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Some Reflections on Caste and Indian Tradition

Anil Kumar*
Department of Law, School of Legal Studies
Central University of Kashmir, J&K, 190015, India

Abstract
Hierarchy and inequality are deeply rooted in Indian tradition. They are found in practice in the form of unequal placement of caste and class groups in the civilizing system of Indian society. The notions of dharma (normative order), karma (personnel moral commitment) and jāti (caste) that constitute the basic principles of Indian culture, making the Indian cultural tradition a unique cultural tradition, are also the principles of hierarchy and social stratification. In this paper, an attempt has been made to present a comprehensive and investigative view of different scholars concerning the deep-rooted traditional characteristics of caste in Indian society.

Keywords: Indian society; Varna; Jāti; Caste; Class; Dharma; Karma.

India presents a remarkable range in practically every facet of societal life. The existence of the range of ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious, economic, class and caste diversities divide society into groups of an alternate character. And these differences across India are infused with further extremely large gaps between rural and urban, tradition and modern, between genders and so on. There are various basic features of traditional Indian society like; Indian society is mainly Hindu society, based on some theological ideas, viz. punarjanama (re-birth), immortality of ātmā (soul), punya (merit), karma (deed), dharma (morality), and mōksha (salvation); social interdependence is a great theme of traditional Indian society, people are born into groups - families, clans, sub-castes, castes and religious communities - and feel a deep sense of inseparability from these groups; another important theme is social hierarchy, which is evident in caste groups amongst individuals, in families and kinship groups, whether in north or south India, in urban or rural, among Muslims or Hindus, people and social groups are ranked. First of all, Varna derives its roots from 'vri' which means "choice according to inherent traits." The literal meaning of the word varna, in Sanskrit, is colour.[i] In this case, the notion of colour is most likely a device of classification. It also signifies, for the Vedic scripture – Yajurveda, that colours also work as classifiers. Another viewpoint is of indulging in an occupation; it represents the division of Hindu society by occupational differences. According to the 'divine theory' of origin of the varna system, the four orders[ii] of the society are understood to have created from the self-sacrifice of Purusha. That way, as per Hindu philosophy, Purusha is the creator – the prevailing being.[iii] As the Slōka (hymn) reads in Purushasukta (Rig Veda):

* Assistant Professor of Sociology, School of Legal Studies, Central University of Kashmir (J&K) India.

Brahmanaasmukhamaseet, Bahooraajasyakritah, Urootadatvaisyah, Padbhaagymsoodroajayitah.[iv]

In this form of the Creator, the head, the arms, the thighs, and the feet are ranked in descending order and so are the traditional functions. Therefore, this model often cited for its hierarchical ordering of the varnas; however, the same model also implies the interdependence of the varnas. According to the 'triguna' theory of the origin of the varna system, the gunas (inherent qualities) in human beings are responsible for the existence of varnas. Bhagavad Geeta says:

Chaturvarnam, mayashristya, gun karma, vibhagasah.[v]

The philosophical speculation of ancient India identified three qualities in human beings, animate objects and inanimate objects, and inhuman actions: *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. "Sattva" consisted of noble thoughts and deeds, goodness and virtue, truth and wisdom. *Rajas* characterised by high living and luxury, passion and some indulgences, pride and velour. At the bottom was *tamas* with attributes of coarseness and dullness, overindulgence without taste, the capacity to carry out heavy works without imagination. Thus, persons with *sattvic* qualities are classified as Brahmans, those with rajasic as Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, and those with tamasic as Shudras. As per the 'karma theory', the varna system comes into existence because of specific professions. In Shanti Parva,[vi] there is a conversation between sage Bhrigu and sage Bhardwaj which tells that all people were originally Brahmans but later by profession they all became different varnas. Whereas, in another view of Manusmriti, all people were originally Shudras but later by profession, all of them found themselves into four different varnas.

Similarly, the 'transplantation theory', proposed by Herbert Hope Risley, the Aryans who migrated to India from Persia or Iran already had varna like structure. In Iran, where *Aryans* lived before their invasion of India, the society was divided into four sections corresponding to four varnas in India.[vii] Originally the system was based on colour. Therefore, it was known as the 'varna system'. It was intended to distinguish the fair-skinned *Aryans* from dark-skinned *Dāsas*, which means Indian society earlier was divided into two parts, Aryans and non-Aryans and these *Aryans* were later divided into three varnas - Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya. The non-Aryans were termed as Shudras and allotted physical labours.

During the post-Vedic period, the practice of untouchability took deep roots, being associated with people carrying minimal occupations, which involved handling animals and human waste, animal hides, dead bodies and other polluting professions. The people of these lower groups were called *Panchama* or *Antyaja*. They were considered to be outside the purview of the Varna system. However, in reality, they formed an integral part of the Varna system. Therefore, the *Chaturvarna* model was changed during this period with the addition of one more hereditary occupational group termed *Panchama* Varna.[viii]

J.H. Hutton says that the concept of Varna is often confused with the concept of caste or Jāti, although they have different meanings. He also observes that the Varna system originally seems to have four classes, and in Vedic times the line of demarcation between various classes was not considered essential, which means a *Kshatriya* could become a *Brahman.* However, certain colours were associated with the four Varnas.[ix] For G.S. Ghurye, Varna means distinction to denote the colour scheme of the different sections of the society and taking the reference from Rig Veda the word Varna is never applied to Brahmans or Kshatriyas. It is only that the Arya Varna is contrasted with Dāsa Varna referring to their fair and dark colour respectively. Ghurye believes that the distinction between the Arya and Dāsa was later responsible for the distinction between Arya and Shudra. In the Vedic age, the society was divided only into three classes, namely Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya. Though, in the later Vedic period, a mention about the fourth Varna, that is, Shudra has been made. According to him, the Aryans came from outside India and conquered the indigenous population in India, they occupied a higher social status, and the people who were defeated got the lowest position in the society.

However, M.N. Srinivas thinks that the Caste system is a very complex organisation, and it should not be identified with the Varna system. The distinction between Caste and Varna is that a Caste is a local group whereas Varna refers to a general identity of the larger social group in Indian society. There are only four Varnas, but there are over three thousand Castes. Similarly, there is no mobility in the Caste system, whereas the Varna system is mobile.

Every Hindu is governed by Svadharma (own duties) in a classified Varna, which means each must follow general moral codes and duties according to their nature. People are regulated by the system of four Varnas (the four social classes) and four Ashramas (the four stages of life). The duties of each of the four Varnas are mentioned below:

1. Brahmana: The Brahmanas provide education and spiritual leadership, determining the vision and values of any society.
2. Kshatriya: The kshatriyas are the nobility, the protectors of society and are expected to display the considerable strength of body and character.
3. Vaishya: The Vaishyas are the productive class.
4. Shudra: The Shudras are the only section of society who were to accept employment offered by the other Varnas which are occupationally and financially self-sufficient.

Types of Duty (Dharma)

As prescribed in the Vedic scriptures, there are two types of dharma (duty) in the Varna system; *first* is sāmānya dharma, which is common to all, irrespective of Varna. It includes a universal code of conduct, non-violence, truthfulness, cleanliness, control of the senses, non-acquisitiveness (one must not possess material goods more than what is needed for one's bare requirements), devotion to Īśvara (God), trust in one's parents, love for all creatures etc. The *second* type, viśeṣa dharma, means special duties of various varnas. It would be Dharma – a code of conduct specific to each varna.

According to some scholars, the main features of caste are: (1) a common name, (2) a common descent, (3) professing the same hereditary calling, and (4) forming a single homogeneous community. S.V. Ketkar considers hereditary membership and endogamy as the basis of caste as an organic structure of relations. The organic nature of caste refers to the harmony of relations between different caste groups. J.H. Hutton (1946) takes a functional view of the caste system. He speaks of three types of functions of the caste system: (1) functions for individual members, (2) community functions, and (3) functions for the state, society as a whole. G.S. Ghurye (1950) gives a comprehensive definition of caste. According to him, the six main features of the caste system are: (1) segmental division of society, (2) hierarchy of groups, (3) restrictions of feeding and social intercourse, (4) allied and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections, (5) lack of the unrestricted choice of occupation, and (6) restrictions on marriage. Endogamy is the stable feature of the caste system. However, in recent years, inter-caste and inter-religion marriages have been taking place, particularly in towns and cities.

Several other views on caste are: (1) Karl Marx believes that the Asiatic mode of production was related to the stability of the caste system in India. (2) H.J.S Maine's view is that caste is an example of non-contractual 'status society'. (3) Senart's focus is on the purity of descent and purity of occupations. (4) Louis Dumont's view refers to pollution-purity as the ideological basis of Hindu society reflected through the caste system. (5) Hocart believes that the performance of certain rituals and services to the deity and feudal lords was the basis of the caste system. (6) Max Weber's view is that caste is based on the other-worldly doctrines of Hinduism. (7) C. Bougle's view of the caste system emphasises on hereditary specialisation, hierarchy and mutual repulsion (social distance).[x]

Caste and Varna

There is relation as well as the difference between the two concepts of caste and varna, which are discussed below, respectively. Varna and caste represent two different forms of social stratification of India. Varna and caste represent two different forms of social stratification of India. Very often, one is used interchangeably to mean the other. But the distinction between the two is of great importance in sociology. The following could be referred as the main differences between the two:

Varnas are four in number whereas jatis are innumerable: According to the "chaturvarna doctrine", there existed four varnas during the Vedic and the post-Vedic period namely which are of course mentioned earlier as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. These four varnas represented the four-fold division of the then existing Hindu society, whereas castes are found in a very large number. It is very difficult to say the exact number of castes existing in India. It is well known that there are more than 4000 castes and sub-castes in India.

The caste system is based on birth while the varna system is based on occupation: Membership in the case of caste is determined based on the birth of a person. Individuals who are called caste members are invariably born in one or the other caste. For example, Brahmins are born in

Brahmins, Reddys are born in Reddys, Jats are born in Jats and so on. Varna system which existed during the Vedic period was based on the occupation, which is also a division of labour in society. Membership in the Varna system was determined based on "Karma" or occupation which an individual was pursuing. It was subject to change. As Bhagavad Gita puts, referring to Lord Krishna, that the membership of the Varna of an individual was very much dependent on the "Guna" as well as "Karma" of that individual.

Varna system was more or less an 'open' system whereas the caste system is regarded as a 'closed' system: Varna system was regarded as open because it provided opportunities for the individual to change the membership of the Varna to which they belonged. For example, a man who belonged to Kshatriya Varna could become a Brahmin. Similarly, a Vaishya could become a Kshatriya or a Brahmin. Even the Shudras could become Brahmins. We have an example of Vishwamitra who was originally a Kshatriya and later on became a Brahmin. Vedavyasa, the author of "Mahabharata", originally belonged to a fisherman's family of the Shudra Varna, but later on, pursued the Brahmin career. On the contrary, the caste system is regarded as closed because caste membership cannot be changed from one group to another. Therefore, opportunities for moving up and down in the hierarchy are virtually closed.

Varna system has the sanction of the religion, that is, Hinduism, whereas the caste system does not have the sanction: The origin of the Varna system throws light on the fact that it was divinely ordained. As it is believed by a large number of traditional thinkers that four varnas emerged from the four different organs of the Prajapati Brahma or the divine king, Lord Krishna also says in Bhagavad Gita (See Chapter xiv, sloka 13) that he had created the four varnas.[xi] The caste system, on the contrary, does not have the sanction of any divine force. Caste system can be regarded as the degenerated form of the Varna system which existed during the ancient times in India. It means, the origin of the caste system can be traced to the Varna system itself. Thinkers like Swami Vivekanand and others have said that the caste does not have the sanction of the Hindu religion. Vivekanand says, "in religion, there is no caste…the caste system is opposed to the religion of the Vedanta."[xii]

Though people speak of the "Varna system" and the "Varna model" in theoretical terms, practically they are not in existence. Varna, as a form of stratification, has become a thing of the past. What is in existence today is the caste system with all its peculiarities.

Notes and References

[i] This meaning once invited speculation that class distinctions were originally based on differences in the degree of skin colour; the difference of skin pigmentation between the alleged groups of lighter-skinned invaders called "Aryans" and the darker indigenous people of ancient India. This theory has been discredited since the mid-twentieth century.

[ii] Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.

[iii] See [https://www.britannica.com/topic/varna-Hinduism].

[iv] The Brahman was his head, of both his arms was the Kshatriya made. His thighs became Vaishya, and his feet became the Shudra.

[v] The four varnas are divine creations based on inherent qualities.

[vi] The Book of Peace (the twelfth of eighteen books of the Indian Epic Mahabharata).

[vii] See [http:www.hindupedia.com/en/theory-of-varna] (retrieved on 21/03/2014).

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] The Brahmans associated with white colour, the Kshatriyas with red, the Vaishyas with yellow and the Shudras with black.

[x] In most of the societies, members of a high caste enjoy more wealth and opportunities while members of a low caste perform menial jobs and outside of the caste system are the untouchables. Untouchable's job such as toilet cleaning, garbage removal etc. requires him to be in contact with bodily fluids. They are therefore considered polluted and not to be touched. Early Sanskrit literature reveals the importance of 'purity' in the body and food. Untouchables have separate entrances to homes and must drink from the separate well. They are considered to be in a permanent state of impurity. Untouchables were named Harijans by M.K. Gandhi. Hutton, J.H, *Caste in India*, Oxford University Press, 1946. Ketkar, S.V, *History of Caste in India*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 1979. Ghurye, G.S, *Caste and Class in India*, Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1950. Sharma, K.L., *Indian Social Structure and Change*, pp. 167-168.

[xi] See *Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter xiv, sloka 13.

[xii] See Swami Vivekanand, *India and her problems*, chapter IV.

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