CHAPTER 5

THE PLACE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF VARNASHRAMA DHARMA IN RAMAYANA

1) The place of Varpashrama Dharma in the Ramayana:

Ramayana, the great Indian epic and philosophy, in general, go hand in hand. The tenets of Hinduism find greatest significance in Valmiki Ramayana and we have to attach very great importance to our tenets of Hinduism, found in the epic because the most valuable principles, and human values are very much in treasure and we also find the higher values of life exactly incorporated in the Valmiki Ramayana. We come across, later books, on Ramayana after Valmiki Ramayana, such as Thulasidas' Ramacharithamanas in Hindi, Kambar Ramayana in Tamil, Ramayana Darshanam in Kannada, Ramayana Kalpavruksham in Telugu besides few others, in other languages.

While dealing with the Varnashrama Dharma in Ramayana, attention has to be made to focus the significance and relevance of varnashrama Dharma, to the modern society. Indian Society is the nucleus for our varnashrama Dharma. We can say values of Philosophy are always secular; the flowers of thoughts may possess different colours, but the fragrance is one and the same. As we try to describe Varnashrama let us know our holy books, namely, Rigveda, Yajurveda, Sama Veda Adharvana Veda, being the highest order of our religion.
Valmiki Maharshi and Vyasa preached Vedic Philosophical values in their great epics. About the people of India, we have many great authors, praising the Hindu race. Here I quote, "woven out of the old time sages of a remarkable people, the ancient Aryans of India, in many respects were the most wonderful race, that ever lived on earth." 

VARNASRAMA DHARMA:

I try to give a possible picture of the Varnashrama Dharma of the Rama Rajya as composed by Valmiki, as the historicity of the epic is said to be established at least nineteen centuries ago. Brahma, the Creator of all, blessed the sage Valmiki to compose this immortal epic that it should endure as long as the mountains and the seas and the sun and the moon exist upon this earth. The epic proportioned the then Rama Rajya with the fittest and the rightest characters galore, now revitalise our present day varnasrama Dharma of the modern Indian Society. It is not perhaps, possible to real comparision to the epic days and to the most imbalanced materialistic, mechanised world of today. From the epic of Valmiki, we find right from Balakanda, the Varnashrama, vividly described, and it is very much illustrious.
As we make a detailed study of Valmiki Ramayana, the poet did write about varna and Ashrama and Ashrama Dharma, in the epic. So, we say, in the Ramayana age, the varnas existed and the poet gives us a vivid picture of varnashramas, which did exist.

**VARNAS:**

Here first of all I will try to discuss the varna and varna Dharma in brief and then I will give the available facts in the epic, according to Ramayana.

We find, the epic expressly mentions the four varnas, namely, (1) The Brahmanas, (2) the Kshatriyas, (3) the Vaisyas, (4) and the Sudras.

CHĀTURVARNYAM MAYĀ SPRUSHTAM GUNAKARMA VIBHAGASAHAH!

(Bhagavadgita, Chapter - 4, Sloka 12)

These varnas were differentiated from one another, and their privileges, duties, liabilities became well defined in the Ramayana age. We find from purushasakta in the epic, the City of Ayodhya was inhabited by Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas, an devoted to their respective duties. We find from the Vedas "that Brahmaras relating to their origin, of birth, were born from the face of the Brahman, the Creator, the Kshatriyas were born from the shoulders, or, bhujas of the Brahman, the
Vaisyas were born from the thighs of the Brahman and the Sudras were born from the feet of the Brahman. 12

**DUTIES:**

Right from the Vedic age, in the early ages of yugas, the study class and the teaching faculty was started, to know about Vedas and Upanishads. The Brahmanas are so called because they impart Brahma Gnaana to the students of this Varna, who propagated the study of our holy scriptures and they in turn became the teachers to the study class, with students for the purpose of the study of Vedas and Upanishads. So, the first varna, of Brahmanas, or the class of preceptors started functioning in imparting knowledge to the study class.

The second varna are the kshatriyas the protectors, while the Brahmanas looked after the spiritual well-being of the people. The kshatriyas were entrusted with the task of protecting the population from external and internal aggression. The duties of the kshatriyas, as enunciated in the Ramayana consisted in giving alms, taking sacred vows during sacrifices and sparing not even self during battles. A special duty of a kshatriya was to protect the cow and the Brahmanas. They were to offer protection to anyone who sought. The kshatriyas
used to carry bows in order to protect and remove any one distressed. The Kshatriya King had to administer justice in a righteous manner and never in an irresponsible manner. The kshatriya should always be ready to protect the territory of the country from the enemies, even at the risk of sacrificing his life for the country. The Brahmanas and kshatriyas castes were privileged classes, with exclusive political and social powers. The Brahmanas were the brains and thinkers & preceptors, and the kshatriyas were the unrivalled administrators and warriors.

Next in the Ramayana age, the Ramayana Society, the Vaisyas varna or caste provided the economic support to the vast varnashrama. Pursuit of wealth was the special avocation of the Vaisyas. They carried on trade in daily needs of the people and life requirements. They looked after agriculture and rearing of cattle. The vaisyas too observed the same religious sacraments and rites, as the Brahmanas and kshatriyas and were allowed to recite the Vedas.

In the caste or varna hierarchy, a section called Sudras, doing service to the above three varnas, started functioning, both by services and labour. The Sudras suffered from some disadvantages. They were not allowed to study Vedas, nor to do penance, nor the right to perform vedic sacrifices,
like the three higher varnas. So, the four varnas, namely, the four castes the Brahmanas, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas and the Sudras started the frame-work of the society, in every land, country or kingdom.

These four Varnas took division of labour, in the Society. It is said in Bhagavad Gita, by Lord Sri Krishna that God did not make the varnas, by birth, but by one's duties or vidyukt dharma, or virtue of one's profession the varnas have been formed and named accordingly:

In our epic Ramayana, the significance of varnashrama Dharma can be observed by the respective services rendered by each varna. The preceptor who used to impart Brahma Gnana to the study class, belonged to the Brahmana varna dharma, and the kshatriyas who used to protect the country against enemies, belonged to the Kshatriya Kings Varnadharma and the traders who used to attend to economic needs of the society belonged to the Vaisyas varna dharma and the service persons who used to render service to the three higher varnas, belonged to the Sudra varna dharma in the Society.

Regarding the Ashramas and the Ashrama Dharma, it is clear from our Upanishads that each can live and lead his life,
by qualification of his life's career. The period of each human life career was divided into four ashramas, namely, Brahmacharya Ashrama, Grihastashrama, Vanaprastashrama and the Sanyasashrama. During the period of Ramayana, all the four Ashramas were in vogue. They were: (1) Brahmacharya Ashrama, of the celibate student period between 15 and 25 years of age group, (2) The grihastashrama, of the family householder between the age of 25 and 50, (3) Vanaprastashrama, of the retired career, between 51 and 75 years of age and (4) the Sanyasashrama, of the homeless ascetic, between 75 and 100 years of age. Every member of the three higher castes was expected to pass through these stages of life. We find from the Valmiki Ramayana, this order of Ashramas was generally followed without any departure.

In the Brahmacharya stage the student led a celibate life of rigorous self-discipline, rendering whole-hearted service to his preceptor and studying the sacred scriptures. After completion of the prescribed course of education, the Brahmachari entered the Grihastashrama, when he became the mature youth and he became fit to marry and became a grihasta, a householder and he discharged his duties to his ancestors, and Gods and guests by performing his domestic duties, like sradhas, sacrifices and hospitality. In this grihasta Ashrama
he is called upon to support his parents, his elders, his wife and children of his family, attending to all religious ceremonies and sacrifices, in company with his wife, Saha Dharmapâtri. Of all the four Ashramas, Grihastashrama is said to be the best of the four. Ramayana age itself, is par-excellence in this respect as it lends support to the other three ashramas making direct contributions to the social weal, being the stage to fulfill all obligations of life, individual as well as social. In the Vanaprastha Ashrama, life leads to retirement from active social and domestic life, but devoting one's life, away from the society, and not involving in active domestic life having left the responsibility to one's children, the wife either accompanies her husband to the forests, to lead the life of an ascetic. The retired householder devotes himself to the study of Vedas.

As for the last Ashrama, the Sanyasa Ashrama, after the vanaprasta ashrama, leading to liberation of human life, (Moksha) which is free from all the attachment of the society, only to meditate individually, independently and attain lib-eration(Moksha) for oneself. The scheme of the Ashramas we can say, is only complimentary to their scheme of the varnas. The theory of varna treats man, as a social being and defines
his rights and obligations whereas the theory of ashramas considers man as an individual and teaches him what his spiritual goal is and the necessary requisites for attaining this goal.

We find the varnashrama practice worked well in the Ramayana age, showing best fruits, by trying to harmonize the Ramayana Society, and its claims, and giving simultaneous progress, without conflicts. The Poet Valmiki placed the society of the Ramayana age, above the individual and at the same time, allowing every individual free growth of his mind and character without disturbing the social order. Sri Rama's regard for truth and justice and his readiness to sacrifice his own interests, only to achieve the welfare of his people, in the kingdom. This secular philosophical view and practice is the greatest contribution to Indian Philosophy. Valmiki himself says that all kinds of pupils from all walks of life did come to his Gurukula Ashrama for gaining knowledge of this wonderful humanism, seeking the best quint essence of the Holy scriptures, which is secular in its application and study, for qualification and improvement of the character of the humanity. We can say, the entire ethics of Valmiki stands as testimonials to the Truth of unity, in Ramayana, which is secular in character.
CHAPTER - 5

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