

THE  
COLLECTED  
WORKS  
OF  
MAHATMA  
GANDHI

VOLUME FORTY-TWO



THE PUBLICATIONS DIVISION

THE  
COLLECTED  
WORKS  
OF  
MAHATMA  
GANDHI

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434. VARNADHARMA AND DUTY OF LABOUR<sup>1</sup> - I

Questions asked and my answers to them are given below:

Q: Do you accept the duty of [bread] labour expounded by Tolstoy ?

A: Yes, certainly.

Q: Do you expect that every person should do all his work himself ?

A: I do not expect it and I do not think it practicable; Tolstoy too did not consider this essential. Man's dependence is no less than his independence. So long as he remains in society, and remain he must, he has to curtail his independence to fit into that of others, that is, society. Therefore it can only be said that each person, as far as it is possible, must do his work himself; that is to say, I may fill a mug for my use, but may not dig a well myself. Not to fill the mug is pride; to plan or begin digging a well is stupidity. One must, therefore, exercise discretion in deciding whether a task is to be done by oneself or with the help of others.

Q: Do you wish that all should earn their livelihood by the sweat of the brow?

A: Certainly. Everyone does not do so and that is why dire poverty has arisen in the world and especially so in India. This is also the main cause of ill health and the immense greed for acquisition of wealth. If all earned their livelihood by physical work, greed would decrease and much of the power to acquire wealth would weaken automatically. If physical labour is done, ill health will almost disappear and the greatest gain will be the complete obliteration of the distinction between high and low in society.

[From Hindi]

*Hindi Navajivan*, 6-2-1930

<sup>1</sup> Published serially in four consecutive issues of *Hindi Navajivan*

## 450. VARNADHARMA AND DUTY OF LABOUR—II

**QUESTION:** Is not the division of labour under varnashrama dharma sufficient for the development and welfare of humanity? Which do you value more— varnadharma or duty of labour?

**ANSWER:** The purport of this question is that varnadharma and duty of labour are incompatible obligations. In fact they are not. Both are concurrent and imperative. Varnadharma pertains to the society and duty of labour pertains to the individual. The sages divided society into four sections for its welfare and thereby attempted to root out rivalry which is fatal to society. Therefore they made one varna responsible for the growth of knowledge in society, the second responsible for the protection of life and property in society, the third for trade in society, and the fourth for service to society. All the four functions were and are equally essential; therefore there was no reason to consider one high and the other low. Adverting to the equilibrium of scales Maharshi Vyas has indeed said that each individual by performing the duties of his own varna acquires fitness for salvation; whereas mutual rivalry and distinctions of high and low bring about ruin. Varnadharma does not in the least imply that any varna is exempt from manual labour. The duty of labour is incumbent on every person belonging to every varna. The Brahmin also had to approach his guru with firewood in his hands, that is to say, he also had to go into the forest and glean firewood and tend cattle. This work he did for himself and his family, not for society. Only children and cripples were exempt from such manual work.

The doctrine of manual labour for a living which Tolstoy has expounded is a corollary of the duty of labour. Tolstoy felt that if everyone had to do manual work then it means that man must earn his bread by manual labour, never by mental work. In varnadharma the work of each varna was for the welfare of society. Livelihood was not the motive. Gain or no gain, the Kshatriya had to defend the people. The Brahmin had to impart knowledge whether he received alms or not. The Vaishya had to farm and tend cattle whether he earned money or not. But Tolstoy's doctrine that every person must do manual work for a living is perfectly true. We come across distressing disparities in the world today because this universal duty has been neglected or forgotten.

Disparities will always be there, but like the several leaves of a tree they will look beautiful and pleasant. In the pure varnadharma disparity is no doubt there, and when it was in its pure form, it was pleasing, peaceful and pretty. But when several people use their talents for amassing wealth, distressing disparities are created. Just as, if a teacher (Brahmin), a soldier (Kshatriya), a businessman (Vaishya) and a carpenter (Shudra) follow their professions for amassing wealth, not for the welfare of society, then varnadharma is destroyed. Because in matters of duty there can be no room whatever for amassing wealth. In society there is need for teachers, lawyers, doctors, soldiers and others. But when they work for selfish ends they no longer are protectors of society but become parasites on society.

The *Gita*, III. 10 has expounded a great principle where it says:

Together with sacrifice did the Lord of beings create, of old, mankind, declaring: "By this shall ye increase; may this be to you the giver of all your desires."

Now we can clearly comprehend the etymology of the word *yajna*. The meaning of *yajna* is manual work and this is the first and foremost act of worship of God. He has given us bodies. Without food the body cannot exist and without labour food cannot be produced. That is why manual labour has become a universal duty. This duty of labour is not Tolstoy's alone but of the whole world. Ignorance of this great *yajna* has led to the worship of mammon in the world and intelligent people have used their talents to exploit others. It is clear that God is not covetous. Being all powerful, He creates every day only as much food as is sufficient for every human being or living creature. Not knowing this great truth, several people indulge in all kinds of luxuries and thereby starve many others. If they could give up this greed and work for their living, and eat enough to meet their needs, the poverty that we find today will vanish. I hope the interrogator would now see that varnadharma and duty of labour are concurrent, complementary and essential.

[From Hindi]

*Hindi Navajivan*, 13-2-1930

most to the Indian masses who can no longer bear the crushing burden. For India considers many of them ill-gotten. Let this double no surrender stagger humanity. British bullying must stop at all cost.

#### NO CONVERSION PERMISSIBLE

The English Press cuttings contain among many delightful items the news that Miss Slade known in the Ashram as Mirabai has embraced Hinduism.<sup>1</sup> I may say that she has not. I hope that she is a better Christian than when four years ago she came to the Ashram. She is not a girl of tender age. She is past thirty and has travelled all alone in Egypt, Persia and Europe befriending trees and animals. I have had the privilege of having under me Mussalman, Parsi and Christian minors. Never was Hinduism put before them for their acceptance. They were encouraged and induced to respect and read their own scriptures. It is with pleasure that I can recall instances of men and women, boys and girls having been induced to know and love their faiths better than they did before if they were also encouraged to study the other faiths with sympathy and respect. We have in the Ashram today several faiths represented. No proselytizing is practised or permitted. We recognize that all these faiths are true and divinely inspired, and all have suffered through the necessarily imperfect handling of imperfect men. Miss Slade bears not a Hindu name but an Indian name. And this was done at her instance and for convenience. We have more such instances. Richard Gregg who is not suspected of having given up Christianity is to us Govindji. An old Christian sister, Miss Ada West now in Louth, became Devibehn to us in Phoenix.

*Young India*, 20-2-1930

#### 460. VARNADHARMA AND DUTY OF LABOUR—III

Q. It is of course good to find the virtues of all the four varnas in any one individual but can the majority of human beings acquire them all and is it proper to place this ideal before society?

A. Many virtues and functions are common to all varnas and ought to be so; but it is neither necessary nor possible for everyone to have all the virtues of all the varnas.

<sup>1</sup> This was observed in the introductory remarks to the "Interview to *The Daily Express*," 22-1-1930.

Q. If Tolstoy's duty of labour is universally accepted will it not be difficult for poets like Kabir and Rabindra to live in this world? And would this not be a misfortune for the world?

A. Acceptance of the duty of labour is not a denial of Kabir and Rabindranath; on the other hand it is capable of making the poetry of both more forceful and radiant. Manual labour does not weaken the mental faculty; on the contrary it nourishes it. The difference merely is that the votary of manual labour will never earn a living by only writing poetry nor will he give up manual labour altogether. Kabir was of course an advocate of manual labour. He never earned a penny by composing religious songs and hymns. He earned his living as a weaver of cloth. Propagation of religion and morality had become his nature or hobby. Rabindranath is a great poet of this age because he does not earn his living by writing poetry. Whatever he earns by writing poetry is all donated to his institution. He lives by the income from his estates. I do not know how far he believes in the duty of labour; this I do know that he certainly does not despise it. We learn from history that ancient poets or sages had accepted the duty of labour even if it might have been implicitly. As a result their benedictions are with us even today.

Q. According to the doctrine of the duty of labour, Jesus, Buddha and Tolstoy himself are blameworthy. Tolstoy's wife herself has said that beyond writing books he could do nothing else. He might have learnt carpentry and some other manual work only to become a laughing-stock; but this does not satisfy Tolstoy's concept of the duty of labour. Is it not therefore necessary to examine it very carefully?

A. This view takes no note of history. Jesus was a carpenter. He never used his intellect to earn his livelihood. We do not know how much manual work Buddha did before he attained wisdom. Yes, we know this much, that he did not propagate religion for securing his livelihood. He lived on charity. That could not militate against the duty of labour. A roving ascetic has to do a lot of manual work. Now, to come to Tolstoy, what his wife has said is true but it is not the whole truth. After the change in his outlook Tolstoy never took for himself the income from his books. Although he had property worth millions, he lived like a guest in his own house. After the attainment of wisdom, he worked eight hours a day and earned his wages. Sometimes he worked in the field and sometimes he made shoes at home. Although he did not earn much by doing such work, still he earned enough to feed himself. Tolstoy strove hard to prac-

tise what he preached. This was characteristic of him. The sum and substance of all this discussion is that the duty which the ancients observed themselves and which the majority in the world discharges even today has been presented to the world in an explicit manner by him. In fact this doctrine was not Tolstoy's original idea; it was thought of by a great Russian writer by name Bondoref. Tolstoy endorsed it and proclaimed it to the world.

[From Hindi]

*Hindi Navajivan*, 20-2-1930

461. *LETTER TO NAUTAMLAL BHAGWANJI*

[February 20, 1930]<sup>1</sup>

BHAISHIRI NAUTAMLAL,

I have your letter. I am glad that your worry is over. Observe as much simplicity as possible.

*Vandemataram* from  
MOHANDAS

BHAISHIRI NAUTAMLAL BHAGWANJI  
JETPUR, KATHIAWAR

From a photostat of the Gujarati: G.N. 2580

462. *LETTER TO TULSI MAHER*

ASHRAM, SABARMATI,  
February 22, 1930

BHAI TULSI MAHER,

I received your letter.

You are carrying on your work quite well and I hope it will continue so. Do not be perturbed by the news of the struggle here. Your duty lies in sticking to your post.

These days smallpox is rampant here. We are being tested in this way too.

*Blessings from*  
BAPU

From a photostat of the Hindi: G.N. 6537

<sup>1</sup> From the postmark