

THE GUNA THEORY AND THE VARNA SYSTEM

The Samkhya view that Prakriti manifests itself in the three gunas—sattwa, rajas and tamas—was quite widely accepted by Indian thinkers. When applied to human beings, it holds that, while the three are present in every individual, one predominates. Thus, an individual's personality—his outlook, temperament, attitudes, likes, dislikes, activities—are all a result of the prominent guna. The Bhagavad Gita extends the Samkhya thesis, going so far as to claim the kind of food one likes, how one sacrifices, what one worships, how one gives gifts and what is conducive to one's happiness are determined by it.

The sattwa guna is associated with light, truth, calmness, serenity, egolessness, purity, harmony, balance, control, unity, thoughtfulness, gentleness, the inner sympathy and compassion. The raja guna is associated with passions, drives, action, physical strength, ruling, attachment, pleasure, restlessness, arrogance, heedlessness, disunity, divisions, power and wealth. The tamoguna is associated with inertia, darkness, sloth, confusion, obstinancy, unpleasantness, demonic, limitation, distortion and coarseness.

Disregarding philosophical arguments for the Samkhya view of the gunas, I would like to deal with the question of why the theory became widely accepted, from another perspective, namely, the pragmatic. Is it not obvious that such a view could be made to fit neatly into and to serve as a justification for a stratified social system in which the higher group or groups seek to keep the system intact and to retain their elevated status within the system? Dividing persons into three natural types provides a psychological justification. Secondly, it makes room for the classical "argument from nature" approach which one finds universally, and which reinforces the universal tendency in human beings to make distinctions between themselves of the superior/inferior type. Nature has endowed some persons with greater sagacity, abilities or skill, and thus it is quite right and natural that they should have a higher status or standing. Nature has

given others lesser capacities or talents and their role is naturally a subordinate or lesser one.

Without going into a great many historical details to demonstrate it, is it not true that this is what actually happened in India over the centuries? Social groups came into existence early in her history. The Brahmins were accepted as the highest even as early as Buddha's time, for he ridicules them by saying—"I do not call a man a Brahmana because of his origin or of his mother" Certainly, the Samkhya view which, as Chatterjee and Datta point out, "must be a very old system of thought," may well have been called upon by the upper varna as it very well suited their purpose of retaining the status quo and keeping their place in it intact. Such a phenomenon is not limited to one country or tradition. Dominant power groups extolling views likely to ensure their remaining in power is a universal phenomenon. I could very easily demonstrate this in terms of the contemporary American scene.

The whole business is thrown into disrepute, however, if another view is taken as follows. Suppose we view reality ontologically in terms of levels of being or consciousness. We might, in the end, divide the levels into three general ones, even using the same terms as Samkhya philosophy does, *sattwic*, *rajasic* and *tamasic*. From this point of view, the life of an individual is a progression or evolution through these levels of existence, the ultimate goal being to transcend even the last one and attain final union with Brahman. Some pass through more easily and quickly than others. Nevertheless each one goes from the state of potential knowing to perfect knowing, little knowledge to greater knowledge, from the unbridled expression to the subduing and channeling of passions, from attachment and self-seeking to non-attachment and self-giving, confusion to clarity, restlessness to serenity, multiplicity to oneness, anxiety to faith, a process which religions denote as a purifying or redeeming one.

Such a process—view of individual life is not susceptible to the social rationalization of which the Guna view is. There is no superior/inferior dichotomy inherent in it. It begins with the nature of reality rather than the nature of the individual. It holds to a metaphysical monism or pluralism rather than a dualism.

It views all individuals as being subject to the same tendencies which all must ultimately transcend. It leads us to see individuals as simply beings in different stages of an identical process. The social history of India might have been quite different, had an ontological interpretation of man become the prevailing one.

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