

Same Action: Four Castes

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This blog was originally penned on 24 October 2008. It is one among many dozen blogs that have not been released publicly on the Web. I will be gradually refreshing and releasing all those unpublished blogs on this website. They are generally short and tightly focused pieces of writing, readable in a few minutes. I have retained the original contextual immediacy and topical relevance, where possible. I have used the **IAST** transliteration scheme for the Sanskrit terms; see the link for the correct pronunciation. The upshot of this blog is that caste is spiritual in nature, and that all individuals may exhibit all four castes—according to attitude to action—regardless of birth or occupation. Caste is determined by attitude to action, and is not tied to birth, body, or occupation.

House cleaning before Deepavali

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 was I 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 à la Hinduism, I will first explain caste before telling you my tale of today.

The Four Castes

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

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

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

1. **kāma** <=> **śūdra**

2. artha <=> vaiśya
3. dharma <=> kṣatriya
4. mokṣa <=> brāhmaṇa

The Spiritual Meaning of Caste

This is the spiritual origin of the four castes. *It is the mental attitude rather than the physical body that determines caste. It is not the birth-pedigree, but the operating system of the mind, that determines 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.

Why clean house?

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 śūdra, vaiśya, kṣatriya, and brāhmaṇa 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.

Caste and Action

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 spiritual 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 brāhmanas of us all always, who will find ultimate freedom, that Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa has graciously said in the Bhagavad Gīta [9:27]:

yat karoṣi yadaśnaasi yaj juhoṣi dadāsi yat yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruṣva 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.

Epilogue

Galileo's Thermometer



Figure 1: Galileo's Thermometer. The coloured balls are weighted differently with tags that indicate temperature. They rise and fall as the ambient temperature changes. The uppermost bulb indicates the current temperature. This device, with changing uppermost bulbs, is the ideal metaphor for my idea of instantaneous caste, as spelled out in this blog.¹

Galileo's Thermometer is an ideal metaphor for my idea of caste. The device is the same, but different temperatures result in different bulbs rising to the top. The rising and falling of different bulbs represents the changing caste of a person performing the same action, even as his or her attitude to that action changes.

Other viewpoints

My take on caste in this blog has been wholly philosophical and spiritual. I consider caste as ever-changing like a **quantum fluctuation**. Some might call such a view unrealistic or Utopian.

¹Image courtesy of "Plow and Hearth": <https://www.plowhearth.com/galileo-thermometer-with-cherry-finish-wood-frame/p/in6808>.

Caste is embedded in the social and economic fabric of contemporary India at a very deep level. It has been tied to birth and to hereditary occupation. Several eminent social thinkers do not see it as an evil, but rather as the **gluon** that has kept and still keeps Indian society together. Intellectuals like R Vaidyanathan [1] and Gurcharan Das [2] have examined caste from a broader perspective, and the interested reader is referred to works such as these for a different—and more pragmatic—take on caste in India.

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I am grateful to “Plow and Hearth” for permission to use their magnificent image of a Galileo’s Thermometer in this blog.

Feedback

Please **email me** your comments and corrections.

A PDF version of this article is **available for download here**:

<https://swanlotus.netlify.app/blogs/same-action-four-castes.pdf>

References

- [1] Vaidyanathan R. 2019. *Caste as Social Capital*. Westland.
- [2] Gurcharan Das. 2012. *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*. Penguin.