

Vedic Philosophy of Indian Caste System

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Abstract : An enlightened reformulation of the Varna system will produce a new social order different from both what we see in India and from the current Western social model. The basis of this new dharmic society must be Karma Yoga –action based upon selfless service and a sense of the unity of all humanity and the entire cosmos. It must allow the individual to flower in his or her true capacity and encourage entrepreneurship at all levels, but with a sense of responsibility for the whole of life. Developing such a new dharmic social order requires deep exploration, profound research, new thinking and innovative insight.

Key Words : - Caste System, Social Organisation, Ethnographic instance, Classical

The Indian caste system is the paradigmatic ethnographic instance of social organisation based on classical stratification. It has its origin in ancient India with classical textual support, and was transformed by various ruling elites right from the ancient period via medieval, early-modern, and modern India, especially the Mughal Empire and the British Raj.ⁱ It is today the basis of educational and job reservation and affirmative action in India.ⁱⁱ It consists of two different concepts, *varna* and *jati*, which may be regarded as different levels of analysis of this system.ⁱⁱⁱ This Chapter of the Thesis will try to study Caste System in India in its classical origin, its perversion as it exists today in the form of present caste system and its role as a disintegrative or integrative factor in the present day challenge to the ongoing process of national integration in India.

Vedic Origin of Varnashramadharm

India is a traditional ancient-linked society with long cultural heritage, and the caste system is one of the unique features of Indian social organisation. Its root can be traced back to thousands of years. It is among the world's oldest forms of surviving social organisations based on classical social stratification. The system which divides Hindus into hierarchical social groups based on their karma (work) and dharma (the Hindi word for religion, but here it means duty) is generally accepted to be more than 5,000 years old. *Manusmriti*, widely regarded as the most important and authoritative book on Hindu law and dating back to at least 1,000 years before Christ, "acknowledges and justifies the caste system as the basis of order and regularity of society".^{iv}

Right from the Vedic period, our forefathers had developed a classical philosophy of social organisation which had been projected as sacrosanct as religion and called it "*varnashramadharm*" (four stations in social life). The *Four Varna* system reflects a deep ecological and yogic vision of social and universal unity very different from the divisive idea of caste by birth. It was originally based upon the idea of an organic social order that remains relevant today. What is called caste today should not be confused with it. The *Vedas* arose five thousand years ago, when human society was spouting from the nature. The Vedic Rishis deeply contemplated the processes of nature and tried to understand the universal consciousness behind it. Out of this basis, they devised Yoga, Vedanta, Ayurveda and the foundations of Indian or Bharatiya civilization.^v

This Vedic view of life required developing a model of society in harmony with nature, in which humanity's cultural and spiritual potentials could both unfold. Like other Vedic disciplines, the Vedic approach to the social order was many-sided and multileveled, yet rooted in an underlying unity. It did not propose one artificial rule or formula for everyone, but aimed to reflect the intricacy, harmony and abundance of all life. It did not seek to impose social unity from above via authority, dogma or institution, but sought to develop it in an organic manner, according to our natural cooperative ventures with one another.

The caste system, according to *Purushasukta* of *Rig-Veda* and *Manusmriti*, divides society into four main categories -*Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and the *Shudras*. The *Purushasukta of Rigveda*^{vi} states that in order to flourish this Universe, *Lord Brahma*, the Hindu God of Creation, created the *Virat Purush*, out of whose mouth came the *Brahmins*, then sprang the *Kshatriyas* from his arms, the *Vaishyas* from his thighs and the *Shudras* from his feet:

Brahmanoasyamukhamaseedbahurajanyah kritah.

Urutadasyadyaishyahpadmyamshudroajayata.

Deriving from the *Purushasukta*, *Manusmriti* says that in order to protect this universe *Brahma*, the Hindu God of creation and the most resplendent one, assigned separate (duties) occupations to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet. At the top of the hierarchy were the *Brahmins* who were mainly teachers and intellectuals and are believed to have come from *Brahma's* mouth. Then came the *Kshatriyas*, or the warriors and rulers, who supposedly sprang from his arms and assigned duty to protect the people, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the *Veda*), and to abstain from attaching himself to sensual pleasures. The third slot went to the *Vaishyas*, or the traders, who were created from his thighs and were commanded to tend cattle, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the *Veda*), to trade, to lend money, and to cultivate land. At the bottom of the heap were the *Shudras*, who came from *Brahma's* feet and did all the menial jobs to help the above mentioned twice-born castes.^{vii} *Manusmriti*. 1/87 to 91.

The *varnashrama system* contained in *Riga Veda* and *Manusmriti* is symbolically expressed organic theory of social organisation wherein social stratification has been designed on the basis of functional excellence and specialization. The works of a society may broadly be divided into four categories – (i) intellect based works, (ii) administrative works, (iii) common works of livelihood, and (iv) menial works of helping and serving the high-ups. These works are needed in every society, and all the four stations of social organisation expressed in *varnashramadharma* through the *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras* are to perform the above mentioned four works with excellence and functional specialization

respectively. These four Varnas represent the qualities of energy that all people naturally possess. They are not separate or conflicting occupations, but part of the same unitary social fabric. In this original *Vedic* model there is mention of no outcaste, *Dalit* or untouchable. Each *varna* constitutes a necessary part of the whole and all are mutually interdependent. Each is a manifestation of the same Divine consciousness working in humanity.

Philosophy of *Varnashrma vyavastha*

In the *Vedic* view, human society should follow the same organic order as the human body, which mirrors the greater organic order of the universe. Like the human body, human society should be one in nature, but diversified in function. Just as the human body is one organism with different limbs and organs with specialized activities necessary for the health and survival of the whole; so too, human society should have a similar differentiation, with various professions working together for the good of all. This original *Vedic* concept of “*Varnashramadharmā*” reflects an ecological model of society that is universal. Those who look at *Varna* in terms of caste oppression have not examined its origins, but only look at later distortions, in which the true *Vedic* spirit was compromised.

The *Vedic* social order was meant to instill an intrinsic feeling of unity in each individual with the greater society, and human society with the greater universe. The *Varna* system was based upon a transcendent ideal of human unity in the Divine, not an effort to give power and domination to one section of society. This *Vedic* model tells us that each human being has the capacities of all four *Varnas* or human types; just as we all share the same type of human body and its different limbs. Each person is potentially a *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. We all perform these four roles to some degree. Each person functions as a guide to some people, a protector of others, a provider for others, and does service for yet others. But some degree of specialization also occurs, with individuals often assuming a preponderance of one of these roles for most of their adult lives. This organic concept of the social order is not one of superiority, much less domination, but reflects a deep appreciation of the interdependence and mutual interaction out of which life operates.

The more or less similar stratification of social organisation in Plato's ideal state may be seen where Plato in his *The Republic*, divides society into three broad classes – Philosophers, Soldiers and Commoners base on the identification of dominant virtues inherent in individuals – Reason, Spirit and Appetite respectively. His third class of Commoners includes serves also who are tantamount to the *shudras* in *varnashramadharma*. Plato also accepts transmutation of persons from one class to the other based on virtues and traits tested through examination in education. He is also firm to ensure in his ideal state that justice demands that everybody is required to perform his own function to which his nature is best fitted, and one is restricted to poke ones nose in the affairs of others.

It is not possible to have a society in which each individual can perform all necessary social roles, any more than it is possible to have a body in which each limb can perform all bodily functions. Evolution in society depends upon the differentiation of roles and professions that arise out of the four basic *Varnas*. Stability in society depends upon recognizing a common human potential behind all social roles and interactions.

To some extent, all human societies reflect this fourfold order. Every society has its head in the form of intellectual and religious leaders. It has its arms or police and military classes. It has its legs or merchant class. It has its feet or those in service occupations. Older societies worldwide, including Europe up through the nineteenth century, had similar social orders of priests, aristocracy, merchants and common people, remnants of which can be found in many countries today. The social stratification of priests, nobles and commoners prevalent in the Christian community is also something like one found in Plato's scheme and *varnashramadharma*. The addition of *Shudras* in the *Vedic* scheme may have been caused due to post Aryan-Dravidian war situation whereby some of the vanquished Dravidians and their war prisoners were either accommodated in the three *dwija varnas* of *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas* or *Vaishyas* on the basis of their traits or many of them were kept in a separate class of *Shudras* to help and serve the three *dwija varnas*.

This Vedic view of life required developing a model of society in harmony with nature, in which humanity's cultural and spiritual potentials could both unfold. Like other Vedic disciplines, the Vedic approach to the social order was many-sided and multileveled,

yet rooted in an underlying unity. It did not propose one artificial rule or formula for everyone, but aimed to reflect the intricacy, harmony and abundance of all life. It did not seek to impose social unity from above via authority, dogma or institution, but sought to develop it in an organic manner, according to our natural cooperative ventures with one another.

Out of this Vedic contemplation of nature, the Vedic idea of a social order arose. Philosophically and originally, this classical system of social organisation was based on virtue, and not on birth, and was also not rigid. The term *varna* refers to qualities and inclinations called *gunas* in later thought. In *Bhagwat Gita*, the highest and most honoured treatise on *Vedantic* philosophy, Lord Krishna himself reveals, “*chaturvarnyam mayasrishtam gunakarmavibhagsah*”, meaning thereby that the Lord Himself has created four stations in social life considering individuals’ virtue and work efficiency. Moreover, its flexibility based on elevation may be learnt from *Puranas* where it was obviously mentioned, “*janmana jayateshudrah samskaroapi dwijamuchyate*”, meaning that everybody is born as a *shudra*, and it is by his *samskara*, his cultural education that he evolves and elevates himself to the position of a *Brhahmin*, the highest in the hierarchy. These are the philosophical bases on which Swami Vivekananda conceptualizes *varnashramadharma* as a philosophy of social planning or social engineering in which everybody is expected to elevate himself to the level of *Brahmin*, and the so elevated/evolved human being may get transmuted from his original position. He is very categorical and specific in his prescription that it is the duty of the *Brahmins* that they properly train and teaches persons of other stations to get elevate themselves to the highest position – to the level of *Brahmins*. He also holds the view that although certain defects later cropped up in the system due to the improper behaviour of the shrewd *Brahmins* and cultural erosion perpetrated by our foreign foes, the system has rendered a great service to Indian society and it will be serving it to reach its goal. He further addressed the *Brahmin* of South India requesting them not to forget the pious responsibility that the God has ordained on them to make the scheme a grand success. He cites from *Puranas* the example of transmutation of social station by elevation and transformation of virtues. The *Puranas* offer the famous example of *Brahmarishi Vishwamitra*^{viii} who had elevated himself by rigorous yogic efforts to achieve *Brahmarishihood*, although he was *Kshatriya* by birth; whereas Parashuram, a *Brahmin* by birth, became *Rajrishi* and defeated

Kshatriya kings 22 times over with his expertise in fighting wars, the virtue of *Kshatriyas*. Swami Vivekananda thus concludes that the Indian caste system (*Varnashramadharma*) contains flexibility of transmutation on the basis of acquired virtues and adopted functions.^{ix} The concept of *sanskritization* of M.N. Srinivas^x may be seen as the modern conceptualization of the *Pauranic* conception of transmutation of *varnas* presented by Vivekanand.

The Vedic view looks beyond all our social concerns in its examination of human life. The *Purushasukta* begins and ends with a lauding of the Cosmic Person, with the human social order as a secondary topic. It states: “The Purusha is the entire universe, what has been and what will be.” (*Purusha evedam sarvam yadbhutam yacchabhavyam*).^{xi} All human beings are manifestations of the same Cosmic Being, which is present in every person, regardless of status of birth. This is the *Upanishadic* recognition of the Universal Self, Atman or Purusha – the Pure Consciousness that pervades the entire universe and dwells and permeates in the hearts of every creature.

The Hindu *Varna* system has a unique yogic orientation beyond outward class divisions. The Vedic goal of life is the realization of Cosmic Consciousness within the individual, for which the practice of Yoga and meditation is prescribed – which includes detachment from the outer goals of life. *Varna* is meant to aid in the individual process of Self-realization and not become an end-in-itself. To reach that Universal Self one must give up identification with any social group.

The goal of a *Vedic* life, achieved through the practice of Yoga and meditation, requires going beyond worldly desires to a state of inner freedom (*Moksha*) and union with the Cosmic Person or Purusha. This Hindu social goal of *Moksha* is very different from Western social orders that exist for the fulfillment of worldly desires, emphasizing social, political and material gains. It is also different from the ordinary religious goal of going to heaven, which is based upon a continuity of the ego and human identity, not a realization of the Universal Self within us.

Swami Vivekananda, Gandhiji and Vinobaji accepted this *varnashramadharma* as the ideal system of social engineering. However, they are critical of the present form of caste system which is contaminated with exploitation, spiraling inequality, social untouchability and mutual heterogeneity. Originally the *varnashramadharma* was designed to engineer Indian society to stratify on the basis of work excellence and functional specialization with mutual trust and cooperation which should have been mobilized and motivated to elevate people in the lower position to rise to the position of *Brahmins*. In this pious effort, every Indian should get united and thereby strengthen the national unity and integrity. But the reverse is seen because this ideal system has been perverted to create social divide by political elites for their political interest right from ancient time to these days. That is why although Vivekananda, Gandhiji and Vinobaji praised the *varnashramadharma*, they opposed the present divisive and exploitative caste system. They expressed the view that only by launching rigorous reform movements against the present caste system; the Indian society can be reformed and made suitable for national integration.^{xii}

Ups and downs in social relationships are but natural because human behaviour can not reflect mathematical computation and scientific exactness. Human society is not a scientific laboratory where experiments are done in controlled environment. That is why theories formed for human organisation may not work exactly as they were designed to be shaped. Naturally, the theory and purpose of *varnashramadharma* could not be translated into reality because the persons controlling and conducting the system tried to shape it to suit their predominance in the society. Consequently, in the ancient period *Brahmins* tried to shape the rules of social organisation and social behaviour to maintain their superiority, and these rules were being rigidified which reflected in caste organisation based on birth, endogamy and purity in cooking, and also untouchability in social intercourse. This phase of caste system in India was the initial distortion of the ideal *varnashramadharma* incorporated in the *Rig Veda*. Its journey from *Rig Veda* to *Manusmriti* itself contained some element of *Brahmanism* which was further applied to so deteriorate the original ideal *varnashramadharma* that Jainism and Buddhism came forward as the reform movements to oppose and reform it. Hence, *varnashramadharma* as the ideal forward moving dynamics of social engineering failed to achieve its exalted purpose of elevating everybody to the position of *Brahmins* and

making the society of ideal individuals, only because those who assumed the responsibility of conducting society conducted it to its perversions. This process of perversion went on through the ages; this resulted in the caste system in India as it is found today.

An enlightened reformulation of the Varna system will produce a new social order different from both what we see in India and from the current Western social model. The basis of this new *dharmic* society must be *Karma Yoga* – action based upon selfless service and a sense of the unity of all humanity and the entire cosmos. It must allow the individual to flower in his or her true capacity and encourage entrepreneurship at all levels, but with a sense of responsibility for the whole of life. Developing such a new *dharmic* social order requires deep exploration, profound research, new thinking and innovative insight, and above all full commitment to the ideal of human unity and the wellbeing.

ⁱ Adheesh A. Sathaye, *Crossing the Lines of Caste: Visvamitra and the Construction of Brahmin Power in Hindu Mythology*, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 214; also see St. Ian John, (2012), *The Making of the Raj: India Under the East India Company*, ABC-CLIO, 2012, p. 103.

ⁱⁱ Frank de Zwart, Frank, "The Logic of Affirmative Action: Caste, Class and Quotas in India", *Acta Sociologica*, 2000, 43 (3): pp. 235–249.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brian K. Smith and Lindsay Jones (ed.), "Varna and Jati", *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (2nd ed.), MacMillan Reference USA, 2005, pp. 9522-24.

^{iv} *Manusmriti*, 1/87

^v David Frawley, "Varna not Caste", <http://indiafacts.org/varna-not-caste/> Retrieved on February 14, 2018.

^{vi} *Rigveda*, X: 90: 12.

^{vii} *Manusmriti*, 1/87 to 91.

^{viii} Adheesh A. Sathaye, *Crossing the Lines of Caste: Visvamitra and the Construction of Brahmin Power in Hindu Mythology*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015.

^{ix} *Vivekananda Sahitya*, Calcutta: Adwait Ashram, fourth Hindi Sanskaran, 1995, Vol. 9, pp. 281-95.

^x Mysore N. Srinivas, Calcutta : Adwaita Ashrama, Fourth Hindi Sansskaran, 1995, Vol. 9, pp. 281-95.

^{xi} *Rigveda*, X:90: 2.

^{xii} *Vivekananda Sahitya, Op. Cit.*, Vol. III, pp. 248-49; Vol. x, pp. 281-87; and also see V.P. Varma, *Op.Cit.*, 172-74.