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ISBN 978-81-7086-738-8



THE SYMBOLIC WORLD

Edited by
S. SEKAR SEBASTIN

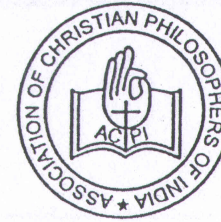


THE SYMBOLIC WORLD

CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION



Edited by
S. SEKAR SEBASTIN



Association of Christian Philosophers of India

Annual Series 16

THE SYMBOLIC WORLD
CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION

Edited by

S. Sekar Sebastin

*Papers Presented at the ACPI Annual Research Seminar
Hosted by the Pontifical Institute of Theology and Philosophy, Aluva
Held at St. Joseph's Pontifical Seminary, Carmelgiri, Aluva
15 – 18 October 2014*



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ACPI Annual Series No. 16

Series Editors: Johnson Puthenpurackal
Keith D'Souza
John Peter Vallabadoss

THE SYMBOLIC WORLD CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION

Editor : S. Sekar Sebastin
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First Edition: October 2015

Cover Design: Carmel

ISBN: 978-81-7086-738-8

Published by :
ACPI (Eluru) and
ASIAN TRADING CORPORATION
58, 2nd Cross, Da Costa Layout, P.O. Box 8444,
St Mary's Town, Bengaluru -560 084, India
Tel: +91-80-25490444, 25490 444; Fax: +91-80-25479444
E-mail: info@actbooks.in
Web: www.atcbooks.in

Printed at: National Printing Press, Bengaluru

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Purushasukta has been considered most important. *Purushasukta* is also looked upon as the sacrifice of the primal being. One of the meanings of the term 'purusha' in *purushasukta* is 'the administrator of the universe.' Right in the beginning, the crucial misunderstanding of the term 'purusha' needs clarification, that the term 'Purusha' is not to be understood as the 'Male' aspect, but as Consciousness, and so *purushasukta* is to be treated as the Conscious program of the Creation. This supreme consciousness contains the entire information that is available in this world. When one undertakes the inner inquiry to understand a particular subject at phenomenal level, it is possible that the information in the form of intuition is delivered to the individual. Such wisdom is found in the Vedic *suktas* and mantras, which become the guiding principles of human life. The Vedas continue to function on a path, parallel to socio-religious development to bring to society the knowledge of dealing with nature and the human being. The Vedas are therefore composed purely of scientific knowledge dealing with questions like: How the universe has come into existence? How the system of the universe works? What are the laws of nature? What are the various centres or principles of energy in that universe i.e. the 'Gods'? How are these Gods involved in the working of the entire system?

The Vedas talk about several universes in existence. In *purushasukta* these universes are outlined and their inter-relationship is explained. The term used for all these entities (several universes) is 'purusha,' which is composed of two root words 'Puru' the whole world, the people, the town, or anything whole in itself; and 'Ishaha' the lord of all people. The term 'Purusha' means, the Lord or Controller of All That Is. Thus, the supreme concept is *Param Purusha*, who is beyond; then the *Virat Purusha*, also known as *Vishwa Purusha*, which refers to the entire observable universe (*Bramhand*) and this is an expression of the *Param Purusha*. Finally, the human body is another *Bramhand* or *purusha*, which is also called the *Pinda Purusha*. The human body is considered as the mini universe, which is complete in itself and its functions can be related to a large extent, to the physical universe outside.

THE VEDIC COSMOGONY

Purushasukta & Social Implications

Kamaladevi R. Kunkolienger

Abstract: *This presentation begins with the original meaning of purusha sukta and its importance, followed by the concept of body involved in this sukta. Next, the creation aspect is explained. This creation concept is interpreted to explain the complex social issues by various thinkers, especially with reference to caste structure, both for and against, and so is a source of many controversies. A distinction between chaturvarna system and caste system is attempted. Also, efforts are made to expose the myths related to this sukta.*

Introduction

This presentation begins with the original meaning of *purushasukta* and its importance, followed by the concept of body involved in this *sukta*. Next, the creation aspect is explained. This creation concept is interpreted to explain the complex social issues by various thinkers, especially with reference to caste structure, both for and against, and so is a source of many controversies. A distinction between *chaturvarna* system and caste system is attempted. Also, efforts are made to expose the myths related to this *sukta*.

Meaning and Importance of *Purushasukta*

Purushasukta is found in Rig Veda (x.90), *Puranas* and in *Bhagwad Gita* and Narayan rishi is the composer of it. Among other vedic *suktas*,

Purushasukta describes the Omnipresence of universal consciousness that is the supreme *purusha*. This is beyond our comprehension, due to our limited capacities. This universal consciousness has potential energy with complete concept and programme, and also has the capacity to manifest as material and energy. From this *purusha* the five elements originate, which create the entire universe. This *purusha* envelops the universe completely and remains far above and beyond. The body is equated with all of creation. This is also the Vedic understanding of origin of God. *Purusha* is 'time' (*kaal*) and is the past in which everything that has ever existed and is the future, which evolves through food. The entire universe comes from only one part of Him and three parts remain unchanged. All that is inert and living, comprising the universe is continuously being remade and the Being, which is three parts control this recreation. Interaction between time and space gives rise to seasons.

Yadnya comprises of seven levels of transformation and at every stage there is evolution. This is the technique of uniting the inert and the living. The first creation of *yadnya* is the fertilized egg, which gradually forms within the body and takes shape. The twelfth verse raises the question of how the body is being dismembered and then to be offered as sacrifice to the mystic fire. Here we do find the mention of four *varnas* or categories, *brahmanas* are supposed to have come from the mouth of *purusha*; *ksatriyas* from the arms; *vaishasa* from the belly and *shudras* from the feet of *purusha*. Next, in *purushasukta* comes the explanation for the development of the mind and the suns, followed by the development of various worlds and how this cycle of *yadnya* is kept in motion.

The *yadnya* is the indispensable method or formula that the conscious concept and program uses to change the state of things and evolve them. The rituals performed in *yadnya*, when put into place, helps evolution occur. In other words what we learn from this process of performing *yadnya* is how to set up any mechanism for a desired result. It is a specific *tantra* or technology that invokes or attracts energy in a specific way. Whatever is offered in *yadnya* for transformation, there must be

the potential for transformation, by means of an energy that already exists. Only with this potentiality the given offerings will be changed into evolved or higher energy.

But *yadnya* is incomplete without the concept of sacrifice. According to Sri Aurobindo, the law of sacrifice is the common divine action that was thrown out into the world in its beginning as a symbol of the solidarity of the universe. In the *purushasukta* the verses from 8 to 14 deal with how the *purusha* sacrifices himself by dismembering himself and scattering around the necessary number of portions for the completion of the work of creation. *Purusha* self-immolates so that the universe may come into being. Out of this complete sacrifice, that is from the limbs of the Cosmic Man came all things both animate and inanimate: animals of every type: 8th to 10th verses; liturgical formulas: 9th verse; the four *varnas*: 12th verse and the cosmic powers: 13th and 14th verses.

Concept of *Varna* in *Purushasukta* and the Caste-Rigidity in Social Setup

Caste issue is one of the perennial issues that have affected Indian society. An inquiry into the issues, values and disvalues of caste system leads us to consider the empirical—sociological—anthropological aspects as well as its conceptual—philosophical aspects. There are mixed responses to the caste system in India, the system which has immensely affected the formation, structuring of the society—specially the post-vedic society till today. Sidney Low in his vision of India says,

There is no doubt that it is the main cause of the fundamental stability and contentment by which Indian society braced up for centuries against the shocks and politics and the cataclysms of nature. It provides every man with his place, his career, his occupation, his circle of friends. It makes him at the outset a member of a corporate body, it protects him through life from the canker of social jealousy and unfulfilled aspirations; it ensures him companionship and a sense of community with others in

like case with himself. The caste organization is to the Hindu his club, his trade union, his benefit society, his philanthropic society.¹

Sherring M.A. in his *Hindu Tribes and Castes* says, "It is the most baneful, hard-heated and cruel social system that could possibly be invested for damning the human race."² The caste system may be viewed from the 'emic' or the 'etic' perspective. The emic perspective is the native's interpretation or model in the context of culture, whereas 'etic' is representation of the outsider's view. To be fair and rational and for a balanced view both interpretations need to be considered. An attempt is made in this presentation to understand the salient features of *varna* system, since in *purushasukta* as well as in *Bhagwad Gita* mention of *chaturvarna* is found. Many thinkers are of the opinion that, the original *varna* order prevalent during Vedic period, subsequently led to the practice of rigid caste system in India.

*Varnadharm*a is a Vedic concept, since it has its origin in Vedas and Upanishads. There is a need to distinguish between the philosophical ideology of *varnadharm*a and caste system, and also to understand this concept in *Sruti* and *Smrti* literature, that is in *Mahabharat* and *Bhagwad Gita*. According to H.H. Risley,

A caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor human or divine, professing to follow the same professional callings and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community.³

Thus the members of any particular caste bear a common name, claim a common descent, and follow the same profession forming a homogeneous community. The hereditary specialization to practice

- 1 Kane PandurangVaman, *History of Dharmashastra*, Vol. 2, Part 1 (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1974), 262-63.
- 2 Sherring M.A., *Hindu Tribes and Castes*, 3 Vols. 1872-81. Reference obtained from P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmashastra*, Vol.3, 274.
- 3 Risley H.H., *The People of India*, W.Crooke (ed.), 2nd edition, (London,1915).

the profession of a caste is the characteristic feature of caste system. To this the critics have pointed out that the division of labour brought about by the caste system is not a division based on choice, and that the individual sentiments and preferences have no place in it. It has also been pointed that caste system is based on the principles of purity and pollution. As it prohibited intermixing, it aimed at purity of race and purity of blood. B. R. Ambedkar says, "Caste system is a negative thing. It merely prohibits persons belonging to different castes from intermarrying."⁴

Hierarchy is another most prominent feature of Indian society, due to which there was a typical social stratification with reference to various castes. Thus we observe that there are three tendencies that characterize the spirit of the caste: 1) separation, relating to marriage and contact; 2) hierarchy relating to ranking of groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another; 3) hereditary specialization relating to profession of their own, which the members of each group cannot abandon.

Purushasukta has been specifically cited by many interpreters as responsible for sowing the seeds of a thoroughly obnoxious caste system in India and some even nicknamed it as ideology of class exploitation. To quote J. Bandopadhaya in his book, *Class and Religion in Ancient India*,

The full text of the *Purushasukta* (RV,10.90) is without doubt intended to establish the divine origin of the four-tiered class structure of the prevailing Vedic society, to legitimize and sanctify it in the eyes of the people and thus create a pseudo-religious disguise for the oppression and exploitation of the masses by the ruling class.⁵

Since the root cause of this ideology is to be traced in *varnadharm*a, which is vedic in origin, it is necessary to understand the conceptual philosophy and metaphysical speculation supporting it. *Bhagwad Gita*

- 4 Ambedkar, B.R., "Annihilation of Caste," in Valerian Rodrige, (ed.) *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 245.
- 5 Bandopadhayaj, *Class and Religion in Ancient India* (Delhi, Anthem Press, 2007), 20.

mentions that there are three *gunas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* which exist as qualities of *Prakriti*. These *gunas* represent latent potentialities: *Sattva* is the principle of assimilation, harmony and equilibrium; *Rajas* is the principle of creative endeavour, motion and impulsion; *Tamas* is the principle of inertia, passivity and is responsible for creating disharmony. It is further maintained that these three *gunas* or qualities are evidently present or active in all existences, including human beings, but the order is not the same, in which one *guna* predominates and the other *gunas* play a subservient role to it. They are juxtaposed and combined in a very complex manner and in all aspects of their existence; physical, mental and moral. Although there is a general rule of mind and action for all men, yet each individual acts not only according to the common laws, but according to his own nature constituted by the inherent potentiality, disposition or tendency, that whatever is bestowed upon by the order of the constituting *gunas*.

Every individual fulfils different functions or follows a different bent according to the rule of his own circumstances, capacities, character and power. This set up decides one's own nature, rule and function. It should be followed even if it is defective, it is better than well-performed rule of another's nature. This is called *svadharma* and it is of four general kinds, formulated outwardly, in the action of four orders of the old Indian social culture, *chaturvarna*. That is these four distinct orders of active nature correspond with the actions of *brahmanas*, *ksatriyas*, *vaisyas* and the *shudras*, divided according to the qualities born of their inner nature, spiritual temperament and essential character.

Every action may be evaluated as Sattvic, Rajasic and Tamasic *karma*; depending upon the composition of three *gunas*. Thus we do not find in the Gita any reference to birth or hereditary feature in accounting for *varna*. In Mahabharat too, *varna* is not hereditary and that it solely depends on natural temperament or inborn vocational aptitude. It has been clearly said that neither birth, nor *samskar*, nor *vidya*, nor family is the cause of being a Brahman, but only profession. In *vanaparva* of Mahabharat it has been stated that, a *shudra*, if he has acquired good

character traits, then may be treated as a Brahman, and a Brahman by his defiling deeds may be turned into a *shudra*. This shows that a Brahman had to be a true Brahman carrying out all his duties and should have '*prashasthaacharana*'.

As mentioned in *purushasukta*, the whole universe has been created out of one Brahman and so initially there was only one *varna*. 'We were all Brahmins or all *shudras*'. Gradually the criterion for deciding who is Brahman or *ksatriya* or *vaisya* or *shudra* depended on the type of the individual. Depending upon some hints suggestive of this *varnabheda* found in epics it may be explained as follows: among the original lot, some were regarded as *ksatriya* because they became interested in material prosperity, were rough in nature, they were adventure loving and more prone to anger. Some of them earned their living by animal husbandry, agriculture and they were called *vaisyas*. Those who were doing the task of assisting others were devoid of tidiness and were called *shudras*. Those who sincerely performed Vedic rites and rituals, observed Vedic tradition and kept themselves busy in penance were treated as true *brahmins*. Indeed this kind of *chaturvarna* is present everywhere, in all the societies and all periods of time. Plato, Kant and Einstein, in this sense were Brahmins, Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great were *ksatriyas*, Henry Ford and present day Bill Gates make the *vaisyas*, the factory worker, bank employee and the govt. servants including highest secretary are *shudras*. It should be noted here that birth was not the only criterion in differentiating between *varnas*. Thus, it is the intellectual capacity of the individual, his temperament, his ethical nature, his spiritual stature are all considered important factors in determining *varnabheda*. To support this claim number of examples of individuals, sages, thinkers are given here to show such *varna* mobility.

Vyāsa, a brahmin sage and the most revered author of many Vedic scriptures including the Vedas, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavada Gita* and *Bhagavata Purana*, was the son of Satyavati, a *sudra* woman. Vyāsa's profound knowledge of the Vedic wisdom established him as a brahmin even though he was born of a *sudra* mother. Vyāsa's father, Pārāsara,

was also a son of a candala woman and yet was considered a brahmin based on his Vedic wisdom. Another popular Vedic sage, Vālmiki was initially a hunter. He came to be known as a brahmin sage on the basis of his profound knowledge of the scriptures and his authorship of the Rāmāyana. According to Rig Veda (IX.112.3), the poet refers to his diverse parentage: "I am a reciter of hymns, my father is a physician and my mother grinds corn with stones. We desire to obtain wealth in various actions." Sage Aitareya, author of *Aitareya Upanisad*, was born of a sudra woman. Vasishtha, son of a prostitute, was established as a brahmin and Rig Veda book VII is attributed to him.

In Chandogya Upanisad, the honesty of Satyakāma establishes his brahminhood, even though his ancestry is unknown as he is the son of a maidservant. Visvamitra, born in a ksatriya family becomes a sage, and hence a brahmin, based on his asceticism. Some Rig Veda hymns are attributed to him. The priest Vidathin Bhārdvāja became a *ksatriya* as soon as he was adopted by King Bharata and his descendants were the well-known *Bharataksatriyas*. Janaka, a ksatriya by birth, attained the rank of a brahmin by virtue of his ripe wisdom and saintly character and is considered a rajarishi (king-sage). Vidura, a brahmin visionary, who gave religious and moral instructions to King Dhrtarashtra, was born to a woman servant of the palace. His *varna* as a brahmin was determined on the basis of his wisdom and knowledge of scriptures. The Kauravas and Pandavas were the descendants of Satyavati, a fisher-woman, and Vyāsa, a brahmin. In spite of this mixed heredity, the Kauravas and Pandavas were known as ksatriyas on the basis of their occupation. Ajamidha and Puramidha were admitted to the status of the brahmin class, and even composed Vedic hymns. Yaska, in his Nirukta, tells us that of two brothers, Santanu and Devapi, one becomes a ksatriya king and the other a brahmin priest. Kavasa, the son of the slave girl Ilusa, becomes a brahmin priest.

The *Bhagavata Purana* tells of the elevation of the ksatriya clan named Dhastru to brahminhood. In the later Vedic times, Chandragupta Maurya, originally from the Muria tribe goes on to become the famous Mauryan

emperor of Magadha. Similarly, his descendant, King Asoka, was the son of a maidservant. The Sanskrit poet and author, Kalidasa is also not known to be a brahmin by birth. His works are considered among the most important Sanskrit works. The Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar, author of '*Thirukural*' was a weaver. Other saints such as Kabir, Sura Dasa, Ram Dasa and Tukaram came from the *sudra* class also. Many of the great visionaries in modern India were not brahmins by birth but can be regarded as brahmins by their life-styles and teachings: Mahātmā Gāndhi, Swāmi Vivekānada, Sri Aurobindo, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swāmi Chinmayānanda etc.

During the period of *smṛiti* literature, the *varna* system started becoming rigid and this is the important juncture when *varna* ideology got translated into the discomfiting caste practices. Thus it was a great fall which is unfortunate. Among the contemporary Indian thinkers, who expressed their reaction to caste system and sought an explanation for this anomalous system Sri Aurobindo, swami Vivekananda, Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar are worthy to mention. Swami Vivekananda stood for complete annihilation of caste system. He simply wanted caste to become a psychological phenomenon for the individual to decide his relation to the society based on his individuality and the society should be democratic enough to allow full manifestation of this individual variation in the society to contribute to the welfare of the society and the individual. In May 1897, in one of his letter Swami Vivekananda wrote:

The Smrithis and Puranas are productions of men of limited intelligence and are full of fallacies, errors, the feelings of class and malice... the conviction is daily gaining on my mind that the idea of caste is the greatest dividing factor and the root of Maya; all caste either on the principle of birth or of merit is bondage. Some friends advice, "True, lay all that at heart, but outside, in the world of relative experience, distinctions like caste needs must be maintained." . . . The idea of oneness at heart (with a craven impotence of effort that is to say), and outside, the hell-dance of demons—oppression and persecution... I am a Shudra, a Mlechchha, so I have nothing to do with all that botheration. To me what would Mlechchha's food matter or Pariah's? It is in the

books written by priests that madneses like that of caste are to be found, and not in books revealed from God.

This was the idea of Swami Vivekananda regarding caste, that first it is a scheme of harmonizing the individuality of the individual with the welfare of society based initially on merit. Later, corrupted to hereditary and today existing purely as the greatest obstacle to the progress and unity of Indian society and spiritual emancipation of the individual. As a system as a social institution as it exists today and as it existed in the day of Swami Vivekananda, he declared clearly where he stands with relation to it in very clear terms, that the caste system is opposed to the religion of Vedanta.

Conclusion

Sri Aurobindo offers an explanation for this transition in his several books. In his book, titled *The Human Cycle*, he classified the course of historical progress into distinct psychological states as symbolic, conventional, individualistic and subjective. According to him the institution of *varna* is a symbolic and typical institution, which with the passage of time got conventionalized into caste. Further he states that, based on *purushasukta*, with reference to symbolic interpretation of *varna*, one finds that the Brahman signified the divine as knowledge in man, the *ksatriya* as the divine as power, the *vaisya* the divine engaged in production, and the *shudra* the divine engaged in service, obedience and work. He points out at the variation in understanding and practicing of knowledge and values at different stages in social development. During the conventional stage in human society, the outward expressions of the spirit became more important than the ideal, the body or even the clothes became more important than the ideal. This is true in the evolution of caste that the external factors like birth, economic functions, religious rituals, and family customs along with other social factors began to influence enormously and contributed towards the rigidity of the caste system. Thus, the difference between the *varna* and caste is difficult to bridge. In this transition from *varna* to caste, the original *varna* system

got much maligned. In today's situation the rational and logical reading of *varna* in *purushasukta* provides enough scope for each individual to improve oneself and to be promoted to higher moral order by performing his duties according to his capability.