

Divinity: An all-inclusive affair

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To be in an exclusive club is an average human behaviour. There seems to be a tendency to classify people, issues and things as either high class or low class and go after the former. A Rs. 40,000 cell phone is considered more classy than a Rs. 5,000 phone and it is considered to be a special privilege to own the former. Same could be said of a Porsche car vis-à-vis a Maruti 800 or of having dinner in Taj West End, Bangalore than in an Udupi restaurant. If this is the case, then it is not surprising that this idea pervades into matters of religion and spirituality.

Whenever we think of some religious observations and functions there is one thing that comes to our mind vividly. There are some people who are in the know of things and are aware of the various nuances of religious observations and the dos and don'ts associated with them. Along with this comes the superiority of such class of people. They become an exclusive class and they leave an impression that only they are the real inheritors of divinity, religion etc. The others are not entitled to many of these matters, they are not capable etc. Since others are not capable, it appears that they become ineligible to evolve and liberate themselves from the clutches of birth and death. There is a dependence on these "special" people to progress in matters of religion, self-evolution etc.

The path for a true devotee?

This pattern exists in almost all religions, albeit in varying degrees and modes. If this were true, then perhaps the top 10% of the society is blessed and the rest are condemned. Everyone must then vie for obtaining that knowledge that takes them to an elitist club of lucky people who are supposedly closer to God. If this is the stereo type thinking prevalent today, it raises a fundamental question: What happens to a true devotee who neither knows any of the above nor belongs to the exclusive class mentioned above? Alternatively, for someone there may be no interest to acquire this special knowledge. Instead he/she may want to follow a path of devotion to the Lord.

A true devotee is one, in whose heart the Lord lives and shines 24x7. He/she strongly believes that everything he/she does is because the Lord has willed. Such a devotee gladly accepts the outcomes and experiences of every moment of the life as the *prasada* of the Lord, notwithstanding the quality and nature of such outcomes. Should such a person start learning the nuances of these religious practices, mantras and know-how and make all-out efforts to get into this exclusive club?

If we read our scriptures carefully, we get to understand that self-evolution is everybody's birth right. A Rig vedic mantra for example says that truth is one but is articulated by many in different ways. Another mantra proclaims that let all noble thoughts come from everywhere in the world.

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In order to ascertain this truth and provide a reassuring message to a true devotee, Shri Krishna has devoted some *ślokas* in *Bhagavad Gītā*. Let us look at one *śloka* from chapter 9.

The path of self-evolution: Neither elitist nor exclusive

Shri Krishna emphatically dispels this myth and assures that a true devotee indeed has the same propensity to self-evolve as a person who is well versed in vedic and other scriptural knowledge and practising them diligently. Oh Partha (*pārtha*), those people (*ye*) who are in deep devotion and contemplation (*vypāśritya*) to indeed me (*hi mām*) they may be (*api syuḥ*) of any of the following categories: considered to be of lower origin or sinful background (*pāpayonayaḥ*), ladies (*striyaḥ*), the trading community (*vaiśyāḥ*) or (*tathā*) the working class (*śūdrāḥ*). Despite these, they all (*te*) will also (*api*) reach (*yānti*) the ultimate stage (*parāṃ gatim*) in their evolution.

मां हि पार्थ व्यपाश्रित्य येऽपि स्युः पापयोनयः ।

स्त्रियो वैश्यास्तथा शूद्रास्तेऽपि यान्ति परां गतिम् ॥ 9.32

*mām hi pārtha vypāśritya ye'pi syuḥ pāpayonayaḥ
striyo vaiśyāstathā śūdrāste'pi yānti parāṃ gatim*

At the first and cursory reading of this *śloka* many may get offended and take exception to the idea proposed by Shri Krishna. Therefore, some detailed explanation of the idea presented in the *śloka* is required. Some background information is very essential to explain the *śloka*. It is generally believed that regular chanting of vedic scriptures and contemplating on the meaning of these scriptures and putting them to practice is a critical pre-requisite for evolution leading to *mokṣa*. It follows from this that since brahmins are entitled to read, recite and contemplate vedas they are the only ones eligible for this self-evolution.

It is in this context that we must understand why Shri Krishna mentioned these categories and what is common to all of them? The only common thing amongst all these categories is that as per the convention and practices none of them are required to read or chant the vedic mantras. In fact, to be more precise, they are not eligible to do so as per the code of conduct in practice. It is out of scope to get into the details of why this convention is being followed as it may require a very elaborate treatment of the subject. However, what is of interest to us is that if these categories of people are not going to read the vedic scriptures, are they going to be denied of an opportunity to self-evolve and get liberated eventually? Shri Krishna wants to categorically state that it is not true. In fact, there is an assurance that these people can reach the ultimate stage of their evolution by their deep devotion to the Lord.

Modern people claiming to be “rational” are fixated on this idea and are engaging in a number of things to break this custom and ensure that anybody can read and do anything with the vedic texts. Both the assumption about earning more and therefore the methodology to be adopted are flawed. By this act, they seem to implicitly agree to the fact that only by reading vedas one can self-evolve. Except for serving the cause of breaking down customs it is not going to serve any purpose. This is akin to saying that

only the Finance Director is paid the highest salary in an organization and therefore everybody must get an opportunity to become Finance Director. Through this *śloka* Shri Krishna has taken the wind out of the argument that is illogical, unfair and untrue.

The path for self-evolution is many fold

What a set of people must do and must not is an operational guideline every society develops for its convenience using a set of assumptions. That cannot be the basis for spiritual progress, nor it can put hurdles in one's own journey of self-evolution. Elsewhere in the Gītā, Shri Krishna has proclaimed that "the way people approach me I am available accordingly". The power of true devotion cannot be simply underestimated.

Therefore, the main implication of the *ślokas* discussed above is to stop the needless worry that by not knowing vedas the opportunity to spiritually progress is blocked. Everyone one of us have unique strengths and capabilities and are engaged in some societal activity in tune with this. Some are intellectually oriented, and some others are physically exerting in nature. Our efforts to make spiritual progress must align with our nature, the ambience that we are operating in and the opportunities that we get.

As long as there is a genuineness and constancy of the purpose to progress, self-evolve and liberate we are bound to reach the goal. If we understand this aspect, the road to our journey of self-evolution will be broad, all-inclusive and easily approachable.