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# The Caste System of Hindu Society

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*Varna vyavastha* (literally, the class system) remains one of the most interesting and debatable topics in the study of Vedic culture. Since the Vedas remain an unraveled mystery even today due to the archaic Sanskrit in which they were composed, much of the ancient social history is derived from the extrapolation from the later history of Indian society. While most of the modern scholarship on this issue applies Marxist and Weberian themes to interpret this, I endeavor to take a fresh approach to demonstrate some of the lesser-known aspects of this system.

## The Original System

The varna system illustrates the spirit of comprehensive synthesis, characteristic of the ancient Indian mind with its faith in the collaboration of races and the cooperation of cultures. Paradoxical as it may seem, the system of varna was the outcome of tolerance and trust. Though it may now have degenerated into an instrument of oppression and intolerance and tends to perpetuate inequality and develop the spirit of exclusiveness, these unfortunate effects were not the central motives of the varna system. The system of varna insisted that the law of social life should not be cold and cruel competition, but harmony and co-operation. Society should not be a field of rivalry among individuals. The varnas were not allowed to compete with one another. Varna divisions were based on individual temperament, and which were not immutable. Originally varnas were assigned to people based on their aptitude and qualities, but in later periods they were assigned based on birth. However, there are a number of exceptions in the entire period that shows the flexibility of the system.

There were four varnas: brahmin, ksatriya, vaisya and sudra. The basic idea was division of labor in the society. Brahmin was defined as *brahman nayati iti brahmin*. People who preached spiritual teachings to the society and lived spiritual lives were called brahmins. Ksatriya was defined as *kseeyate traayate iti ksatriya*. These were the people who protected the society against external attacks and maintained internal order. Vaisya was defined as *visati iti vaisya*. Businessmen, traders and farmers came under this category. Sudras were the people engaged in services. Carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, cobblers, porters etc., fell under this category. This system ensured that the religious, political, financial and physical powers were all separated into four different social classes. Due to this fair separation of political and intellectual powers, ancient Indian society could not turn itself into a theocratic or autocratic society.

In the beginning, there was only one varna in the ancient Indian society. "We were all brahmins or all sudras," says Brhadaranyaka Upanisad (1.4, 11-5, 1.31) and also Mahabharata (12.188). A smrti text says that one is born a sudra, and through purification he becomes a brahmin. According to Bhagavada Gita, varna is conferred on the basis of the intrinsic nature of an individual, which is a combination of three gunas (qualities): sattva, rajas, and tamas. In the Mahabharata SantiParva, Yudhisthira defines a brahmin as one who is truthful, forgiving, and kind. He clearly points out that a brahmin is not a brahmin just because he is born in a brahmin family, nor is a sudra a sudra because his parents are sudras. The same concept is mentioned in Manu Smrti. Another scripture Apastamba Dharmasutra states that by birth every human being is a sudra. It is by education and upbringing that one becomes 'twice born', that is, a dvija.

Manu sums up the relative status and functions of the varnas in the following verse of Manu Smrti: "The brahmin acquires his status by his knowledge, the ksatriya by his martial vigor, the vaisya by wealth; and the sudra by birth alone." In the Bhagavada Gita, 4.13, Krsna says: "The fourfold varna has been created by Me according to the differentiation of guna (qualities)."

In Bhagavada Gita 18.41, Krsna states: "The devotees of the Lord are not sudras; sudras are they who have no faith in the Lord whichever be their varna." Mahabharata says that a wise man should not slight even an outcaste if he is devoted to the Lord; he who looks down on him will fall into hell. SantiParva, Mahabharata also says that there is no superior varna. The universe is the work of the Immense Being. The beings created by him were only divided into varnas according to their aptitude.

Bhagavada Gita also says, "Of brahmins, ksatriyas and vaisyas, as also the sudras, O Arjuna, and the duties are distributed according to the qualities born of their own nature." According to the Hitopades, all mankind is one family. Manu Smṛti (11.157) says, "Just as a wooden toy elephant cannot be a real elephant, and a stuffed deer cannot be a real deer, so, without studying scriptures and the Vedas and the development of intellect, a brahmin by birth cannot be considered a brahmin."

In my opinion, all the above quotations and references point out that the varnas were designated to a person based on one's aptitude, quality, mental state and characteristic. Although birth or parentage may have played an important role in the later times, the original system seems to be based on the quality of a person rather than on birth alone. Even when the varna was ascribed based on birth, there are a number of examples from the mythology and history of ancient India to demonstrate the flexibility and mobility among the varnas.

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. Visvamisra, 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 descendents were the well-known Bharata ksatriyas. 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 Dhṛtarashtra, 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 fisherwoman, 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. In the medieval period, saint 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 Gāndhī, Swāmi Vivekānada, Sri Aurobindo, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swāmi Chinmayānanda etc.

Misconceptions about the Varna System

Heterodox ideologies such as Jainism and Buddhism have criticized the notions of varna-based svadharma (one's own duty), which inspired Arjuna to indulge in the Mahabharata war. Since Arjuna was a ksatriya, he was motivated to follow his duty of a warrior by Kṛṣṇa.

Unfortunately, the original system is often either overlooked or misinterpreted. Let us examine some of the main concerns expressed about the varna system.

• **Inequality:** Does the varna system treat human beings unequally, with the brahmins at the top of the hierarchy and the sudras at the bottom? This is a common observation about the system which is based on the modern caste system rather than the ancient varna system. It is rarely observed that the social hierarchy is not just limited to Hinduism but it stays intact in any Indian religious society; Buddhists, Jainas, Sikhs, Christians and Muslims have their own caste hierarchies and restrictions. Even western societies have their own classes and groups. Thus, it is indeed a social phenomenon, which is not just limited to Hinduism or India. J. Muir has provided numerous passages from ancient Indian texts to demonstrate the equality of varnas.

Rig Veda II. 33. 13 speaks of "our father Manu" (pita nah). Note that all of mankind is described as having a single ancestor.

Taittareya Brahmana II.3.8.1. It describes the process of creation of human beings by Prajapati as follows: "... he reflected, after that he created men. That constitutes the manhood of men. He, who knows the manhood of men, becomes intelligent. Mind does not forsake him."

Satapatha Brahmana VII.5.2.6. This passage describes the process of creation of human beings by Prajapati as follows: "He formed animals from his breath, a man from his soul, a horse from his eye, a bull from his breath, a sheep from his ear, a goat from his voice." It is worth noting that here too the various objects of creation are being correlated to various parts of the body of Prajapati, as in the Purusa Sukta.

Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad I. 4. 11-15. These passages describe the successive creation of the four varnas, in contrast to their simultaneous creation in the Purusa Sukta. Just as in the case of Manu where all of humanity is traced to a single parent, here all of humanity is traced to a single homogeneous class, to begin with.

Viṣṇu Purana VIII. 138-140. According to this account when the Eden-like existence ceased: "At this juncture the perfect mind-born sons of Brahma, of different dispositions, who had formerly existed in the Satya age, were reproduced in the Treta as brahmins, ksatriyas, vaisyas, sudras, and destructive men." This means that the varna system characterises human life after the 'fall', as it were. It is a post-Lapsarian

phenomenon. The development of 'castes' here represents a falling away from an earlier ideal condition, in which there were no varnas.

In Bhagavada Gita, it is clearly mentioned that sudra and women can achieve the liberation and it is not just limited to any one high caste.

Upanisads and other Vedic scriptures have mentioned at many places that the same Brahman exists in all the living beings and hence all are equal.

Mahabharata (III.216.14-15) mentions that a sudra can become brahmin by engaging in self-control, truth and righteousness.

H. T. Colebrooke, one of the early Sanskrit scholars wrote, " Daily observation shows even the brahmin exercising the menial profession of a sudra. It may be received as a general maxim, that the occupation, appointed for each tribe, is entitled merely to a preference. Every profession, with few exceptions, is open to every description of persons; and the discouragement, arising from religious prejudices, is not greater than what exists in Great Britain from the effects of Municipal and Corporation laws."

• **Svabhāva by birth:** In the varna system, one's svadharma is based on one's svabhāva. But how can svabhāva be fixed by birth? Is it a changeable substance? This debate is not fully resolved even by today's geneologists. According to the recent research, genes are much more responsible in fixing one's nature than they are given credit for. As more researches unfold, this mystery will unravel whether one's svabhāva is fixed based on one's birth or it can be changed by one's training.

• **Coercion:** Did the varna system deny the basic right to choose one's profession? Was one forced to perform one's svadharma even against one's call of conscience, e.g., Krsna motivates Arjuna to fight because he was born as a ksatriya? In the same war, there were many warriors who did not qualify fully as ksatriya by birth and still were fighting, e.g., Drona, Krpa, Asvatthāmā, Karna, Bheeshma etc. Krsna did not ask Arjuna to fight just because he was born as a ksatriya but convinced him based on many other arguments. Whatever coercion may exist in the society could be argued as a social discipline. In the practical world, there would be complete chaos and disaster if the individuals stopped performing their duties. A well-balanced society definitely needs warriors, merchants, teachers and laborers. Hence, instead of one's unrestrained rights, one's duties are given more importance.

## Conclusion

Varna system is one of the most debatable phenomena of India and is tarred with many controversies. However, on a deeper analysis one finds that the basic need for this system was simply to ensure a healthy and flexible society unlike the one which has been rigidified due to the colonial misinterpretation and mistreatment of varnas, resulting in the castes as we find them in the present day India . The original varna system was quite flexible in which one's varna could be changed based on one's skill and was not fixed as is often understood.

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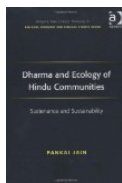
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