not birth is important. *Varna* system is, therefore, not hereditary. In it there is social mobility. Hence, *varna* classification stands for open classification of society. Thus, a *Sudra's* son in whom the propensities of a *Brahmin* are found is a *Brahmin* and not a *Sudra*. A *Brahmin's* son in whom the propensities of a *Sudra* are found is a *Sudra* and not a *Brahmin*. That is anyone can attain *Brahminhood*. Some examples are- Valmiki, Vyasa, Vasistha and Narada. All are children of *Sudras*. Similarly, Visvamitra though born as a prince, became a *Brahmin rsi*[1]. Thus, it is found that no *varna* is superior or inferior as it depends on one's qualities, not on birth.

The four *asramas* of life, as divided in Hindu society, were-the *Brahmacharya, Garhasthya, Vanaprastha and Sannyasa*. These were the means of all round training and development, through which a Hindu could fulfill the purpose of his life. The duty of a person during *Brahmacharya* is to acquire knowledge. In *Garhasthya* he is to get married and maintain his family. At this stage a person strives toward the first three *purusarthas – dharma, artha* and *kama*. This stage also supports the other three *asramas*. During *vanaprastha* one is to go away from home and live in jungle thinking about God. Through these three

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stages one can attain *sanyasa*. In this stage he is completely free from worldly interest and lives in a state of indifference. This indifference is the identification of individual soul with the God or Absolute. At this stage one can, thus, attain his final *purusartha*, i.e., *moksa*. Thus, the four stages of life stand on a gradual progression from pursuit to withdrawal, from attachment to detachment, from *pravrtti* to *nivrtti*, from individual care to service of mankind.

It is, thus, seen that the *varnashramadharma* of the Hindus incorporate codes of life and conduct for the good of the society and the individual.

Gandhi's Views on *Varnashramadharma*

From the above discussion we find that *Varnashramadharma* of the Hindus incorporate codes of life and conduct for the good of the society and the individual. We also mention that in latter days around these four *varnas* or classes, many sub-castes grew up with innumerable prejudices and evil motives, which created barriers among these classes. Mahatma Gandhi, as a humanist, thus, finds himself unable to tolerate these evils. To remove such evils and also for the well-maintenance of the society he, therefore, wanted to revive once again the ancient ideal of *vanashramadharma*.

"I do regard varnashrama as a healthy division of work based on birth. The present ideas of caste are a perversion of the original. There is no question with me of superiority or inferiority. It is purely a question of duty"[2], said Gandhi.
Again he said,

"There is no room for arrogation of superiority by one class over another in a scheme of life based on ahimsa whose active form is undefiled love for all life"[3].

Indeed, he saw in it the all round development of human beings.

"*Varnashrama*, as I interpret it satisfies the religious, social and economic needs of a community. It satisfies the religious needs, because a whole community accepting the law is free to devote ample time to spiritual perfection. Observance of the law deviates social evils and entirely prevents the killing economic competition…It ensures the fairest possible distribution of wealth"[4].

Thus, *varnashrama*, for Gandhi, was an ideal system, which alone would make life livable by all and would restore the only object worthy of it, namely, self-realization. It was a "horizontal plane on which all the children of God occupy absolutely the same place."[5]. It is, thus, clear that *varnashrama*, for Gandhi, was not only for the Hindus but for the welfare of the whole of humanity also.

OBSERVATION AND CONCLUSION

As a part of his programme Gandhi was emphatic on keeping *varnashramadharma* with his interpretation of the Vedic custom. Le us then examine his view of *varnashramadharma*. For him, it was a horizontal plane on which all the children of God occupy absolutely the same place. *Varna* classification stood for an open classification. A *Sudra's* son in whom the propensities (*pravrttis)* of a Brahmin are found is a *Brahmin* and not a *Shudra*. A *Brahmin's* son in whom the propensities of a *shudra* are found is a *Shudra* and not a *Brahmin*. That is anyone can attain *Brahminhood*. Valmiki. Vyasa, Vasistha and Narada etc. were the ancient examples, who were the children of *Shudras*. Here, *varna* is based on qualities or *pravrittis*, but not on birth. Though originally this distinction among different *varnas* or castes were made with a view to making division of labour in accordance with one's capacities and propensities, and though Gandhi wanted to revive the tradition with complete faithfulness to that sprit, it must be observed that it was not a wise move on Gandhi's part insist on reviving the *varnashramadharma* at a time when it had become a rigid social order, and when lots of exploitation of people had been going on in the name of the *varna*-distinction.

Moreover, he had quite contradictory observations on this system He was once asked – "If the *Sudra* has all the qualities of a *Brahmin*, can we not call him a *Brahimn*?".

His reply was, "Not in this birth. It is a good thing for him not to arrogate a *varna* to which he is not born. It is a sign of true humility"[6].
He again said:

"*Varna* is intimately connected with birth and the observance of the law of *Varna* means believing on the part of us all of the heredity and traditional calling of our forefathers in a spirit of duty"[7].

So, it seems that Gandhi was also not above a conservative Hindu. For him too *varna* was determined by birth rather than by qualities or *pravrittis*. So, one's *varna* would decide one's status. As a result, one's status would be predetermined, which can never be altered. Moreover, Gandhi said that each person for earning his livelihood should follow the hereditary and traditional calling of his forefathers. Thus, the caste, in which a man is born, would determine his vocation. In this context, he would have no personal choice, his birth to a particular caste would determine his occupation. Such statements, thus, would degenerate the Indian society rather than making it an ideal one. It would, thus give a free hand to the exploitation of the lower by the so-called upper castes.

From about the 10th century B.C. to the 6th century B.C. braˉhmanas developed an elaborate religious and ritual cult to strengthen their social superiority, which was attacked by the Buddha[8]. Moreover, 'the old orthodox *braˉhmanical* doctrine of *adhikaravada*, which propounds the exclusion of the *shudras* or the masses from the benefit of the Vedic knowledge'[9] was even condemned by Swami Vivekananda, who at first inspired by *Varna* system. 'He even denounced priest craft in vigorous terms because it perpetuated social tyranny and disregarded masses'[1o].

V. P. Verma, a great historian, observes
"It is difficult to destroy historical traditions and so long as the four terms of Vedic sociology – *Braˉhmanas*, *Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras* – are retained, they are bound to perpetuate painful historical memories of social exploitation and suppression. I believe that a profound social revolution is the need of India and this conviction of mine is strengthened when I find even a mighty personality like Gandhi believing in the determination of castes by birth. Dayananda, hence, was a greater social revolutionary than Gandhi because he maintained that qualities and nature are the determinants of *varna*. …The caste system has proved to be the greatest citadel of conservative thought"[11].

The *ashrama* system has long since ceased to be practiced as it lost all relevance in the modern context. The *varna* or caste system should also be eliminated from our society. It is because the question of eliminating untouchability would remain a distant dream so long as this system exists. It is found that untouchability in Indian society rests upon the idea of the superiority of one section of people over another on account of their birth. Thus, the prevailing caste system itself bears the germ of untouchability.

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