Gandhi on Caturvarṇa and Niṣkāma Karma: A Re-interpretation

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Abstract

Gandhi's writings on the issue of Caturvarṇa, despite their apparent lacunas, dogmatic tones and seeming inconsistencies, are available to a convincing reconstruction. With this purpose in view, the first section of this paper will attempt to give an anti-foundational reading of Caturvarṇa—where varṇa is seen to be based neither on the different proportions of the three guṇas (sattva, rajas and tamas), nor on a system of hereditary professions, but as abstract dimensions that are not mutually exclusive—and at best serves to give an orientation to our cognition and actions. This reading, while borrowing heavily from Shri Aurobindo's reading of Caturvarṇa, will seek to give it a more neutral and expansive direction, shorn of all associated suggestions of intransigence and empirical contingencies, in order to effect the best possible synthesis with Gandhi. The second section of this paper will concentrate on appropriate portions of Gandhi's commentary on *Gītā*, trying to track down Gandhi's reservations against any psychological determinism with respect to varṇa. His direct but scattered observations on varṇa and caste will be addressed in the last section—to see how far our neutral reading of Caturvarṇa can be responsibly reconciled with his distinction between varṇa and caste—indicating a way to dissolve the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate on varṇabheda and jātibheda. Overall, this paper attempts a paradigmatic reconstruction of Gandhian Caturvarṇa in the light of his approach to the notion of niṣkāma karma.

Keywords Three guṇas · Paradigmatic · Psychological determinism · Anti-foundationalist · Caturvarṇa · Niṣkāma karma

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Setting the Need for an Anti-foundational Reading of Caturvarṇa

We all know that the caste system as it is practised in India is a distortion of the original principle of Caturvarṇa formulated in the *Gītā* and Vedas.¹ In order to understand the process of distortion, we have to address a well-known symbolic imagery (figuring in the Ṛgveda) associated with the Caturvarṇa, and also a psychological theory of four personality types constituted by a specific proportion of triguṇas, viz. sattva, rajas and tamas. Both the imagery and the psychological theory will be ultimately displaced by a more neutral and anti-foundational reading of Caturvarṇa, where the four varṇas turn out to be the four ethical directions or dimensions of carrying out our cognition and actions. Being four aspects or dimensions of the same content or locus—they will turn out to be *not* mutually exclusive. Thus, the same human character may have one aspect or direction as more pronounced than the others. In other words, each of these so-called varṇas constitutes a personality type or svabhāva, each type is a marked disposition that is rightfully allowed to follow its own action or svadharma.

Hopefully, there will be no psychological determinism here—rather the criterion of morality is to facilitate the marked aspects or dispositions of one's character and to navigate them to their fullest efficacy, which in the long run turns out to be the deliverance of niṣkāma karma. Thus, ideally speaking, what the society is grounded on are the personality types or svabhāva—which are constituted by specific aspects or orientations of the triguṇas—which in their turn are articulated by the criterion of morality.

After a brief recount of the well-known imagery of Caturvarṇa, we shall pass over to a concise narration of the tripartite guṇa-karma basis of Caturvarṇa in the *Gītā* line—which also happens to be in consonance with the Yogasūtras.² Some basic problems in this traditional guṇa-karma basis of varṇa will ultimately take us to a conceptual or paradigmatic reading of this issue in the style of Aurobindo.

Imagery of Caturvarṇa

The symbol of Caturvarṇa mentioned above was captured in the Puruṣasukta of Ṛgveda where we find an imagery of a Universal Spirit producing four orders or types of men. An English rendition of this Ṛk would be roughly as follows:

His head was the Brāhmaṇa; of His arms Rājanya (Kṣatriya) was made; then His thighs were the Vaiśyas; of His feet were born the Śūdra.³

¹ For writing this section, I am chiefly indebted to Basu (1995) I have been guided by this paper to draw the essential points of Aurobindo's theory from Ghosh (1997a) Chapters I, XI and XIII; (1997b) Chapters VIII, XIV, XVIII, XIX, XIX, XX; and (1999) Chapter III.

² I have used Venkateshananda (2001) for his translation and commentary of Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras*.

³ For the original couplet, see Web: www.sanskritweb.net/rigveda/rv10-086.pdf.

Triguṇa and Karma: Psychological Basis of Caturvarṇa

Karma as conceived in the *Gītā* broadly stands not only for voluntary actions, but covers the harmonious function of a living and cognizing organism, where the life-breath (prāṇa), the sensory and the motor organs, the mind, ego and buddhi—all cohere in the growth, reproduction and preservation of the human body. (*Gītā* III.5)⁴ In so far as a Yogi can intentionally stop his life-sustaining activities like respiration, digestion, blood circulation, etc., they too are deemed to have a volitional character and hence termed as ‘karma’. Any cognition or volition leaves its subtle impression (saṁskāra) on the subconscious mind stuff (citta) and is enlivened on appropriate occasions. Saṁskāras are like sediments underlying explicit cognitions and volitions—in a manner that every action and cognition scoops up a handful of clay from a pot—which again settles down as a new layer on the old sediments. The word ‘triguṇaiḥ’ in the above-mentioned verse clearly suggests that according to *Gītā*, it is an interplay of the three guṇas—viz. sattva, rajas and tamas—that direct all actions. For this saṁskāra theory, it is the continuous generation and revocation of saṁskāras that make our cognitions and engagements smooth and unhindered.

Let us understand how exactly the personality types are created in accordance with the three different directions and dispositions of the guṇas. A guṇa is a universal mould of our karmaśakti, the latter being the power with which our sense organs and motor organs are equipped for coping with the environment. One disposition of this karmaśakti that maintains the reciprocal balance of several qualities in an even equilibrium through the means of intellection is termed as the sattva guṇa. The rajas helps navigating the karmaśakti, whereas tamas is the term for our inertial tendencies marked by deficient intelligence. All characters are composed of these three guṇas, one or other of which gets primacy over others in some stage of our life.

The primacy of sattva (in maintaining a balance between the three guṇas) is marked by a tendency to bypass the exuberance of external facts and incidents to withdraw into the theoretical or general principles that bind the former. A sāttvik personality accords importance to the empirical richness of data only to the extent to which he can derive the general principles underlying the superficial variety of incidents. If a sāttvik personality is also marked by an appreciable presence of rajas, he will be equipped with the physical prowess and pragmatic skills to apply the abstract principles of knowledge and ethics to the concrete situations—fighting effectively against conflicts and opposition. But an untempered intensity of rajas amounts to an attitude of unqualified egotism, which naturally erupts in such activities as killing, conquering, selfish consumption at the cost of others. Such personalities, only if channelized in the sāttvik direction, can attain spiritual control, spiritual bliss and power. On the other hand, a tāmasik personality yields inertly to the pressures of the

⁴ I am specially indebted to Aranya (1369 (Bangabda)) for writing the account of saṁskāras, karma and karmaphala. The account ultimately falls back on the Yogasūtras—and the relevant insights about this psychological theory are scattered all over the body of the sūtras. However, specific details about different kinds of saṁskāras, memory and karmaphala can be tracked down in Chapter II, verses 12–15, Chapter IV 8–10, while more generic inputs figure in Chapter I, verses 6, 11, 18, 19, 34, 43, 50. (See footnote 2).

external world, without making any effort to resist or recast the imposing barrage of sensory stimulations into a constructive direction. An unqualified concentration of *tamas* cannot possibly be turned into a balanced synthesis of the three *guṇas*,—for a minimal presence of the *sattva* and *rajas* would at most enable him to assimilate the minimal character of the sensory stimuli—sufficient for his basic survival—not adequate for the assimilation of principles and laws of a higher level of generality.

Further *sattva* is held to produce pleasure, *rajas* pain and *tamas* indifference—which shows that *varṇabheda* is not only due to *guṇabheda* but to *karmabheda* as well. To speak at a more concrete level, the *karmas* of a *Brāhmaṇa* are *yājana*, *yajāna*, *adhyayana* and *adhyāpanā*, while those of the *Kṣatriya* are the protection of people from external and internal disturbances; *Vaiśyas* should engage in commerce and agriculture, while the duties of the *Śūdras* are to render service to the upper *varṇas*.⁵

Thus, the tripartite division of personalities is constituted by a tripartite division of *guṇa*–*karma* configuration. In more specific terms the specific pattern of the three *guṇas* for each person constitutes his *svadharma*. Subbannachar⁶ has charted out the three *guṇas* with respect to the pattern of their possible intermixtures.

Thus, this interpretation enables us to come out at least from the old imagery or the physical symbol of the *Ṛgveda* and reconceive *Caturvarṇa*—not as determined by the professions inherited by one's forefathers, but rather by the psychological principle of one's *svadharma*. It is this *svadharma* that constructs the moral criterion of spiritual elevation.

⁵ See Chakrabarti (2010) pp. 36–37.

⁶ Subbannachar (1966). (Table 9, pp. 259 & 323), also cited in Basu (1995) endnote 14.

Theory of Saṁskāras and Its Role in Determining Varṇa

The Yogasūtras⁷ speak of two kinds of saṁskāras—(1) smṛtiphala or vāsanā and (2) trivipāka. Vāsanā or desire is again of three kinds—the desire (unconscious) for jāti (birth), desire for āyu (life span) and desire for bhoga (pleasure and pain)—all of which are characteristically passive, for they can simply reproduce themselves in memory—they cannot produce a new construction. Once the raw elemental force of our sensory and motor organs falls into the three moulds of vāsanās or desires, what we have is the creative functioning of trivipāka, that being directly attached with the powers of our sensory and motor organs leads to volition (ceṣṭā), subsequently bringing relevant changes in our instruments or organs themselves. In fine vāsanās produce the path through which the trivipāka geared to the instrumental powers can navigate to produce further actions and further saṁskāras—not in the present birth, but in the subsequent ones.

The Yogasūtras with which the precepts of *Gītā* on the principal issues of triṣṇas, karma and saṁskāras match roughly speak of two types of karmas—puruṣakāra and bhogabhūta. The latter kind comprises those actions where the agent's will is overpowered by the functioning of his sensory and motor organs—for instance, the activities of digestion, respiration, falling down on the ground, being physically compelled to do something, habitual and impulsive actions. These actions are determined by past saṁskāras and external forces. Puruṣakāra on the other hand are voluntary action in the true sense of the term that characteristically resist sāṁskārik impulsions. Karmas once performed have already generated a repertoire of saṁskāras which in their turn must produce their respective phalas (consequences)—phalas which the agent must suffer—irrevocably, inviolably. If one habitually takes to stealing or frequently gives vent to uncouth passions, these actions will produce their respective saṁskāras that will go on producing further consequences, unless the very nature and direction of those saṁskāras (caura-saṁskāras and krodha saṁskāras⁸) are reflected upon and steered to a new channel. It is only then that the new trend of saṁskāras (acaura- and akrodha saṁskāras) will start producing a different set of effects, but not before the previous caura and krodha saṁskāras have run the full track of their production. Thus, it turns out that the Indian psychology admits two levels—the first level where actions and cognitions are caught into a deterministic law of causation, and the second level where the human mind can perform an operation with the saṁskāras themselves to channelize them into a different direction.

The content of the verses of *Gītā* III 33–43 roughly matches with the above theory of the Yoga. Let us paraphrase Gandhi's rendition of verse 37 and 41–43. Lust and anger, kāma and krodha are the 'two great energies of man [that] drive him to sin'. When man realizes God, 'his mind will be under His control, not swayed by the sense'. Gandhi further explicates that 'Controlling the self by the

⁷ See footnote 4.

⁸ These phrases can be translated, respectively, as 'cleptomaniac and wrathful dispositions'.

Self' (saṁstabhya'tmānam ātmanā—verse 43) means 'overpowering the demoniac impulses in the mind through the Atman, that is through the Godward impulses'.

It is argued that the nature of a jīva is an outcome of two factors—the one is the saṁskāra of the previous birth and the other is the environmental factors arising out of education and good association in the present birth. That the human nature changes due to the complex intermixture of these two factors is clearly registered in *Gītā* where it enjoins that if the Brāhmaṇic characteristics like Śama, dama, etc., are found in varṇas other individuals than the Brāhmaṇas then they are to be deemed as Brāhmaṇas as well. Many scholars are of the opinion that the so-called varṇabheda cannot be traced in the Vedic era. Ṛgveda contains unambiguous statements about the same family members engaging in different activities. 'Look here, I am a strotrakāra, my son is a medical practitioner, i.e. vaidya, and my daughter is a yababharjanakāri, i.e. a cook. One can find similar ideas in Aitareya, Chāndogya and Śatapathabrāhmaṇa. It is to be further noted that in Śatapathabrāhmaṇa as well as in Taittirīya there is no mention of the Śūdras—clearly showing that the notion of Śūdras was contrived and introduced later in the social mainstream.⁹

At this juncture the guṇa-karma theory of varṇa gets challenged by the following two options. The first is the *aposteriori* thesis that we are born first and then acquire the guṇa and karma through the course of our present life, the second is the *apriori* thesis that we are born with the saṁskāras of the respective varṇas.¹⁰ The *Gītā* theory as well as the Yogasūtras—with their rigorous distinctions between two types of saṁskāras and karmas—with their substantial ontology of trivipāka and bhogabhūta karmas—clearly upholds the *apriori* theory. It is indeed a common empirical fact that we see people change their karmas and guṇas at different stages of their life—sometimes quite radically and dramatically, but never in an abrupt or sporadic fashion that would give the impression of a total chaos or disorder—where everything follows from everything, and hence nothing follows from anything. This consideration apparently lends a strong support to the *apriori* theory of the guṇa-karma vibhāga of Caturvarṇa. On this theory, every action or cognition (in so far as it falls under the category of the bhogabhūta karma) is caused by, and itself gives rise to, an appropriate saṁskāra—thus producing an infinite stretch of sedimentation that runs through the entire series of births and rebirths. However, the theory of Puruṣakāra has to allow that a person has the ability to negotiate with his pre-given saṁskāras and to recast them to create a new flow. Otherwise if the nature and extent to which the saṁskāras can be moulded are already inscribed in the pre-given saṁskāras, then the very notion of Puruṣakāra as well as the promise of freedom from an *apriori* sediment will turn out to be a hoax. Indeed, when the Shastras enjoin specific duties to specific varṇas with a moral predicate of 'should', it virtually negates a psychological determinism and commits itself to the possibility of outgrowing these varṇic norms.

⁹ See Chattopadhyay (1401 (Bangabda)) specially p 703, and also Chakrabarti (2010) for other such details.

¹⁰ See Chakrabarti (2010) for constructing these two options, as for other relevant points of defence as well.

Defects in the Tripartite Guṇa–Karma Basis of Caturvarṇa

First, it seeks to ensure that no action or cognition occurs without a *sāṃskārik* base; otherwise, it would be a random occurrence magically shooting off in a vacuum—which cannot meaningfully be ascribed to the relevant subject as *his* action or *his* cognition and nobody else's. But how would then a *puruṣakara* that modifies the *saṃskāras* themselves take place—without having its base in the previous *saṃskāras*? The problematic character of being inauthentic and agentless will detract the *puruṣakaras* from their crucial role in moral philosophy. Secondly, since *vāsanās* and *trivipāka* are by definition unconscious, the talk of the present action or cognition reviving a *similar* *saṃskāra* does not make sense. The purported similarity has to be judged by the subject and the agent—and for this both the items of the similarity relation—viz. the present action as well as the past *saṃskāra* has to be (*per impossibile*) consciously present to the subject—a crucial requirement that cannot be satisfied by the *saṃskāra* theory. An unrecognized similarity floating in the air and hauling up the relevant *saṃskāra* does not have any explanatory weight. Overall, the picture of each person being born with a semi-solid sediment of *saṃskāras*, having a definite proportion of the three *guṇas*, with a parallel meta-level capability of modifying this *sāṃskārik* fluid seems to be a problematic piece of ontology. In this theory the *guṇas* do not figure as exclusive essences, but as specific categories of intermixtures with specific directions, and each type of intermixture constitutes a determinate type of personality. Instead of solid hard entities we have fluids or flows, but each flow is determined with respect to the exact nature and extent to which it flows. Thus, each of the *varṇas* now is reconstituted as a characteristic fluidity and this fluid-metaphysics cannot avoid the flaws of psychological determinism.¹¹

It is said that the course of Indian history took a perverse turn where the psychological as well as the moral principles of *varṇavyavasthā* got completely obscured. The conceptual or paradigmatic basis of the four personality types was forcefully contrived into some artificial sects of the society. What was presented in the *Ṛgveda* as simply an persuasive imagery or a metaphor underwent an unimaginative and literal degeneration. The Pundits and priests became the caricature of *Brāhmaṇatva* or *sattva guṇa*, the idle and despotic landowners came to represent *rajas* or *Kṣatriyatva*, the greedy merchants were equated with *Vaiśyatva* (a *rajas*–*sattva* synthesis), and lastly the half-fed labourers were reduced to *Śūdratva* or *tamas*. Now it needs to be noted that this very fact of the original ethical and religious principles of *Caturvarṇa* degenerating into perverse masks or caricatures is again due to the actions of men with specific personality types, where each type is constituted by a specific fluidity of the *triṇaṇas*. Thus, the psychological determinism embedded in the *guṇa*–*karma* basis of *Caturvarṇa* is fraught with multiple layers of inconsistencies.

¹¹ See Mitra (2014) for a more detailed account of the theory of *karma* and *samskāras* and its flaws, pp. 62–67.

Constructing an Anti-foundational Approach to Caturvarṇa

To avoid this determinism, we have to re interpret Caturvarṇa in a still different way, so that a varṇa or a personality type would not be identified with a pattern of fluidity. The four principles are now reformulated as A. Wisdom (Prajñā) or the knowledge of Ultimate Reality, B. Ultimate Power or Śakti, C. Harmony (Saṁhati) or the sustenance of various parts in a cohesive balance, and D. Work (Karma), i.e. achieving efficiency and completeness in labour.¹² The psychological determinism that marked the previous theory of varṇa should be revised to incorporate puruṣakāra that enables each individual to channelize his saṁskāras to new directions, without being encased in a pre-given network of saṁskāras, and without implicating two levels (a first level and a meta-level) of cognition and actions.

What is the exact flaw in equating a personality type with a specific pattern of flexibility of the guṇas? It is not that one guṇa penetrates into another, rather one supposedly fixed proportion of guṇas penetrates into another supposedly fixed proportion. In order to appreciate how one kind of fluidity penetrates into another kind of fluidity, one has to re-read the four new principles—Prajñā, Śakti, Saṁhati and Karma—as to how they blend intractably into each other. Pure intellection, even in the shape of a conscious and deliberate attempt to withdraw a theory from all possible applications is itself cast into an applicational mould, for a theory whose preliminary routes of application are not incorporated into the theory fails on both moral and intellectual grounds. It fails on moral grounds because the formulation of the theory is not motivated for the sake of knowledge, rather it is the egoistic passions that impel one to submerge the applicational flaws in his theory; it fails on intellectual grounds because a theory which does not incorporate the *ceteris paribus* clauses of application is failure as a theory itself, and this is not merely a peripheral defect pertaining to the sphere of application.

It is for this reason that the intrusion of Kṣatriyatva into Brāhmaṇatva is necessary, for Kṣatriyatva should be seen as the cognitive power (and not merely muscle power) and contextual sensitivities to implement theories in the face of all resistance and oppositions—whether they are offered by nature or man. Similarly, a person who is capable of increasing productivity should not be doing it for generating money for the sake of money, i.e. amassing a heap of papers or metals. Increasing money should be a symbol of increasing production and a due recognition of a person's productivity. Similarly, love for work is not passive unimaginative labour or blind obedience, it needs to infuse innovative ideas into labour—thus bridging the gaps that often crop up between theory and practice. Looked at in this way, it connects directly to Kṣatriyatva, extending the general conception of the *ceteris paribus* clauses to their concrete implementation at the ground level. This is how the work of a technician and a labourer blends with that of a theoretician, this is how Karma blends with Prajñā and Śakti, and all are synthesized under the principle of Saṁhati.

¹² Insights about these four principles can be related to Kapali Sastry (1948), pp. 95, 98–99. Also cited in Basu (1995).

Thus, the Caturvarṇas turn out to be four paradigms with no ontological correlates. A ruler used to measure length only functions through an active exercise of shoving out the unwanted excess of breadth, depth, colour and texture—of both the ruler and the measurable object—an exercise which does not draw anything from a supposedly immaculate length of the ruler.

If we turn back to the original imagery of the Puruṣa whose limbs generated the four varṇas, one can see that the four organs of the Puruṣa are merely the four dimensions and directions of our cognition and actions. They are four ways of freeing ourselves from constraints—whether they are our passions and inclinations or the external impositions—and work solely through the principle of inner necessitation.

Aurobindo seems to wind up with his insistence that the fourfold powers have to be harmonized and integrated around the soul force or Ātman which surpasses the ego. Now we want to suggest some revisions of Aurobinda's paradigm to give it a more neutral character so that Gandhi's approach too can be reconciled with this reading. In this reading the significance of Caturvarṇa and the language of Caturvarṇa turns out to be is somewhat like this. On the one hand, the different varṇas become different paradigms—one is to discard breadth to focus on length, the other is to discard length in favour of breadth, still another is to discard both length and breadth and just to concentrate of the depth. On the other hand, there is an equally compelling demand of one paradigm penetrating into another. Ossifying the four paradigms of varṇa into real entities—real groups of humans—was a degenerative phase of Indian history; similarly, deliberate nullification of paradigms amounts to the perverse practice of using elastic rulers for measurement, or contriving water drops or gas waves as units of counting. On the one hand, there is an unavoidable need for knowledge to recoil into itself, to the extent to resisting the exuberance of empirical data assuming the shape of being the primary objective; on the other hand, both the demand of mere intellectual harmony empty of content and the rhetoric of servility or unquestioning obedience (taking the garb of pure satva and pure tamās, respectively) should be resisted from being ends in themselves. *The exact nature and extent to which the four paradigms should allow and resist interpenetration cannot be decided by external constraint—be it the psychology of impulsion or the logic of utility—but should be motivated by inner necessitation or the principle of niṣkāma karma.*

Reading Gandhi's Commentary of *Gītā*¹³: In View of the Paradigmatic Principle of Caturvarṇa

Browsing through Gandhi's commentary on *Gītā*—with respect to certain selected portion—can enable one to effectively reconcile his view of varṇa with our paradigmatic reading of the same. Gandhi elaborates IV 13—what is distinctive of a Brahmin is that he knows Brahman, and lives most in the consciousness of God,

¹³ Strohmeier (Ed.) (2009) All references to *Gītā* have been marked as the verse number in decimal notation preceded by the chapter number in Roman letters.

and imbibes the duty of helping people to realize God. Gandhi emphasizes that '[b]esides this particular gift, he will also have the qualities of character that mark the other *varnas*'. And it is this context that Gandhi said that the śūdra's special dharma is service, which he needs to combine with the spirit of yajña, or 'the motive of public good'. Gandhi further comments: 'If we regard the person who cleans lavatories as lower and another who reads the Gita as higher, that will be the end of us'.¹⁴ Again in his interpretation of III 35¹⁵ he observes that should a person settled in a particular profession—say a sweeper—allow himself to be drawn away from his duty to become an accountant he would himself be lost and put the community in danger. What needs to be noted is that Gandhi does not translate 'svadharma' as one's 'law' or 'psycho-physical make up',¹⁶ but renders it simply as 'one's duty'. He also observes that 'before God the work of man will be judged by the spirit in which it is done, not by the nature of the work'.¹⁷ The fact that he does not render the term as 'one's law' suggests that he does not relate varṇa deterministically with a psycho-physical foundation that is given in birth.

We can take such observations as suggestive occasions to lay out the interesting connection between violating one's svadharma and violating the principle of niṣkāma karma. It is often said that the frog which tries to blow himself up in order to grow as big as a bull explodes itself to death because the svadharma of a frog is to remain a frog. Milk may be better than water, but a fish that insists on living in milk will die. Sun is the source of energy that the earth gets, but we will not survive an attempt to leave the earth and be close to the source, because our svadharma is to live on earth. One may not believe in milk or fire as having unchanging essences, one may not believe in a metaphysical reality of space that encloses every object in an ethereal boundary, but these anti-metaphysical insights should not be stretched to the absurdity that one can bloat one's frog size to that of a bull. This kind of fallacy is on the same footing with that of traversing space from one point to another without traversing the distance in between. That space *qua* an external container of objects is unreal, that every space is penetrated by every other, does not consist in magically bloating up the size; and ironically, bloating one size to any other loses sight of the inherent porosity of space and spatial boundaries. It labours under the false imagery of one spatial boundary increasing into another, and this inflammation does not operate by absorption of more and more space, but in magically spreading out the smaller-space container, within which the smaller body was supposed to be encased, into a larger container. Such efforts sway under the impression of putting more content into the container, so that the previous walls would recede to allow more volume within the container—all this happening in the spatial containment

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 59–60.

¹⁵ Śreyān sva-dharmo viguṇaḥ para-dharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt/svadharme nidhanam śreya para-dharmo bhayāvahaḥ'. I have used Radhakrishnan (1949) for citing original verses from *Gītā*.

¹⁶ This is how Radhakrishnan renders the crucial term 'svadharma'. See Radhakrishnan (1949) pp. 146–147.

¹⁷ Strohmeirer, J (Ed), pp. 50, 51.

model. And such an unnaturally flawed operation cannot be motivated by the sake of duty, i.e. it cannot be performed in the *niṣkāma* style.

In all these contrived exercises of bloating sizes, ossifying or liquidizing paradigms, it is the immense load of our passions and desires that breaks up the immaculate oneness of space into fragments. Performing actions in a desireless way can only obtain when actions, intentions and consequences are absorbed into a smooth continuity, and this will not accommodate any invalid attempt to outgrow the natural course of one's faculties, rather one should let one's rule of action space out gradually into the intention, action and consequences.¹⁸

This internal relation between action, intention and consequences is clearly seen in the principle of *niṣkāma* karma which enjoins us to abandon the external and contingent consequences (*naimittik phalas*) of an action, and never the natural or internal (*svābhāvik*) ones. The Yoga system as well as the *Gītā* theory of karma, *saṁskāra* and *karmaphalas* take care to clarify that the irregular and external contingencies invariably associated with our actions are not the *phalas* in the strict sense of the term, it is only the internal and natural consequences that are to be considered to be the *karmaphalas*. The exact distinction between these two kinds of *phalas* can be explained by three examples. (1) A person's scholarship leading to his cerebral excellence, (2) drinking water contaminated by a COVID-19-infected person due to the *saṁskāras* of ignorance (3) the action of planting a sapling giving rise to a feeling of pleasure and expectation. These are the natural or internal consequences of the actions or the relevant *saṁskāras*—while the consequences like getting a post of professorship in case of (1), or contracting COVID-19 disease in the case of (2) or the fruition of the plant in case of (3) are external contingencies. It is *the ways we are affected by the external conditions* (and not the conditions themselves—viz. those of having a social reputation, contracting COVID-19 disease, fruition of the plant, etc.) that constitute the natural consequences or *phalas* of an action.

The injunction of performing actions in a *niṣkāma* style should be understood in the light of the relevant distinction between natural (*svābhāvik*) *phalas* and accidental (*naimittik*) *phalas* of our actions. The negative particle 'mā' in *Gītā* II 47¹⁹ connotes two kinds of negation. First, it makes a factual statement that the agents do not have any control (*adhikāra*) over the *naimittik* fruits. Secondly, it needs to be noted that the particle 'mā' cannot morally enjoin us to renounce the *svābhāvik* *phalas*—say the cerebral excellence generated by one's scholarship, or the idea of the sown sapling budding in its due course. The natural consequences are conceptually embedded into the actions themselves, and hence, the injunction of renouncing them does not make sense. What the second meaning of 'mā' applies to is the moral injunction of renouncing the passionate excess of a craving (or repulsion) for the *svābhāvik* *phalas*—not renouncing the *svābhāvik* *phalas* themselves.

Gandhi's translation and commentary of *Gītā* II 47 and 48 may be read as falling in with the distinction between the *svābhāvik* and *naimittik* *phalas*. When Gandhi says : 'Let not thy motive be the fruit of the action', when he says that 'the reward

¹⁸ See Mitra (2014) for an elaboration of this point.

¹⁹ *Karmany eva'dhikāras te/mā phaleṣu kadācana/mā karmaphalahetur bhur/mā te saṅgo'stv akarmaṇi.*

of the work is entirely for Him to give', Gandhi meant not the svābhāvik phalas that are blended with the very action, but the external and contingent consequences—the occurrence or non-occurrence of which are actually beyond our control. For Gandhi, performing a niṣkāma karma would involve the difficult feat of delinking the apparently svābhāvik phalas from the actions and reconceiving them as the naimittik one; and this involves displacing the latter from the realm of conscious intention and leave it to Nature or God. Giving away the naimittik fruits to God amounts to recasting what seems to be a consciously intended action into a reflex or spontaneous action. In our present example, getting a lucrative job (on the basis of scholarship) is not what can be consciously intended—it rather stands on the footing with reflex or spontaneous actions. If one thinks that the task of protecting our eyes with the lids is what he has consciously designed he has to reconceive that seemingly intentional action into a reflex action that falls within the realm of Nature or God. For Gandhi, giving away the external rewards of action to God is to realize one's slender and spontaneous link with Him, and it is in this sense that the actions geared to merely the naimittik fruits are comparable with reflex actions. Gandhi's commentary on II 48 also is an innovative recreation of the injunction not to give up the svābhāvik fruits, but to give up our attachments for it. '[W]e should not be attached even to a good cause. Only then will our means remain pure and our actions, too'.

We have to understand how the artificial distortion of varṇa paradigms misconceives naimittik phalas of an action as its svābhāvik ones, thus violating the principle of niṣkāma karma. The principle of Prajñā—say in the discipline of microbiology—evenly balances the theory with conceptual possibility of its application—without diluting the theoretical rigour for the sake of gaining the actual fruits of application. The principle of Śakti will articulate the difference between the purely conceptual possibility of application and the path of its actual applications, while the principle of Karma will turn the actual possibilities into concrete realities. All these paradigms of varṇa complement each other in a way that any of these attempting to outgrow the others results in importing foreign elements—virtually destroying the entire fourfold synthesis. Using the theory of microorganisms for manufacturing viruses (for destroying rival nations) is as much foreign to the discipline of virology as the external motivations of lust for power that triggers off this worst kind of extrapolation—i.e. the worst kind of sakāma conflation of the svābhāvik with the naimittik.

Gītā XVIII 41–44 does speak of the duties of Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra—being distributed according to their innate qualifications (svabhāvaprabhāvair guṇair). Gandhi adopts the standard translation of śama and dama—as serenity and self-restraint, 'tapas' Gandhi translates as a procedure to keep body, speech and mind under control by hard discipline. Forgiveness he amplifies as wishing well, even for a person who may have hit us with a stone, straightforwardness he translates as having no impurity in one's eyes. Here one may legitimately claim that having no impurity in one's eyes is not to see the people under the lens of false categorization (of the fourfold sects)—and this for Gandhi is behaving decently. Knowledge and discriminative knowledge ('jñānam, vijñānam') Gandhi translates as knowledge based on experience and not bookish dry knowledge—which supports our ultimate reading of the Caturvarṇas as notional

paradigms. Brāhmaṇatva is characterized by Gandhi as a theoretical or intellectual orientation to all phenomena, not overpowered by superficial empirical details. Faith in God (āstikya) is mentioned last among the list of the defining characteristics of a Brāhmaṇa. Serenity is calmness, equanimity, composure—which roughly stands for the quality of not being too elated nor too dejected due to external circumstances, thus keeping a balance of emotions. Gandhi explains that some qualities like serenity and self-discipline with a bad intent or selfish motives like winning prize competitions and wrestling matches fall back on the devotion to God to upgrade themselves as the defining characteristics of Brāhmaṇatva.

With respect to XVIII 43 Gandhi says that both a Brāhmaṇa and a Kṣatriya have to have the qualities like valour (śauryam), spiritedness (tejo), consistency (dhṛti), resourcefulness (dākṣyam), etc. This perhaps again shows that Gandhi did not believe in the triṣṇavibhāga foundation of Caturvarṇa. Gandhi adds that in this way every individual *should* display in varying measures the qualities associated with all the castes. (*Italics added*) The word ‘should’ shows that a person’s character is not determined by a given structure of saṁskāras, otherwise the moral injunction to cultivate all the qualities associated with all the varṇas will not arise. However, Gandhi has added the qualifier, viz. ‘in varying measures’, and he also adds that a person will belong to a caste the virtues of which he possesses in predominant measures. This would hopefully support out adoption of the fourfold principles of Prajñā, Śakti, Saṁhati and Karma and their modes of mutual complementation.

The way we have sought to assimilate Brāhmaṇatva with Kṣatriyatva—in the model of the synthesis between Prajñā and Śakti—may not tally with certain marks of Kṣatriyatva, viz. ‘śauryam’, ‘tejo’, ‘yuddhe ... apalayānam’, as demanded in XVIII 43. When Galileo yielded to the pressures of the church to make false confessions about his scientific discovery—this might be a violation of the marks of Kṣatriyatva—in so far as it is a glaring case of fleeing from battle. Hopefully Gandhi will argue that the machinations of a hostile society with vested interests for opposing the exploration of scientific laws of reality cannot be termed as a fair battle (nyāya yuddha), and from this perspective we can further insist that marks of Brāhmaṇatva or Prajñā—*qua* pure commitment to intellectual principles stands *independent* of muscle power or heroism that is patently supposed to withstand physical torment or even death for the sake of vindicating truth.²⁰

Gandhi’s Observations on Varṇa

The problem of eking out a comprehensive account from the bits and pieces of Gandhi’s writings—often seeming to be inconsistent, incoherent and dissipative—is mainly because his view of Caturvarṇa evolved through a long process of transition.

²⁰ In this respect one can remember Galileo’s pertinent observation, when he was admonished by his student Andrea, for making false confessions before the clergymen to save his own skin. When Andrea swore: ‘Unhappy the land that has no heroes’, Galileo replied: ‘No, Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes’. See Brecht, B. (1939), *Life of Galileo*.

Here we can selectively look at certain observations of Gandhi where he had discarded the caste system and the casteist version of *varṇāśrama* in most unambiguous terms.²¹ By early 1930s, Gandhi had declared that caste was ‘a handicap on progress’²² and ‘a social evil’²³, and, by the 1940s he stated that it was ‘an anachronism’²⁴ which ‘must go’.

Further he says: ‘The Ashram does not follow the *varnashram* dharma. Where those in control of the Ashram will take the place of the pupils’ parents and where lifelong vows of celibacy, non-hoarding, etc., are to be observed, *varnashram* dharma has no scope. The Ashram inmates will be in the stage of *sanyasis* and so it is not necessary for them to follow the rules of this dharma. Apart from this, the Ashram has a firm belief in the *varnashram* dharma’.²⁵ This observation adequately shows that Gandhi did not believe in a dogmatic equation of *varṇa* and parental professions, nor perhaps with a specific type of *triguṇa* proportion that comes in the shape of a psychological determinism. The ashrama inmates already have the training to perform actions in the *niṣkāma* model—through an inner determination free from external constraints of lust and greed, or pragmatic pressures and this equips them to see the *Caturvarṇa* in their dimensional character. While for Gandhi the obligation to follow the hereditary professions applies normally to people, in order to train their mind for the required paradigmatic reading of the *varṇas*, the ashrama inmates already cultivating the dimensional principle of *Caturvarṇa* are exonerated from that obligation.

From our preferred standpoint, we can again look back at Gandhi’s stand according to which untouchability itself is an artificial mask that thwarts the conceptual interpenetration of the four paradigms, thus stopping the moral principle of *Caturvarṇa* to operate. Actions patently become loaded with external factors like desire and vested interests of preserving untouchability—thus deviating from the ethical principle of *niṣkāma* karma.

There are many occasions where Gandhi speaks simultaneously of removal of untouchability, equality, and the freedom to take a profession of one’s choice—along with an injunction to adopt the profession of his forefathers. For instance, if we consider these reflections:

‘[A Shudra] may not be called a Brahman in this birth. And it is a good thing for him not to arrogate a *varṇa* to which he is not born. It is a sign of true humility.’²⁶ ‘I do not believe the caste system...to be an “odious and vicious dogma.” It has its limitations and its defects, but there is nothing sinful about it...’²⁷

²¹ For this I heavily rely on Nauriya (2006).

²² Gandhi (2015) *Young India*, 4-6-1931.

²³ *Ibid*, *Advance*, 15-10-1932.

²⁴ *Ibid*, *Varnavyavastha*, pp. 13–14.

²⁵ *Ibid*, *VARNASHRAM*, p. 456.

²⁶ *Ibid*, VOL. 40: 2 SEPTEMBER, 1927—1 DECEMBER, 1927, p. 484.

²⁷ *Ibid*, VOL. 59: 13 JANUARY, 1933—9 MARCH, 1933, p.228.

Further: ‘The law of varna prescribes that a person should, for his living, follow the lawful occupation of his forefathers. I hold this to be a universal law governing the human family...’

But in the same passage he says: ‘No one is precluded from rendering multitudinous acts of voluntary service and qualifying [educating, training] oneself for it. Thus...[a person] born of Brahmin parents and I born of Vaisya parents may consistently...serve as honorary national volunteers or honorary nurses or honorary scavengers in times of need, though in obedience to that law...I as a Vaisya would be earning my bread by selling drugs or groceries. Everyone is free to render any useful service so long as he does not claim reward for it’.²⁸

Perhaps in the above excerpts Gandhi thought it obligatory to appreciate the *sāttvik* aspect of one’s forefathers’ profession and hence his injunction that everybody should follow his forefather’s profession in its *sāttvik* dimension would have a universalizable character required for it to be a moral rule. It is in this sense that Gandhi as a son of Vaiśya parents can legitimately adopt the profession of a national volunteer or that of a scavenger without taking any remuneration. And in the light of the entire trajectory of this paper—from a psychological reading to a paradigmatic rendition of *Caturvarṇa*—we can take Gandhi’s prescriptions about being humble about one’s being born in a *Śūdra* family as connoting a sensitivity to the principle of Work and associated values of expertise in labour.

Again he says: ‘I believe in *varnashramadharma* but I do not believe in castes. *Varanashramadharma* means that a man should find satisfaction in getting his livelihood from his ancestral occupation.’²⁹ ...I have devoted much thought to the subject of the caste system and come to the conclusion that Hindu society cannot dispense with it, that it lives on because of the discipline of caste. Societies all over the world are organized on the principle of caste or *varnavyavastha*. Our society was organized in this manner for the purpose of self-control, that is, for self-denial. ... So long as there are among human beings impulses which tend to a godly life and those which tend to a demoniac life, so long will the division of society into communities remain. It is a vain effort to replace this structure by one single community’.³⁰ One can read these observations not in terms of strict *triguṇa* proportions amounting to a godly personality versus a demoniac personality, nor in terms of different personality types smoothly complementing each other to form a cohesive community. Gandhi’s reflections can only be adopted as a heuristic method—as a tentative tool or starting point to aid a non-foundational reading of these supposed psychological types.

To peruse through some more of his speculations: ‘It is likely that at the end of it we shall all find that there is nothing to fight against in *varnashrama*. If, however, *varnashrama* even then looks an ugly thing, the whole of Hindu society will fight it...’³¹ This clearly shows that Gandhi made a distinction between the psychological

²⁸ *Ibid*, VOL. 40: 2 SEPTEMBER, 1927—1 DECEMBER, 1927, pp. 384, 385.

²⁹ *Ibid*, VOL. 15: 21 MAY, 1915—31 AUGUST, 1917. P. 79.

³⁰ *Ibid*, Vol. 15: 21 MAY, 1915—31 AUGUST, 1917, pp. 226–227.

³¹ Quoted in Nauria (2006), p. 1835.

foundationalism and the paradigmatic reading of varṇāśrama—and ultimately abandoned the former in favour of the latter. The task of matching the reality of Indian society with the four categories was taken up by Gandhi as a programme, which as he clearly suggested, is to be discarded if facts do not meet the theory.

In April 1933, Gandhi declared on the basis of some authoritative texts that varṇa could not be perpetuated or determined merely by birth. He argues: ‘These and numerous other verses from the shastras unmistakably show that mere birth counts for nothing’.³² He could not accept, he said in 1934, that in his religion ‘there should be a single human being considered lower than myself’.³³ Besides more significantly Gandhi was conscious of hierarchies among dalits themselves. The scheduled castes, he said in 1937, ‘cannot be expected to appreciate and accept ex-cathedra usages that discriminate between savarnas and avarnas and between the different groups among the avarnas themselves, as these smack of invidiousness and offend against reason’.³⁴ His sensitivity about irrational character of the caste system shows that he was fully open to the purely notional or dimensional interpretation of the Caturvarṇa.

We know that Gandhi wanted to have undivided general elections for the untouchables and virulently opposed the latter to have a separate electorate. We can say that Gandhi’s ideal of merging the Dalits within the mainstream population may well be reconciled with the paradigmatic version of the Caturvarṇa that we have adopted. We may also add—though tentatively—that keeping a separate electorate for the Dalits may have looked like an artificial way to keep one personality trend or one dimension of measurement in strict segregation from the other—which in the long run will freeze the Dalits into a fixed identity, instead of liberating them from the latter.

Many eloquent and moving appeals were made by Gandhi against untouchability—when he said that if we do not incorporate the untouchables into the mainstream society the very notion of swaraj will turn out to be a vacuous one. ‘The advice I receive from one and all is that if I do not exclude the Antyajas [untouchables] from the national schools, the movement for swaraj [self-rule] will end in smoke. If I have even a little of the Vaishnava in me, God will also vouchsafe me the strength to reject the swaraj which may be won by abandoning the Antyajas’.³⁵... it is equally necessary for us to give peace to the Panchama (untouchables) before we can with any show of justice or self respect talk of Swaraj....Hence for me the movement of swaraj is a movement of self-purification’.³⁶ Now what we have sought to argue in the first section is that the Caturvarṇas being conceptual dimensions or paradigms—they can neither be segregated nor merged forcefully—rather keeping a self-governed balance amongst them constitutes the very essence of niṣkāma karma. It is this niṣkāma karma that Gandhi is referring to by the term ‘self-purification’.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 1836.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Gandhi (2015) VOL. 22: 23 NOVEMBER, 1920—5 APRIL, 1921, p. 57.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, *Young India*, 12-6-1924, p. 138.

and his demand of incorporating Dalits within the general population as amounting to an exercise of self-purification seems to be in accordance with this paradigmatic re-construal of the Caturvarṇa. If swaraj is freedom then it should be merged with the moral character of the four paradigms and there is no freedom without the emancipation of the Dalits. Freedom is the freedom from external constraint—like greed or utilitarian agendas—and hence the very notion of a separate class like Dalits is both morally repugnant and conceptually invalid—like the notion of pure length without breadth or depth and vice versa.

Gandhi further said—‘When I ask you to purify your hearts of untouchability, I ask of you nothing less than this—that you should believe in the fundamental unity and equality of man. I invite you all to forget that there are any distinctions of high and low among the children of one and the same God’.³⁷ Here Gandhi’s words are sensitive not only to the moral flaw of the purportedly fixed essence of each varṇa, but rather to the conceptual flaw in such categorizations. Perhaps Ambedkar’s demand for a separate electorate for the Dalits hurt Gandhi’s sense of the natural interpenetration of the four paradigms—which led him to make such extreme comments about the propriety of his own death—had Dr. Ambedkar taken up decided to go against the Poona Pact and punished the so-called caste Hindus for their ‘sins of generation’.³⁸

How to interpret Gandhi’s comments about himself suffering more as an untouchable since he was a convert to untouchability and not born into it? We have seen how the purely conceptual paradigms of Caturvarṇa degenerated into arbitrary sects assuming a philosophical mask. Perhaps Gandhi implied that discarding one fake mask—viz. that of a Vaiśya and putting on another fake identity of a Dalit confines him into a more alien form of oppression. This act of putting off one mask and wearing another may also be conceived as wearing mask of a mask—shadow of a shadow—being twice removed from reality and yielding to doubly intense form of intellectual and moral oppression.

Lastly Gandhi’s remarks about the issue of scavenging invite more detailed controversies. ‘In my humble opinion, the dirt that soils the scavenger is physical and can be easily removed. But there are those who have become soiled with untruth and hypocrisy, and this dirt is so subtle that it is very difficult to remove it. If there are any untouchables, they are the people who are filled with untruth and hypocrisy...’³⁹ ‘Even if scavengers, potters and barbers are offered the fullest payment, they may or may not serve, as they please; they have a right to decide. If we, too, acknowledge this right of theirs, we shall have qualified ourselves for full swaraj’.⁴⁰ ‘Scavenger, I employ that word in all its meaning. If the members would get out and lend a helping hand to clean up the city, literally and morally, they would be doing a great work’.⁴¹ Further—‘If we had not despised professions which required one to use

³⁷ *Ibid*, Harijan, 16-2-1934, p. 146.

³⁸ *Ibid*, VOL. 57: 5 SEPTEMBER, 1932—15 NOVEMBER, 1932, p. 123.

³⁹ *Ibid*, VOL. 16: 1 SEPTEMBER, 1917—23 APRIL, 1918, p. 138.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, VOL.17: 26 APRIL, 1918 - APRIL, 1919, p. 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, quoted from *Young India*, 25-2-1920, p. 336.

one's hands and feet, we would not have fallen into this unhappy state and graduates would have felt no shame in working even as scavengers'.⁴²

In accordance with the dimensional model of Caturvarṇa that we have accepted, we can say that scavenging should be characterized by a synthesis of the three aspects of the guṇas—the sāttvik mark will consist in cognizing the principles of preserving ecology and environment, the rājasik aspect of scavenging implements them into sustained actions to harmonize theory and practice, whereas the last aspect of tamas would perhaps consist in a dedication to the gritty details of actual labour. It is the synthesis of the four dimensions in the act of scavenging that would render it into a noble profession. In all probability Gandhi did not call the so-called śūdras to practice scavenging, rather he had called on all individuals to be sensitive to the sāttvik, rājasik and tāmasik aspects of scavenging. If he had really insisted on a rightful imposition of the scavenging function on to the śūdras—it would have been the most scandalous and cruel joke, as Ambedkar remarked.

Concluding Remarks

Nauriya (2006) records that in 1945 Gandhi's position against the Caturvarṇa became quite definitive and in a new forward to an old anthology in Gujarati where he explicitly asserted that all his older statements on Caturvarṇa that do not cohere with his latest observations are to be rejected. And he even says: 'But there prevails only one varṇa today, that is of shudras, or you may call it, ati- 'shudras', or harijans or untouchables'.⁴³

One of his latest comments on varṇa came in February 1947 where he said that caste must go if Hinduism is to survive, and yet qualifying that 'There was room for varṇa, as a duty'. According to him: 'This was true of all religions whether the name used was other than varṇa. What was a Muslim 'maulavi' or a Christian priest but a brahmin if he taught his flock its true duty, not for money but because he possessed the gift of interpretation? And this was true of the other divisions'.⁴⁴ Here he seems to be upholding neither a hereditary categorization nor a psychological determinism—but merely certain pronounced dispositions in one's character and personality which would motivate him to deliver the best performance in a desireless fashion for the sake of duty—unhindered by a false split between an action and its consequences.

Reading Gandhi's view on varṇa in the paradigmatic mould is apparently nothing new—many stalwart commentators have taken Gandhi to have retained an idealized version of the varṇa system.⁴⁵ I have sought to add a new perspective to this trend of

⁴² *Ibid.*, VOL. 19: 29 SEPTEMBER, 1919—24 MARCH, 1920, p. 105.

⁴³ Nauria (2006), p. 1837.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ For instance, Singh (2014), has presented a comparative analysis of the commentaries of Thomas Pantham, Ramchandra Guha and Partha Chatterjee - where Gandhi's idealistic approach to Caturvarṇa has been differently deployed to settle (or unsettle) the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate. However, their idealistic reading has a focus different from the agenda of this paper.

thought—viz. that one requires a systematic and rigorous critique of psychological determinism (constituted by definite proportions of *triguṇas* and corresponding store of *saṁskāras*) or any other foundational categorization, in order to sustain the idealized reading of the *varṇa* system. It is through a long and tortuous journey that Gandhi's initial concessions to the principle of *Caturvarṇa* finally ended up with an unreserved dismissal of any kind of genetic or *saṁskārik* pre-destiny. It is the entire history of his life and his nation that showed him how ethics—in the true sense of the term—has to break free from any metaphysical, psychological or utilitarian impositions.

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