

Same Action: Four Castes

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This is Deepavali week. We are also having dinner guests tonight. So, I spent much of the day sprucing up the house from front porch to back toilet while my wife looked after the more essential culinary side. As I was doing the cleaning chores, I asked myself why I was doing them. As different answers flashed in my mind, I realized that they were all applicable, but each flavour of answer held within itself a secret: it determined the caste of the action. Since we are talking about caste in la Hinduism, I will first explain caste before telling you my tale of today.

The ancient wise people of India discerned that there were four great goals of life. They called these purusharthas. These four great goals are:

1. fulfilment of desire or kama;
2. acquisition of wealth or artha;
3. establishment of righteousness or dharma; and
4. quest of spiritual liberation or moksha.

Humankind was also partitioned or classified according to which of these four major goals predominated in their individual lives. The linkage was so:

1. kama \Leftrightarrow shudra
2. artha \Leftrightarrow vaishya
3. dharma \Leftrightarrow kshatriya
4. moksha \Leftrightarrow brahmana

This is the origin of the four castes. It was the mental attitude rather than the physical body that determined caste. It was not the birth-pedigree but the operating system of the mind that determined caste. Moreover, because the mind constantly fluctuates with time, and because human aspiration and motivation oscillate with time and deed, the caste of a person changes accordingly. It is not fixed for all time but varies with mood, moment, and movement.

Now, back to my cleaning chores. I asked the question, "Why am I cleaning house?" My mind reflected back many answers from which I have distilled these four archetypes:

1. Because I want to impress the guests that we keep a very clean house.
2. A clean house and a clean bathroom will encourage guests to leave everything as clean as they saw it: so the house will remain clean after the event.
3. Cleanliness promotes health and well-being. My guests should not suffer allergic reactions from dust and dirt.
4. My guests are representatives of the Almighty. Therefore I must show my devotion and reverence to the Almighty by cleaning the house.

These four attitudes of mind correspond respectively to the shudra, vaishya, kshatriya, and brahmana states respectively. The action has not changed; it remains the same. But the mental attitude or underlying motivation is different in each case. It starts out by being wholly self-centred and changes shade by shade into an action that is totally selfless.

The interesting thing is that caste is not dependent on action but on the attitude to action. To ligate caste to activity and make each trade or profession into a caste is to grossly distort caste and its purpose and meaning. There is no leather-working caste and no medical-doctor caste any more than there is a thinking caste or a breathing caste. There is only attitude to action and that attitude determines the “instantaneous” caste of the person performing that action.

It is in an attempt to make brahmanas of us all always, who will find ultimate freedom, that Bhagavan Krishna has graciously said in the Bhagavad Gita [9:27]:

yat karoshi yadashnaasi yaj juhoshi dadaasi yat yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kurushva mad-arpanam

Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you donate
Whatever austerities you practise, O son of Kunti, do that as an offering unto Me.

Galileo's Thermometer: same device different temperatures mean different bulbs at the top. The top bulb at any moment determines caste at any moment. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galileo_thermometer

Acknowledgements

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