

Genealogical Investigation: Tracing the Divine Origin of Varna as Anathema to the Mundane Origin of Caste

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Abstract:

This paper is an extract of a research project titled “Understanding the Discourse of Caste and Race in the Contemporary World (F. No. ICSSR/RPD/MJ/2023-24/G/42)” funded by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). This paper undertakes a genealogical investigation into the historical evolution of social stratification in the Indian subcontinent by examining the distinction between the Vedic conception of *varna* and the later crystallization of caste as a rigid social institution. Drawing upon Vedic texts, epics, Buddhist and Jain traditions, historical accounts of foreign travellers, and modern scholarly interpretations, the study interrogates the claim that the contemporary caste system is a direct continuation of the ancient *varna* framework. The paper argues that the original *varna* order represented a flexible and functionally differentiated system grounded in *guna* (qualities), *karma* (actions), and *varnadharma* (ethical obligations), where social mobility and occupational fluidity were not entirely absent. Through an examination of textual and historical evidence—including the *Rig Veda*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita*, accounts of Megasthenes and Hiuen Tsang, and interpretations offered by scholars such as Ghurye, Bayly, and Ambedkar—the study demonstrates that rigid hereditary boundaries and fixed social exclusion were neither uniform nor absolute features of early social organisation. It further contends that subsequent historical developments, religious codifications, political transformations, and changing social practices gradually diluted the metaphysical and ethical foundations of *varna*, contributing to the emergence of increasingly rigid social distinctions. The paper thus seeks to contribute to debates on caste by differentiating between the philosophical ideal of *varna* and the historical evolution of caste, while highlighting the complex and contingent processes through which social categories transformed over time.

Keywords: Varna, caste, social stratification, Varnadharma, Vedic society, genealogy, social mobility, Indian social history.

Introduction

The caste system remains one of the most debated and contested institutions in the study of Indian society. It has often been approached as a timeless and continuous social arrangement whose origins are presumed to lie in the ancient Vedic *varna* order. Such a reading has substantially influenced both scholarly and public discourses, leading to a tendency to treat *varna* and caste as synonymous categories. However, the historical trajectory of social organisation in the Indian subcontinent reveals a far more complex process involving transformation, reinterpretation, and gradual institutional restructuring across different periods

of history. The assumption that the rigid hereditary caste system observable in contemporary times is a direct and unaltered continuation of the ancient *varna* framework warrants critical scrutiny.

The Vedic conception of *varna* emerged within a broader cosmological and philosophical worldview that sought to organise society in accordance with principles of social function, ethical obligations, and individual qualities. Rather than being merely a social classification based upon birth, *varna* was embedded within a larger metaphysical framework informed by *guna* (qualities), *karma* (actions), and *dharma* (duties). Classical and scriptural sources, together with historical accounts from different periods, suggest the presence of social mobility, occupational flexibility, and porous social boundaries that complicate contemporary understandings of caste as a rigid and immutable institution. Over time, however, historical changes, codifications of social practices, political developments, religious interpretations, and encounters with diverse communities gradually altered the character of this earlier social arrangement.

This paper undertakes a genealogical investigation of the evolution of social stratification in India by tracing the movement from the Vedic conception of *varna* to the later emergence and consolidation of caste-based distinctions. Drawing upon Vedic and post-Vedic texts, Buddhist and Jain traditions, historical accounts of travellers such as Megasthenes and Hiuen Tsang, and modern scholarly interpretations, the study examines the changing nature of social organisation across historical periods. It argues that the relationship between *varna* and caste cannot be understood through simplistic continuity; rather, caste emerged through a long and contingent process of historical transformation in which the philosophical foundations of *varna* were progressively diluted and reconstituted into more rigid social structures. By revisiting these developments, the paper seeks to contribute to broader debates on caste, social history, and the genealogy of social categories in India.

The Vedic Age

Travelling back in time and exploring the genesis of the four-fold division of society becomes a prerequisite if we are to understand the complexities of the caste system which has been infecting the Indian society with its blatant distortions of the underlying principles of the nuanced system of *varna*. *Varna* does not merely have worldly connotations; it is simply not a classification system that pertains only to the empiricism of human affairs but encompasses the whole realm of intelligibility that transcends the boundary between the worldly and other-worldly principalities. Thus, originally, following the laws of nature and the tri-fold functioning of the universe and its parts, as reflected in triads of gods, of worlds (earth, atmosphere, and sky), of day (morning, midday, and afternoon), of Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sama), and of the ‘principal meters in which the sacred scripture was composed (gayatri, tristubh, and jagati)’ (Smith, 1994, p. 14), the human society was also conceived of comprising three compartments: Brahmin, Kshatriya and the Vaisyas, or *viś* as referred to in the Rig Veda. However, certain elements in nature defy a strict triadic formulation, for instance, the cardinal directions of east, west, south, and north, following which the human society too was enriched with the addition of a fourth group, that colloquially came to be known as the Sudras. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, or the Rajanya, Vaisya, and Sudra are said to have emanated from the mouth, arms, thighs, and the feet of the Creator, respectively. This four-fold division has a hierarchy no doubt, as the Taittiriya Samhita insists, and in this hierarchy the Brahmins, owing to their prior creation vis-à-vis other groups, and being the mortal repository of Vedic knowledge and the sole orchestrator of sacrifices, is placed at the apex of the arrangement, followed by the Kshatriyas who

exercise prerogative over military might and political rule. But this four-fold division must not be understood as caste. In fact, the early Rig Veda has no mention of caste at all, and the Purusha Sukta, which is a later interpolation, mentions only the four varnas, which evidently proves that the non-existence of social segregation system paralleling the contemporary set up of the caste system in the Vedic age. Varna was also characterised by a hierarchy; however this hierarchy was not rigid as, there are indications that the Kshatriyas had certain undeniable powers over even the Brahmins themselves, as well as over the other classes. In one rite, if the sacrificer is a Kshatriya, certain verses are to be repeated three times, for “there are three other sorts of men besides the Kshatriya—the Brahmin, Vaishya, and Shidra. He thus makes them subordinate (anuka) to him” (TS 2.5.10.1). Elsewhere it is said that both the Brahmins and the Vaishyas “approach the Kshatriya respectfully” and “are subject to him” (JB 1.285) (Smith, 1994, p. 38).

The hierarchy also seems to be obfuscated by references that insist on complementariness and alliance between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. Thus, the hirerachical arrangement was mediated by an inherent element of flexibility. To illuminate this Nanditha Krishna in ‘A brief history of caste in India and the British role’ writes how ‘Valmiki, author of the Ramayana, was an Adi Kavi and thief by jati. In the Mahabharata, King Shantanu married a fisherwoman, Satyavati. Their child was Vyasa, the author of the epic, and their descendants were the Pandavas and Kauravas, Kshatriya rulers of Hastinapur. The Kshatriya King Kaushika became the Brahma rishi Viswamitra’. The other groups that were part of this flexibly hierarchical set up were the Vaishya and the Shudras. The *viś*, or the Vaishya, are the general populace who possess the might of numerical strength and material productivity/prosperity, although they lacked political or religious authority. The Sudras belong to the lowest rung and were meant to serve the other groups and were characterised by their inability to sacrifice.

Thus, this four-fold varna system was premised on categorising people on the basis of their skills, potentials, or their propensity to perform a task. But it was also not merely fragmentation based on specialisation of labour. It went beyond that. The specialised division of labour was embedded in a set of rights and duties that were possessed by the individuals by virtue of their abilities with these rights and obligations constituting the individuals’ varnadharma, or the ethics and the moral code of that particular varna. The insistence on varnadharma lent to this division and hierarchy an element of flexibility, ‘accommodating individuals who had risen in deeds and actions’ (Singh, 2015, p.59). This element of flexibility can also be found in the teachings of Lord Mahavir, the first Thirthankara of Jain Dharma who insisted one’s varna was in vogue upto his times: ‘It is right in front of our eyes that Tapasya is the main thing. Harikesh Muni is the song of a Chandal (formerly used term by Brahmins for a group of Untouchables). However, he surprises everybody by his yogic kriya or functions i.e. excellence and exceptional powers acquired by him through rigorous discipline’ (Uttar- JJghayanani 12:37 cited in Maha Pragma, p. 491). This significant point has also been emphasised by Dr. Ambedkar who argued that ‘particular attention has to be paid to the fact that this [varna] was essentially a class system, in which individuals, when qualified, could change their Varna’ (BAWS, Vol. 1, 1979, p. 18). Annie Besant, in ‘Ancient Ideals in Modern Life’ (1901), relies on epics like Mahabharata to point out that ‘If these qualities are seen in a Shudra and are not found in a Brahmana, then that Shudra is not a Shudra, nor is Brahmana a Brahmana’ p. 75). Thus, guna of a person assumes primary significance and this is reiterated by Vivekananda when he writes that ‘The son of a Brahman is not necessarily a Brahman.’ The spiritual make up of man determines what caste he is since “every individual is a centre for the manifestation of a certain force...Most of the Upanishadas were written by Kshatriyas—most of our great teachers have

come from Kshatriyas—Ram and Krishna and Buddha worshipped as incarnations of God were Kshatriya’ (Vivekananda, cited in Anuradha, 2017). This flexibility premised on one’s guna, or one’s innate quality and core moral peculiarity was a characteristic ideal that was lost its essence as ‘dissemination of Varna as a complete social thought was literally diluted by the end of later Vedic period’ (Singh, 2015, p.59).

Post-Vedic Age

This fourfold division was disrupted as certain new groups emerged as a consequence of intermixing of the four primary groups, in the post-Vedic period. In the succeeding paragraphs, as we analyse the trajectory of the varna through post-Vedic and contemporary periods, reference has been made to G. S. Ghurye’s ‘Caste and Race in India’ (1932), unless stated otherwise. So, in the post-Vedic age when the varna system was encountered with a handful of other groups, the latter were merely regarded as derivatives from the four predominant groups thereby, more or less, maintaining the fourfold humanity. The first three varnas came to be understood as dvijas or twice-born as they were ordained to undergo the initiation ceremony that symbolises rebirth. Sudras were barred from this and thus were once-born or ekajati. The ritual distantiation between the apex and the base of the pyramidal order escalated as greater significance was accorded to sacrifices and rituals which were the exclusive purview of the Brahmins. The growing prestige, and by extension, power, of the Brahmins can be discernible from Mahabharata, a late Vedic text, that hails Brahmins as the one true varna, from which the rest emerged as mere modifications. Also, the ambiguities characterising the relation and hierarchy between the Kshatriyas and the Brahmins in the Vedic age were completely obliterated as the Mahabharata emphasised the subordinate position of the Kshatriyas vis-à-vis the Brahmins. Brahmins were also exempted from corporal punishment, which even Kautilya affirms, except in cases of high treason. Notwithstanding such exaltation of the Brahmin, there was an equally intense insistence that the Brahmins observe and abide by the rules and the ideals that bestowed them with the aura of divinity, failing which they needn’t be respected and may degenerate into Shudra. This acted as a check against abuse of power by Brahmins and is an indication that the privileged position of Brahmins is due to their virtuous disposition, which is a far cry from the corporeal superiority that is vainly asserted by the today’s Brahmins irrespective of their virtues, or the lack thereof. This is what Gandhi meant when he vocalised that ‘any man irrespective of his birth may have the qualities of a Brahmana or a Kshatriya or a Shudra’ (2004, p. 57). As explained in the Bhagavad-Gita, the division is a reflection of the differing capacities of individuals who are then destined to perform functions and duties corresponding to the extent of their cognitive and spiritual advancement, with no duties being castigated as immoral, sinful, or impure.

In the third period, with the codification of Manusmriti and similar texts, Ghurye declares that offering gifts to Brahmins became so definitive it was regarded as the supreme duty of men in Kali-Yuga to offer gifts to Brahmins. The authority of the Brahmins expanded as it was no longer only the Sudras, but the Kshatriyas and the Vaisyas were also morally required to serve the Brahmins. Vaisya was approximated to Sudras who were subjected to an ontological bifurcation—the sat and the asat—depending on their ceaseless acquiescence or repudiation of the commands authored by the Brahmins. Only the acquiescent Sudras, or the sat, were allowed certain non-Vedic rites and rituals. In the fourth period, after having encountered uncountable metaphysical and mundane phenomenologies, historical developments, and changes as part of the evolution of human civilisation, the varna system meekly presents itself in the contemporary period as an offensively distorted version. In this stage, the difference between sat and asat came to be observed only in scattered areas of the Northern part of the Indian subcontinent, with its

Southern counterpart dismissing the differentiation as artificial, claiming that all Sudras are Sudras. Thus, it was considered utterly sinful for Brahmins to accept pachcha food cooked by the few sat Sudra, which were acceptable in the preceding period. Thus, distinctions and distantiations became more and more rigid as society and history moved teleologically towards the modern contemporary period. The calcification of such rigid distantiation, in a way, proved to be counterproductive, to a degree, as ‘the Sudra, who was accustomed to look upon it as a great privilege to be allowed to practise the Brahmanic rites, though only with the accompaniment of the Puranic mantras, now produced individuals who struck out a new path and established themselves as teachers. And the Brahmin, who was doubtful whether a Sudra was even capable of profiting by his religious teachings, had to accept some of these Sudras as his religious masters’ (p. 94-95).

The absence of a rigid four-fold social stratification system carrying implications paralleling the essence of the contemporary caste system has been empirically justified by the observations chronicled by figures such as the Greek historian and diplomat Megasthenes and the Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, traveller Hiuen Tsang. Megasthenes, in ‘Indica’ had described an Indian society divided into seven hereditary groupings and even though some of these groups were castes, the division was enriched by the existence of numerous specialised subdivisions. The division comprised of the philosophers, and they were the fewest in numbers, followed by the farmers who have the most numerical strength and the most practically capable (epieikestatoi) and are exempted from military service. The third section comprised of nomadic hunters and shepherds who receive a grain allowance from the royal granary for keeping the land protected from wild beasts and birds. Men in craft, trade and those engaged in manual work form the fourth category. The fifth section is that of the army, soldiers and warriors who are provided with all indulgences of drinks and other leisure activities by the royal treasury so that they be immediately accessible in instances of sovereign exigencies. Domestic spies, secret police and other kinds of overseers that report directly to the king occupy the sixth category. The best and the most reliable men are chosen for this task. The advisors to the king and councilmembers fall in the seventh category.¹

Thus, Megasthenes’ account of societal stratification found in 3rd century Indian fundamentally differs from ‘a description of the caste system as such, as is now almost universally acknowledged’; rather he provides us with ‘an analysis of social specialization and hereditary exclusiveness’ (Bosworth, 1996, p.124). It was indicative of how concept of varnashrama which was more of a skill-based categorisation was getting diluted and adulterated both in terms of its structure and character and ‘by the time it reached at the thresholds of Mauryan Empire, it was diversified and heterogeneity modeled its basis’ (Singh, 2015, p.58). Thus, Megasthenes’ seven fold classification is an instance of that point in history where the metaphysics of varna had diluted with the sprouting of numerous groups resulting from intermixing and intermarriage. It was not varna that Megasthenes talked about; also it was not caste as we understand it today (since we argue that caste is a British construct), but he was merely trying to make sense of the groups and the social stratification he encountered in India. Such an observation is also affirmed when we pay attention to how Hiuen Tsang in Chapter Three of his work ‘Si-yu-ki’ has described the life and society in the subcontinent. Hiuen Tsang mentions that 7th century Indian subcontinent, although had four castes, the society itself was deeply characterised by mixed castes, formed on the basis of certain indefinable parameters: ‘Besides these there are mixed castes, a variety of classes formed by different grades of people intermarrying. It would be difficult to speak of these in detail’ (p.142). Although Hiuen Tsang affirms that

¹ See pages 40-60 of Richard Stoneman’s ‘Megasthenes’ Indica: A New Translation of the Fragments with Commentary’ (2022) for further explanation.

the ruling class, that is Kshatriya or Chinese T'sa-ti-li, was had strict inherited distinctions, 'usurpation and bloodshed have occasionally arisen (in the matter of succession), and even other castes have assumed the dignity' (ibid), an observation that is highly indicative of the porous caste cartography. This flexibility and mobility were made possible because the groupings were not necessarily defined by one's birth, but more importance was given to one's capacity or lack thereof. For instance, Hieun Tsang notes that 'the chief soldiers of the country are selected from the bravest of the people' (p.143) and even though in most cases 'the sons follow the profession of their fathers, they soon acquire a knowledge of the art of war' and are ultimately 'chosen for their courage and strength' (ibid).

Nanditha Krishna rightly notes that, at this stage, even though the divine import of the varna system was no longer adhered to, the crystallisation of the then existing disparate groups into caste system had not yet taken place. By illuminating how 'the Guptas were Vaishyas who became Kshatriyas when they established their rule...Ramanujacharya, the 11th century Vaishnava philosopher, absorbed people of every caste, including the so-called "untouchables" and downtrodden, into his Sri Vaishnava bhakti movement and gave all of them the sacred thread, converting them to Brahmanism', Krishna stresses that these instances categorically confounded the strict ontological boundaries now observable in the contemporary caste system. This has also been reiterated by Sanjoy Chakravorty who, in 'How the British reshaped India's caste system', writes that "'Slaves" and "menials" and "merchants" became kings; farmers became soldiers, and soldiers became farmers; one's social identity could be changed as easily as moving from one village to another; there is little evidence of systematic and widespread caste oppression or mass conversion to Islam as a result of it'. Thus, the post-Vedic period inherited the element of flexibility that had enriched the varna system in the Vedic period. Even in the late medieval era when the Indian subcontinent was witnessing the gradual fall of the erstwhile ferocious presence of the Mughals, several groups emerged, claiming monarchical power and kingly status purely on the basis of their martial capacity. They hailed from Shudras, tribal societies, and even peasant groups. The case of Shivaji Bhonsle is illuminating in this case, 'He was a Maratha peasant-caste born. Subsequently, he sent his men to Benares and the Brahmins of Benares coronated him in 1674 as the chatrapati by extorting almost half the gold of his treasury' (Rao, p.111). Thus, even though the transcendental essence of the four-fold varna system was subjected to heavy metaphysical dilution, society had not yet digressed into the caste conundrum, not the populace appropriated caste-based distinction as marker of social identity. In fact, 'pre-colonial kings and their subjects did not treat caste norms as one-dimensional absolutes, but as reference points to be negotiated, challenged or reshaped to fit changing circumstances. In the period from the Mughal conquest to the early stages of colonial rule, the caste or castelike conventions which had come into being in different regions equipped both the weak and the strong with a means to maximise assets and protect themselves from loss (Bayly, 2000, p.30-31).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the relationship between *varna* and caste is neither linear nor historically static. The genealogical analysis suggests that the Vedic conception of *varna* was embedded within a broader ethical and functional framework characterised by relative flexibility, mobility, and emphasis on qualities and duties rather than rigid hereditary status. Historical transformations, religious codifications, and changing socio-political circumstances gradually altered these foundations, contributing to the emergence of increasingly rigid social distinctions. Understanding caste as a product of historical

evolution rather than an unchanged continuation of *varna* provides a more nuanced framework for interpreting India's social history and contemporary debates.

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