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The Systems of Varna and Ashrama

The perfect outlook of life considers four aspects which form inseparable ingredients of the very notion of perfection—society, the individual, the universe, and God. These four principles sum up the central objectives of what may be called the human perspective. The Indian's outlook has ever been a movement towards the achievement of perfection in degrees. There has never been an attempt to jump over the scales of evolution, but rather a very systematised endeavour at completing the duties called upon everyone at every level of evolution, starting with the lowest possible form. Previously I mentioned that this vision of perfection took into consideration four objectives of human existence known as the Purusharthas—dharma, artha, kama, moksha—which great ideal is implemented and worked out through the administration and organisation of society, and the discipline of the individual. The organisation of society took the form of the varna system, and the discipline of the individual took the form of the ashrama system. These are the famous varna and ashrama orders of the regulation of life as a whole. No man in this world is complete, and no man can be complete. Inasmuch as the endowments of every individual are partial, human society would be a conglomeration of partial individualities; there would be nothing perfect anywhere. The human personality is an admixture of various levels or, we can say, forces. The layers of the so-called individuality—the physical body, the pranas, the mind, the intellect, and the spirit—are all there in every individual, but none is fully developed in any person. If the body is perfect, the mind may not be; if the mind is perfect, the body may not be, and so on. The wisdom of the ancients was such that they contemplated a system of introducing some sort of perfection into the social order by bringing together the various partial endowments of personalities into an ordered system, which gave the shape of perfection. In the Sankhya philosophy we have the famous example illustrating the work of purusha and prakriti jointly. Purusha is supposed to be like a lame person who can see; prakriti is supposed to be like a blind person who can walk. Suppose the person who can see but has no legs sits upon the shoulders of the person who cannot see but has legs; then there is an appearance of a complete ability to reach the destination. We can say there is a total individuality by a bringing together of two partial aspects, which is a good illustration to explain the point that we are making in connection with the varna system. As no man is complete—no man is wholly spiritual, no man is wholly intellectual or rational, no man is wholly emotional or active, and no man is wholly capable of manual work, etc.—a necessity is felt to bring together the various partialities into a wholeness for the welfare of society. It is something like the system of give-and-take in the field of commercial activity. He who has rice but needs cloth will sell his rice to a person who has cloth; and one who has cloth but has no rice will trade his cloth for rice. The old barter system was like this. Everyone has needs, but no one has the capacity to fulfil all their needs. What I have, others may not have; and what others have, I may not have. Therefore, in order that social solidarity may be ensured so that there may be some sort of perfect image produced in the totality of the social structure, the varna system was thought to be the most advisable method to be adopted. What does the varna system mean, actually? We have a very crude notion of these ideas. We have often heard of the various castes, known as the Brahmanas, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, the Sudras, etc. While originally it was a purely rational, scientific, impersonal contemplation of social values, it has gradually deteriorated into a kind of emotional appropriation of prerogatives, and has tended to become an obnoxious system. Well, we can call any dog a bad name and hang it, but all dogs are not necessarily bad. Likewise, a misinterpretation and a misconstruing of the original intention can become a travesty—as it is also in the case of the various religions of the world, for instance. The original prophets and the founders were masters—Godmen and Incarnations who had the vision of the Supreme Supernal Light—who gave mankind a divine message with eternal significance. But when the prophet has vanished and the Incarnation has gone, there are followers who misinterpret, distort, and cut off one faith from another so that the very intention of the prophet or the Incarnation is lost, and we have only warfare among religious faiths. Such a thing has happened to the original system of varna. 'Varna' does not actually mean colour in a grammatical sense. It means the colour which is philosophically or metaphysically attributed to the so-called gunas of prakriti—sattva, rajas and tamas. These three properties of prakriti are the basis or the substratum of what are known as the colours. It does not

mean the colour of the skin, as it is sometimes wrongly thought to be. It is the colour of the property preponderating in a particular individual in some measure—how much sattva, how much rajasic, how much tamasic is there in an individual. No one is wholly sattvic, wholly rajasic or wholly tamasic; there is some percentage of each guna in different individuals in various proportions. The group of individuals who have the capacity to reflect a maximum amount of sattva are those persons who can think better in terms of the higher reason behind things than those who are predominantly rajasic or tamasic. So is the case with the other properties—rajas and tamas. Rajas has a tendency to activate everything, and tends towards energetic movement. Tamas is very heavy, dense and static. It does not move like rajas, and cannot think like sattva. Society has many kinds of requirements and, as we have noted earlier, individuals constitute a society. Whatever is the need of a man is the need of society, so to say. We have hunger and thirst, and everyone in society has this difficulty—an urge to appease our hunger, quench our thirst, and wear clothing. Therefore, we also have a need for the procedure of give-and-take because everyone needs something. I have touched upon the principles of administration, almost bordering upon the system of political science, which tells us something about the origin of the administrative system—the need for organisation in society, how people feel that they have to be governed by a principle, law or rule because individuals are isolated particulars scattered hither and thither—and that there is nothing visible in the world which can bring them together in the form of an organisation. How can two persons come together unless there is something common between them? But what is common between individuals? We can see nothing in common. Each person is absolutely independent in many respects. It was discovered very early that this independence of attitude is to the detriment of individuals because one cannot be wholly independent unless one is also wholly perfect. An imperfect person cannot be absolutely independent; and, as no one in this world is perfect, no one can be independent. Thus arises the necessity to be dependent on others; and the need for dependence calls for a system of relationship among people that lands us upon the system of the management of persons. And what is law, but the rule which tells us how to manage individuals? This also was necessary. But the way of this administration, or the rationale behind the system of organisation, is most important, whatever that organisation be—whether administrative, economic, or anything else. Every action is preceded by a thought. We cannot jump into activity without thinking of the pros and cons of the steps that we are taking, because the thought is the constitution that we lay at the very outset before we implement a procedure. Hence, there must be people to think of the way to organise things. Thus was sown the seed of the varna system. There would be the thinking or the rational type of people who contribute their might of knowledge for the purpose of the wholesome evolution and growth of society in its entirety; others would work vigorously by contributing their own abilities to maintain the organisational order or system; others would help in a third manner, by providing the economic means of sustenance; and there should also be people who would act like the pillars of the entire edifice of society, the footstool of the whole picture called human organisation. That we need people to work, and we need people to provide the economic means of sustenance by the procedure is well known. There is also a need for organisation and administration. And there is, above all, a need to think. Therefore, the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras are not superior and inferior types of people in society. This very poor interpretation is a travesty of the originally goodintentioned system. We know very well how beautifully the Purusha Sukta of the Rigveda touches upon this system of organisation when it says: brahmano'sya mukhamasid bahu rajanyah kritah, uru tadasya yad vaishyah padbhyagi shudro ajayata. This image that we have in the Purusha Sukta of the Veda is illustrative of a very important significance hidden behind this system, namely, the organic character of people. As the human body is one organic completeness, society is also supposed to be that. The body is supported by the legs which stand firmly on the ground, and the legs are connected to the main trunk through the thighs, and there is the trunk, the whole body, and there is the voice which speaks the wisdom thought by the mind. That there is a cooperative action in an organism of the human personality is well known to every person, and we have no partiality or favouritism in regard to any limb of our body. It is improper to think that the legs are inferior to the head, the heart, the trunk, the arms, etc. In a family, no child is unimportant, though various aptitudes are visible in the children of that family. It is preposterous to think in terms of 'high' and 'low' in anything whatsoever

in this world, because the intention of any type of organisation, including the organisation of the physical body itself, is not to pinpoint the superiority or the inferiority of any particular aspect or organ, but to achieve the collective focusing of force, and the cooperation that is behind these apparently isolated limbs, for a purpose entirely transcendent to themselves. The leg does not walk for its own sake. What does the leg gain by walking? The leg can say, "Why should I walk? I gain nothing." What does the brain gain by thinking? What do the hands gain by grasping? If we take each item separately, there seems to be no significance in the action. The action is significant only in terms of a higher transcendent purpose. A machine does not work for its own sake. What does a machine gain by moving? Its moving is significant in terms of the output that results from its movement. The output of the machine is the transcendent purpose beyond the machine. The limbs of the body work, not because that work has any significance of its own when viewed independently, but because it has a transcendent significance, which is the maintenance of the whole person. The maintenance of the person is the transcendent intention behind the working of the isolated limbs of the body. Likewise, no individual can work, or should work, for himself. Otherwise, each one would be grumbling, "Why should I work?"—as it often happens these days. People do not understand the dignity of labour, the meaning or significance of work, even as one cannot know why the leg is walking. Its moving seems to be meaningless and unnecessary. But we know why it is moving. It has a purpose beyond itself. Likewise, when we work, we are working for a purpose beyond the work. That is the spirit of karma yoga. If we look at the work merely as a skeleton of movement or impulsion of an individual towards any isolated motive, then it looks meaningless, absurd. It is very necessary to learn the art of unselfishness from the way in which the body works. What a wondrous mechanism; how unselfishly each cell is working! What for? Nobody knows. Why should the heart pump blood; what does it gain? Nobody knows. Why should the lungs breathe; what do they gain? Nothing. No one gains anything. But then, we should not say, "If I gain nothing, why should I work?" It is really a wonder and a surprise that gain is the motive behind every action. The whole of the philosophy of the Bhagavadgita is nothing but an attempt to cut down the growth of this selfish outlook which sees an ulterior motive behind every action and requires that a fruit immediately be yielded as a consequence. The structure of society is a scaffold, as it were, raised for the purpose of an achievement by society, and is transcendent to the outward form of society. We do not exist for our own selves, we exist for a purpose which is beyond ourselves; and inasmuch as I myself independently, or you yourself independently, cannot adequately contribute the requirements for the achievement of this supreme purpose, we come together in a group, in a team spirit, and create a cumulative effect which will achieve the purpose. What is the purpose of organisation? Why should we have any kind of organisation of society at all? Why should each person not do whatever he can do? It is because the output is diminutive, incapacitated, poor, substanceless, and insignificant. When we come together in a group, we have a greater strength; therefore, there is a chance of achieving greater success. We have to reiterate once again that the system of the varnas is not a classification of superior and inferior individuals. It does not mean the Brahmana can insult the Sudra, because it is like the head insulting the leg—which is preposterous. But man is man, and we cannot make him anything else. He has his own weaknesses. Selfishness is rampant, and however much we may try to sublimate it, it shows its head one day or the other. This peculiar selfishness tries to make the best of the bargain, and inasmuch as the essential or predominant trait of human individuality is the projecting of the ego in some form or the other, even this little facility—we should call it a facility and not a right—provided for contributing one's own might to the welfare of society is taken advantage of, and one who calls oneself a Brahmana feels superior to the Kshatriya, the Vaishya or the Sudra. Thus it is that we are misusing the very instrument that has been provided to us for our own welfare. Social integration and personal integration are absolutely necessary prior to our endeavour at cosmic integration and divine integration. As I mentioned, there are four aspects of our work—society, the individual, the universe, and God—and each one is equally important. We have to proceed from one to the other gradually. Actually, this is what is known as the system of yoga; and the whole of Indian culture is nothing but a grand yoga, if we would like to call it that. The attempt of the ancient masters in India was to transform every activity into a form of spirituality; they could see nothing but that anywhere. With this intention, it was endeavoured that even the humdrum activities of life in the midst of human

society be converted into a highly purposeful worship, we should say, for the attainment of a superior goal. Man does not live for himself. No one lives for himself or herself, and nothing lives for itself. Everything lives for something else. There is a cosmic urge towards a higher evolutionary achievement, and we have to contribute whatever we can, under the circumstances we are placed, towards an ushering in of a better day and a greater light by way of this evolutionary activity or movement. Hence, the envisagement of this structure of the varna system has a part to play in the system of the evolution of the universe itself. It is not enough if we have an organisation of skeleton individuals. They must be powerful individuals. And so the ancient adepts did not forget the need to discipline the individual. There is no use having a society of dry bamboo sticks; there must be vitality, energy, and capacity in them. The more the capacity of an individual, the greater also is the strength of society. If there is only a muddle-headed group of thousands of individuals, what will be the output of that society? It will be confusion. This is why the ancients considered that healthy, robust, well-educated, and highly idealised individuals are necessary for creating a perfect human society. What else is Rama-rajya that we are dreaming of? It is nothing but a society of these perfected individuals who have attained such a state of enlightenment that they do not need any kind of external coercion or force to govern them. Such was the great ideal. Now, while it is necessary to organise individuals into a society because of the partiality of endowments of different individuals, it is also necessary, at the same time, to see that the individuals themselves are disciplined and perfected to the extent possible under the circumstances available. This perfection of the individual is attempted through what is known as the ashrama system. Ashrama is an order. It does not mean a building, such as the Sivanada Ashram. It is a stage of life through which one has to pass by means of an educational career and a process of training, whereby the forces or powers of the individual are harnessed for the purpose for which they are intended. The child grows gradually into the adult, and maturity takes place in the mind. The ashramas are four, even as the varnas are four. While these four varnas—Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Sudra—constitute the spiritual, political, economic, and manual aspects of the complete structure of human society, the ashramas—Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, Sannyasa—constitute another order altogether, which is towards the achievement of individual perfection. When we are born into this world, we are like buds which are not yet opened. The child does not feel the impact of the world because its mind has not yet opened enough to receive the impressions of the outside world. It gradually grows, practically as an untutored physical individuality. At the earliest stage of the child, there is only body and nothing else. Before the form is manifest as the human body, it remains as a kind of shapeless mass. There is nothing but physicality there, for all practical purposes. The shapeless mass is given shape by the order of nature, and while it assumes the shape of a child, it still remains merely a physical organism, like a plant. A newborn baby is just like a plant. It has life, no doubt, but it can think only as much as a plant or a tree can think. There is no capacity for its mind to function in a more intensive manner. The growth of the individual by stages can sometimes be compared to the various avataras of Vishnu—Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, etc. There is also some sort of evolutionary significance hidden behind the gradational statement of these avataras. They start very low, where we are like amphibians with merely an iota of Homo sapiens, or the character of humanity, but from that we gradually evolve into the purna or perfected avatara, as it is called, which is nothing but the completion of knowledge, where enlightenment is attained to logical perfection. Its apex has been reached. The educational process takes the form of ashrama dharma. What is called ashrama dharma is nothing but a process of education in a school; and our great heroes of the past visualised the whole of life as a period of studentship. We are students from birth to death. This is mentioned with great emphasis in the Chhandogya Upanishad, for instance. The various activities of our lives are parts of our apprenticeship in this school of education called life. We are educated gradually through the adaptation of our individuality to the reality outside in terms of the levels of our personality, which are especially taken into consideration by the ashrama system. We have levels of individuality; we have to remember this very well. We are the physical body, but we are also, at the same time, the vital force; we are the mind, and we are the intellect and the spirit. We have to enable each of these layers of our personality to blossom into completeness—again, not by emphasising any kind of superiority or inferiority among them, but by giving each stage its own due, and considering each

stage as a necessary step in the process of education. I mentioned that the four orders—Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Sudra—do not mean a system of superiority and inferiority. It is similar to the various stages of education. A small boy studying in primary school should not be regarded as inferior to one who is studying in college, because that would be a poor way of looking at things. He is not inferior in any way, though he is in a lower grade because he has not yet reached that level of the other student. So, while one may be at one level of evolution or stage of perfection and the other may be at another, it does not imply that one has any kind of right over the other. This is not at all the case. These four orders only mean that there is a necessity for everyone to keep in mind the principle of perfection present in each person, each individual—and, again, a need for cooperation and collaboration. One who has greater knowledge has to impart that knowledge to another who has lesser knowledge. These stages of life, called the ashramas, are the processes of enabling the flowering of our personality into perfection, which is reached in the highest form of enlightenment. In the beginning we are tied to the physical body very forcefully, and liberating ourselves from it is a difficult task, but this is attempted. The body is to be fed with the requisite foods, no doubt, but it also has to be disciplined. It is like a bull, which may go wild if not taken care of properly. While the body can become wild like an untamed horse or an undisciplined bull, it can also become a good vehicle on which we can transport the weight of this entire life's activity. The Guru-disciple relationship, which comes into relief when we think of the first stage of ashrama dharma, namely Brahmacharya, tells us much about the need for physical discipline. The Brahmachari—the lad who is just budding into youth—is given the fullest type of physical training by means of the service that he is expected to render to the master. By this discipline, he is given the very outlook of his life, not merely the opportunity of disciplining the body. He knows how he has to conduct himself before others and in respect of other things, and a sort of ground is paved in the beginning itself for the contribution that he has to make later on when he becomes an adult, a unit of human society, as a Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Sudra. We have various types of desires. We are a bundle of desires, and these desires have to be sublimated. The ashrama system attempts to sublimate the desires, and not suppress them. Perhaps the ancient sages of India were the greatest psychoanalysts, even before the birth of the renowned Freud, Adler and Jung. These ancient sages knew very well that the so-called id, or the ego, or the superego of psychology, is there in every individual. Though they did not call the forces of the individual by these modern names, they knew of their presence. Perhaps, they knew it much better; and they knew what havoc these forces can work if they are not tamed, and also what good they can do if they are properly utilised. The energies of the system have to be harnessed for the supreme purpose of divine enlightenment. This is the great purpose of the educational system through the ashrama dharma.