

The Chaturvarnya in the Ancient Indian Aryan Society and the Present Caste System

In the Light of Sri Aurobindo

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Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan – 333001

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II. Indian Civilisation and Culture

1. The Fundamental Idea and the Essential Spirit

“Indian civilisation must be judged mainly by the culture and greatness of its millenniums, not by the ignorance and weakness of a few centuries. A culture must be judged, first by its essential spirit, then by its best accomplishment and, lastly, by its power of survival, renovation and adaptation to new phases of the permanent needs of the race.” (CWSA 20: 120)

Often we come across criticisms of India and its culture buttressed by the charge that this nation has always been subjugated and downtrodden by foreign invaders and there has always been poverty here. Whatever modern development we now see here is all a gift of the European culture. Mostly the criticisms we come across of this culture are based exclusively on the period of her decline, inertia and inactivity. But actually, this cannot be the right basis of judging any culture, and certainly is no way of judging a culture as ancient as the Indian. A culture that had for millenniums irresistibly and incessantly manifested on a colossal scale in all the spheres of spirit, thought and life, explored new dimensions, opened up untrodden paths in every field for the whole human race, cannot be judged rightly or justly by anyone who concentrates exclusively on its weakness of a few centuries.

The fundamental question here is, what after all should be the proper standards for judging a culture? For, if the standards themselves are unsound, then no reasonable outcome can be expected from an evaluation based on these. For instance, if the Indian culture is to be reckoned by its military aggressiveness, its success in warfare against other nations and the triumph of its organised acquisitive and predatory instincts, its irresistible push towards annexation and exploitation, then India would hardly measure up to the standards of greatness, because any such tendency was completely alien to the spirit of her culture. While sharply criticising the use of such confused standards of greatness for judging India, Swami Vivekananda says, “It is said – the fittest alone survive. How is it, then, that this most

unfitted of all races, according to commonly accepted ideas, could bear the most awful misfortunes that ever befall a race, and yet not show the least signs of decay? How is it that, while the multiplying powers of the so-called vigorous and active races are dwindling every day, the immoral (?) Hindu shows a power of increase beyond them all? Great laurels are due, no doubt, to those who can deluge the world with blood at a moment's notice; great indeed is the glory of those who, to keep up a population of a few millions in plenty, have to starve half the population of the earth, but is no credit due to those who can keep hundreds of millions in peace and plenty, without snatching the bread from the mouth of anyone else? Is there no power displayed in bringing up and guiding the destinies of countless millions of human beings, through hundreds of centuries, without the least violence to others?" (CWSV 4, 323)

If wealth, opulence and external prosperity are the only benchmarks for the evaluation of a culture, then the fact remains that the splendour of Asia, and particularly the opulence of India, were once stigmatised by the indigent Europe as signs of barbarism. But after a long period of reckless plundering of that wealth when the circumstances were reversed, then that very Europe, taking pride in its plundered wealth, began to declare itself on that very basis to be civilised and developed, and it started deriding as uncivilised, poor and naked the very people whose wealth it had plundered and whose culture it had tried to annihilate in a systematic and motivated manner.

"It is essential, if we are to get a right view of Indian civilisation or of any civilisation, to keep to the central, living, governing things and not to be led away by the confusion of accidents and details. This is a precaution which the critics of our culture steadily refuse to take. A civilisation, a culture must be looked at first in its initiating, supporting, durable central motives, in its heart of abiding principle; otherwise we shall be likely to find ourselves, like these critics, in a maze without a clue and we shall stumble about among false and partial conclusions and miss entirely the true truth of the matter. The importance of avoiding this error is evident when we are seeking for the essential significance of Indian religious culture.

physical being. If a civilisation has not any of these aims, it can hardly at all be said to have a culture and certainly in no sense a great and noble culture. But the last of these aims, as conceived by ancient India, is the highest of all because it includes and surpasses all the others. To have made this attempt is to have ennobled the life of the race; to have failed in it is better than if it had never at all been attempted; to have achieved even a partial success is a great contribution to the future possibilities of the human being.” (CWSA 20: 231-32)

2. The Firm Outward Basis on which the Indian Culture Found the Practical Development of Its Spirit and Its Idea of Life

“The problem which Indian culture had to solve was that of a firm outward basis on which to found the practical development of its spirit and its idea in life. How are we to take the natural life of man and, while allowing it sufficient scope and variety and freedom, yet to subject it to a law, canon, dharma, a law of function, a law of type, a law of each actual unideal human tendency and a law too of highest ideal intention? And how again are we to point that dharma towards its own exceeding by the fulfilment and cessation of its disciplinary purpose in the secure freedom of the spiritual life? Indian culture from an early stage seized upon a double idea for its own guidance which it threw into a basic system of the individual life in the social frame. This was the double system of the four Varnas and the four Asramas, – four graded classes of society and four successive stages of a developing human life.” (CWSA 20: 170)

It is only when we understand the problem which Indian culture was striving to solve that we can understand the reason and the significance of the periods or ages through which it passed. The problem was that if a culture sets for itself a goal of self-realisation, self-mastery and the establishment of the rule of the spirit in life, then how should it go about building such a comprehensive system in which every person with all the complexities of his individual being, and the whole society,

III. The True Original Basis for the Determination of the Varna of a Person and the Later Emergence of the Birth as Almost the Sole Determinant : Some Selected Words of Sri Aurobindo

“...in the soul-force in man this Godhead in Nature represents itself as a fourfold effective Power, *catur-vyūha*, a Power for knowledge, a Power for strength, a Power for mutuality and active and productive relation and interchange, a Power for works and labour and service, and its presence casts all human life into a nexus and inner and outer operation of these four things. The ancient thought of India conscious of this fourfold type of active human personality and nature built out of it the four types of the Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, each with its spiritual turn, ethical ideal, suitable upbringing, fixed function in society and place in the evolutionary scale of the spirit. **As always tends to be the case when we too much externalise and mechanise the more subtle truths of our nature, this became a hard and fast system inconsistent with the freedom and variability and complexity of the finer developing spirit in man.** Nevertheless the truth behind it exists and is one of some considerable importance in the perfection of our power of nature; but we have to take it in its inner aspects, first, personality, character, temperament, soul-type, then the soul-force which lies behind them and wears these forms, and lastly the play of the free spiritual Shakti in which they find their culmination and unity beyond all modes. **For the crude external idea that a man is born as a Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra and that alone, is not a psychological truth of our being.** The psychological fact is that there are these four active powers and tendencies of the Spirit and its executive Shakti within us and the predominance of one or the other in the more well-formed part of our personality gives us our main tendencies, dominant qualities and capacities, effective turn in action and life. But they are more or less present in all men, here manifest, there latent, here developed, there subdued

and depressed or subordinate, and in the perfect man will be raised up to a fullness and harmony which in the spiritual freedom will burst out into the free play of the infinite quality of the spirit in the inner and outer life..." (CWSA 24: 742-43)

"The *Bengalee* reports Srijut Bal Gangadhar Tilak to have made a definite pronouncement on the caste system. "The prevailing idea of social inequality is working immense evil", says the Nationalist leader of the Deccan. This pronouncement is only natural from an earnest Hindu and a sincere Nationalist like Srijut Tilak. **The baser ideas underlying the degenerate perversions of the original caste system, the mental attitude which bases them on a false foundation of caste, pride and arrogance, of a divinely ordained superiority depending on the accident of birth, of a fixed and intolerant inequality, are inconsistent with the supreme teaching, the basic spirit of Hinduism which sees the one invariable and indivisible Divinity in every individual being.** Nationalism is simply the passionate aspiration for the realisation of that Divine Unity in the nation, a unity in which all the component individuals, however various and apparently unequal their functions as political, social or economic factors, are yet really and fundamentally one and equal. In the ideal of Nationalism which India will set before the world, there will be an essential equality between man and man, between caste and caste, between class and class, all being as Mr. Tilak has pointed out different but equal and united parts of the Virat Purusha as realised in the nation. The insistent preaching of our religion and the work of the Indian Nationalist is to bring home to every one of his countrymen this ideal of their country's religion and philosophy. We are intolerant of autocracy because it is the denial in politics of this essential equality, we object to the modern distortion of the caste system because it is the denial in society of the same essential equality." (CWSA 7: 679)

Writing in the *Arya* more than one hundred years ago Sri Aurobindo pointed out, "The courage to defend our culture against ignorant occidental criticism and to maintain it against the gigantic modern pressure comes first, but with it there must be the courage to admit not from any European standpoint

IV. The Chaturvarnya System in the Gita – The Principle of Swabhava and Swadharma

चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः ।

तस्य कर्तारमपि मां विद्ध्यकर्तारमव्ययम् ॥ IV. 13 ॥

13. The fourfold order was created by Me according to the divisions of quality and active function. Know Me for the doer of this (the fourfold law of human workings) who am yet the imperishable non-doer.

“On the mere strength of this phrase it cannot altogether be concluded that the Gita regarded this system as an eternal and universal social order. Other ancient authorities did not so regard it; rather they distinctly state that it did not exist in the beginning and will collapse in a later age of the cycle. Still we may understand from the phrase that the fourfold function of social man was considered as normally inherent in the psychological and economic needs of every community and therefore a dispensation of the Spirit that expresses itself in the human corporate and individual existence.” (CWSA 19: 512-13)

“...the fourfold order of society is merely the concrete form of a spiritual truth which is itself independent of the form; it rests on the conception of right works as a rightly ordered expression of the nature of the individual being through whom the work is done, that nature assigning him his line and scope in life according to his inborn quality and his self-expressive function.” (CWSA 19: 6-7)

“Men therefore have to follow the fourfold law of their nature and works and on this plane of mundane action they seek the Godhead through his various qualities. But, says Krishna, though I am the doer of the fourfold works and creator of its fourfold law, yet I must be known also as the non-doer, the imperishable, the immutable Self. “Works affect me not, nor have I desire for the fruit of works;” for God is the impersonal beyond this egoistic personality and this strife of the modes

of Nature, and as the Purushottama also, the impersonal Personality, he possesses this supreme freedom even in works. Therefore the doer of divine works even while following the fourfold law has to know and live in that which is beyond, in the impersonal Self and so in the supreme Godhead. "He who thus knows me is not bound by his works..." (CWSA 19: 147)

"All action on the normal level is determined by the gunas; the action which is to be done, *kartavyam karma*, takes the triple form of giving, askesis and sacrifice, and any or all of these three may assume the character of any of the gunas. Therefore we have to proceed by the raising of these things to the highest sattwic height of which they are capable and go yet farther beyond to a largeness in which all works become a free self-giving, an energy of the divine Tapas, a perpetual sacrament of the spiritual existence. But this is a general law and all these considerations have been the enunciation of quite general principles and refer indiscriminately to all actions and to all men alike. All can eventually arrive by spiritual evolution to this strong discipline, this large perfection, this highest spiritual state. But while the general rule of mind and action is the same for all men, we see too that there is a constant law of variation and each individual acts not only according to the common laws of the human spirit, mind, will, life, but according to his own nature; each man fulfils different functions or follows a different bent according to the rule of his own circumstances, capacities, turn, character, powers. What place is to be assigned to this variation, this individual rule of nature in the spiritual discipline?" (CWSA 19: 508)

Here Sri Aurobindo is explaining why after all there is a discussion on the concept of Swabhava in the Gita. In the normal course of development of all human beings, each individual ascends first from tamas to rajas, then from rajas to sattva and finally from sattva to nistraiguṇya. However, even in this normal course, there is always the possibility that a person may go directly from any stage to nistraiguṇya. But this is an exceptional phenomenon the possibility of which is always there, but it is not the normal course. The normal course is the gradual development through tamas, rajas and

V. The Chaturvarnya in the Ancient Indian Aryan Society and the Present Caste System

“We must realise that the ancient Aryan Rishis meant by the chaturvarnya not a mere social division, but a recognition of God manifesting Himself in fundamental swabhava, which our bodily distinctions, our social orders are merely an attempt to organise in the symbols of human life, often a confused attempt, often a mere parody and distortion of the divine thing they try to express. Every man has in himself all the four dharmas, but one predominates, in one he is born^[1] and that strikes the note of his character and determines the type and cast of all his actions; the rest is subordinated to the dominant type and helps to give it its complement. No Brahmana is a complete Brahmana, unless he has the Kshatratejas in him, the Vaishyashakti and the Shudrashakti, but all these have to serve in him the fullness of his Brahmanyam. God manifests Himself as the four Prajapatis or Manus, the *chatwaro manavah* of the Gita, & each man is born in the ansha of one of the four; the first characterised by wisdom and largeness, the second by heroism and force, the third by dexterity and enjoyment, the fourth by work and service. The perfected man develops in himself all four capacities and contains at once the god of wisdom & largeness, the god of heroism and force, the god of skill and enjoyment, the god of work & service. Only, one stands dominant and leads and uses the others.” (CWSA 10: 7)

“The chaturvarnya in guna may be called Virya. It is the qualities of the four varnas in character. The perfect man has all the four in him, although one usually predominates and gives the character its general type. First, a man should have Brahmana qualities, [those of]^[2] the man of knowledge. He should have, first, the general temperament of the Brahmin,

^[1] This does not mean that the Varna of a person depended on the family he was born into. A person gets his Varna from birth which depends on his/her inner nature. Children born in one family may have different Varnas.

^[2] MS (scribal) or

that is to say calmness, patience, steadiness and thoughtfulness, which may all be expressed by the word Dhairyam. Then he should have the tendency towards knowledge, especially the Divine Knowledge, but also all kinds of knowledge on all kinds of subjects, with the necessary mental openness and curiosity. This is Jnanalipsa. The Brahmin has not only the thirst for knowledge but also a general clearness of mind and its tendency to be easily illuminated by ideas and to receive the truth. This is Jnanaprakasha. He has also a spiritual force which comes from knowledge and purity. This is Brahnavarchasya...

There should also be the qualities of the Kshatriya, the qualities of the man of action or the fighter. The first of these is courage and it is of two kinds – Abhaya or passive courage which is alarmed by no danger and shrinks from no peril that offers itself and from no misfortune or suffering. The second is Sahasa or active courage, that is to say, the daring to undertake any enterprise however difficult or apparently impossible and carry it through in spite of all dangers, suffering, failures, obstacles and oppositions. For this, two other things are necessary. [First,] a tendency of the nature to insist on the battle and victory and effort and triumph, i.e. Yasholipsa. Secondly, there must be a strong self-confidence and a high idea of the power that is in one's self. This is Atma Shakti or Atma Slagha...

The Vaishya qualities are also necessary for action and enjoyment. The first is the readiness to spend labour, resources, materials, means and life itself quite freely, taking great risks of loss in order to secure great gains. This may be called Vyaya. But with this there must be skill in the use of means and methods and their proper disposition in order to secure the end and also the knowledge of what is or is not possible to be gained by a particular means or method or a particular expense. There should be a sense of proportion, of order, and a skill [in]^[3] arrangement and management. All this may be called Kaushala. Also in the use of one's possessions, there are two other qualities of [the] Vaishya which are necessary. [First

^[3] MS (scribal) and

VI. An All-Pervasive Confusion between Two Systems (Qualitative and Hierarchical) of the Fourfold Division – the Root of Most of the Misunderstandings, Bitternesses and Untold Sufferings and Injustices Perpetrated in the Name of the Division of Castes and Varnas

The Vedic Rishis, being primarily concerned with an ever more complete, vivid and faultless expression of the deeper truth, used time and again, as needed, the same symbol or term in different contexts and with different significances. For example, the word ‘go’ is used in the Veda in the double sense of Cow and Light; the Cow is the outer symbol, and the inner meaning is Light. Similarly, the Ashwa or Horse is the symbol of the Life-Force and the Ashwamedha – the Horse-sacrifice – is the offering of the Life-power with all its impulses, desires, enjoyments to the divine existence. The Veda is at the root of Indian spiritual culture and all the other scriptures, Upanishads, Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, Tantras and Smritis are only attempts to variously express and explain the truth of the Veda. It is because the modern materialistic mentality fails to understand the Vedic symbolism that three-fourths of the Upanishads and much of the symbolism used in the Puranas and Tantras to convey deeper truths remain a closed book to it. The Vedic imagery alone sheds a clear light on some of the most important symbolic images in the Puranas. Take for example the famous symbol of Vishnu sleeping after the Pralaya on the folds of the snake Ananta upon the ocean of sweet milk. “It may perhaps be objected that the Puranas were written by superstitious Hindu priests or poets who believed that eclipses were caused by a dragon eating the sun and moon and could easily believe that during the periods of non-creation the supreme Deity in a physical body went to sleep on a physical snake upon a material ocean of real milk and that therefore it is a vain ingenuity to seek for a spiritual meaning in these fables. My reply would be that there is in fact no need

to seek for such meanings; for these very superstitious poets have put them there plainly on the very surface of the fable for everybody to see who does not choose to be blind. For they have given a name to Vishnu's snake, the name Ananta, and Ananta means the Infinite; therefore they have told us plainly enough that the image is an allegory and that Vishnu, the all-pervading Deity, sleeps in the periods of non-creation on the coils of the Infinite. As for the ocean, the Vedic imagery shows us that it must be the ocean of eternal existence and this ocean of eternal existence is an ocean of absolute sweetness, in other words, of pure Bliss." (CWSA 15: 107)

According to Sri Aurobindo, "In the Veda it is possible that another tendency has been at work, – the persistent and all-pervading habit of symbolism dominant in the minds of these ancient Mystics. Everything, their own names, the names of Kings and sacrificers, the ordinary circumstances of their lives were turned into symbols and covers for their secret meaning. Just as they used the ambiguity of the word *go*, which means both ray and cow, so as to make the concrete figure of the cow, the chief form of their pastoral wealth, a cover for its hidden sense of the inner light which was the chief element in the spiritual wealth they coveted from the gods, so also they would use their own names, Gotama "most full of light", Gavisthira "the steadfast in light" to hide a broad and general sense for their thought beneath what seemed a personal claim or desire. Thus too they used the experiences external and internal whether of themselves or of other Rishis. If there is any truth in the old legend of Shunahshepa bound as a victim on the altar of sacrifice, it is yet quite certain, as we shall see, that in the Rig Veda the occurrence or the legend is used as a symbol of the human soul bound by the triple cord of sin and released from it by the divine power of Agni, Surya, Varuna." (CWSA 15: 161)

"Ignorance, this matrix of sin, has in its substantial effect the appearance of a triple cord of limited mind, inefficient life, obscure physical animality, the three ropes with which the Rishi Shunahshepa in the parable was bound as a victim to the sacrificial post. The whole result is a struggling or inert