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Varna – Jāti Interconnection: Revisiting Indian Caste System

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Abstract: *The presence of hierarchy and inequality within Indian tradition is a prominent aspect that manifests through the unequal positioning of caste and class groups within the societal framework. This intricate connection is observed in the way dharma (normative order), karma (personal moral commitment), and jāti (caste) - the foundational tenets of Indian culture - simultaneously shape the distinctiveness of Indian cultural heritage and lay the groundwork for social hierarchy. This research paper delves into an extensive and exploratory assessment of diverse scholarly perspectives aimed at illuminating the deeply entrenched traditional facets of caste within Indian society.*

Keywords: *Indian society; Indian philosophy; social hierarchy; caste; class; religion; dharma; karma.*

Introduction

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.¹ 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. पुनर्जन्म (*punarjanama* means re-birth), immortality of आत्मा (*ātmā* means soul), पुण्यं (*punya* means merit), कर्म (*karma* means deed), धर्म (*dharma* means morality or moral duty), and मोक्ष (*moksha* means 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 a social hierarchy, which is evident in caste groups amongst individuals, in families and kinship groups, whether in the 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.² In this case, the notion of colour is most likely a device of classification. For the *Vedic* scripture – *Yajurveda*, it also signifies 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 the origin of the *varna* system, the four orders³ of the society are understood to have been created from the self-sacrifice of *Purusha*. That way, as per *Hindu* philosophy, *Purusha* is the Creator – the prevailing being.⁴ As the *Śloka* (hymn) reads in *Purushasukta* (पुरुषसूक्तम् from Rig Veda):

ब्रह्मणास्मुखमासीत्, बहुराजस्याकृतः, ऊरुतदात्वैश्वर्यः, पद्भाग्यंसूद्रोऽजायितः॥

[*Brahmanaasmukhamaseet, Babooraajasyakritah, Urootadatvaisyah, Padbhaagymsoodrojajayitah*]⁵

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 is often cited for its

hierarchical ordering of the *varnas*; however, the same model also implies the interdependence of the *varnas*. According to the 'Triguna' (त्रिगुण) theory of the origin of the *varna* system, the *gunas* (inherent qualities) in human beings are responsible for the existence of *varnas*. *Bhagavada Geeta* says:

चतुर्वर्णं, मयाशृष्ट्या, गुणकर्म, विभागसः॥

[*Chaturvarnam, mayashristya, gun karma, vibhagasah*]⁶

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* are characterised by high living and luxury, passion and some indulgences, pride and velour. At the bottom were *tamas* with attributes of coarseness and dullness, overindulgence without taste, and the capacity to carry out heavy works without imagination. Thus, persons with *sattvic* qualities are classified as Brahmanas, 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*,⁷ there is a conversation between sage Bhrigu and sage Bhardwaj which tells that all people were originally Brahmanas, 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 in four different *varnas*.

Similarly, in the 'transplantation theory' proposed by Herbert Hope Risley, the Aryans who migrated to India from Persia or Iran already had a *varna*-like structure. In Iran, where *Aryans* lived before they invaded India, the society was divided into four sections corresponding to four *varnas* in India.⁸ Initially, 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* - Brahmana, Kshatriya, and Vaishya. The non-Aryans were termed Shudras and allotted physical labour.

During the post-Vedic period, the practice of untouchability took deep roots, 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, they formed an integral part of the *varna* system. Therefore, the *Chaturvarna* (four-*varna*) model was changed during this period with the addition of one more hereditary occupational group termed *Panchama Varna*.⁹

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 initially seemed to have four classes. In *Vedic* times, the line of demarcation between various classes was not considered essential, which meant a *Kshatriya* could become a *Brahman*. However, specific colours were associated with the four *varnas*.¹⁰ For G.S. Ghurye, *varna* means distinction to denote the colour scheme of the different sections of society. Taking the reference from *Rig Veda*, the word *varna* is never applied to Brahmanas 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, society was divided into only three classes: Brahmana, Kshatriya, and Vaishya. Though, in the later *Vedic* period, a mention about the fourth *varna*, Shudra, was 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 the caste system is complex and 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.¹¹

Every Hindu is governed by *Svadharma* (own duties) in 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 considerable strength of body and character.
3. *Vaishya*: The Vaishyas are the productive class.
4. *Shudra*: The Shudras are the only section of society to accept employment offered by the other *varnas* who 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; the *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. Ketkar recognised that the caste system had both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, he saw it as a mechanism that provided social order, division of labour, and a sense of belonging for individuals. On the other hand, he critiqued the rigid hierarchical structure of the caste system and the resulting inequalities and injustices it perpetuated. One of his notable works is *History of Caste in India*, where he examined the historical development and evolution of the caste system. In this book, he analysed the Laws of Manu (*Manusmṛiti*) and its impact on the caste system and social relations.¹² 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 a 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) In the view of Célestin Bouglé, a French Sociologist, the caste system emphasises hereditary specialisation, hierarchy and mutual repulsion (social distance).¹³ While Bouglé's work primarily centred on

European societies and social solidarity, he did touch upon the topic of the Indian caste system in some of his writings. In his book, *Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, Bouglé's views on the Indian caste system were shaped by the broader sociological perspectives of his time. He viewed the caste system as a form of social differentiation and stratification that influenced various aspects of Indian society. He made some references to the caste system in the context of discussing social differentiation and its impact on individual identity. He highlighted how caste-based divisions could lead to a fragmented sense of self and identity within society.¹⁴

Caste and Varna

There is a relation as well as a difference between the two concepts of caste and varna, which are discussed below, respectively. *Varna* and caste represent two different forms of social stratification in 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 to as the main differences between the two:

a) *Varnas are four in number whereas jātis 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 Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. These four *varnas* represented the four-fold division of the then-existing Hindu society, whereas castes are found in a vast number. It is challenging 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.

b) *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, Brahmanas are born in Brahmanas, Reddys are born in Reddys, Jats are born in Jats and so on. The *varna* system, which existed during the *Vedic* period, was based on occupation, which is also a division of labour in society. Membership in the *Varna* system was determined based on “Karma”, or the occupation which an individual was pursuing. It was subject to change. As *Bhagavada Geeta* puts it, referring to Lord Krishna, the membership of the *varna* of an individual was very much dependent on the “Guna” as well as the “Karma” of that individual.

c) *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 *Brahmana*. Similarly, a *Vaishya* could become a *Kshatriya* or a *Brahmana*. Even the Shudras could become Brahmanas. We have an example of Vishwamitra, who was originally a Kshatriya and later became a Brahmana. Vedavyasa, the author of “Mahabharata”, originally belonged to a fisherman’s family of the *Shudra Varna* but later pursued a Brahmana 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 the hierarchy are virtually closed.

d) *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 *Bhagavada Geeta* that he had created the four *varnas*.¹⁵ The caste system, on the contrary, does not have the sanction of any divine force. The caste system can be regarded as the degenerated form of the *varna* system, which existed during 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.”¹⁶

Though people speak of the “Varna system” and the “Varna model” in theoretical terms, practically, they are not in existence. As a form of stratification, *varna* has become a thing of the

past. What is in existence today is the caste system with all its peculiarities.

Conclusion

The intricate relationship between “*jāti*” and “*varna*” in the Indian caste system, deeply intertwined with the fabric of Indian philosophical traditions, underscores the complexity of social hierarchies and the evolving understanding of human existence. This relationship reflects the multifaceted nature of Indian society, where notions of identity, occupation, and spiritual progression have interwoven over centuries, shaping social dynamics and philosophical contemplation.

Jāti, the concept of distinct social groups based on occupation and lineage, has played a pivotal role in the Indian caste system. These groups emerged as a response to the practical requirements of a diverse and stratified society, where different occupations necessitated specialised skills and expertise. Over time, these *jātis* became hereditary, contributing to the rigid caste boundaries that defined various aspects of individuals’ lives, from marriage and social interaction to economic opportunities. The relationship between *jāti* and *varna* is nuanced: *varna*, a theoretical framework that categorises society into four broad classes based on spiritual disposition and function, provided a conceptual foundation for *jāti*, offering a semblance of order and hierarchy. However, the alignment between *jāti* and *varna* could have been better, as the complexity of real-life situations often defied strict categorisation.

In Indian philosophical traditions, the relationship between *jāti* and *varna* takes on a more profound significance. The Vedic scriptures, such as the Rigveda, offered initial glimpses into the division of society into Brahmanas (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and Shudras (labourers and servants), which laid the groundwork for the *varna* system. However, the *Upanishads*, the philosophical texts that followed, shifted the focus from external classifications to internal qualities. This shift introduced the idea that one’s spiritual disposition should dictate their position in society, challenging the rigidity of the *varna* system. This philosophical evolution reflects an ongoing tension between the practical necessities of societal organisation and the spiritual aspirations for transcendence.

The *Bhagavada Geeta*, a revered text within Indian philosophy, further deepened the discourse on the relationship between *jāti* and *varna*. Lord Krishna’s teachings to Arjuna underscored the importance of duty (dharma) over birth, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of one’s place in society. It resonated with the broader message of the *Upanishads*, emphasising inner qualities and spiritual evolution rather than mere external designations. The Gita’s teachings pointed towards a harmonious coexistence of *jāti* and *varna*, wherein one’s vocation aligns with their inherent nature and spiritual path.

The advent of Buddhism and Jainism in ancient India introduced alternative perspectives on the relationship between *jāti* and *varna*. These traditions, critical of the rigid caste structure, emphasised individual agency and the potential for all individuals to attain enlightenment, irrespective of their birth. This challenge to established norms contributed to a more inclusive discourse on social roles and spiritual progress, reshaping the conversation around *jāti* and *varna*. As Indian society evolved through different eras and influences, the relationship between *jāti* and *varna* continued to adapt. The medieval period saw the emergence of the *Bhakti* and *Sufi* movements, which stressed the importance of devotion and personal connection with the divine over birth-based distinctions. These movements added another layer of complexity to the relationship, highlighting the tension between prescribed social roles and individual spiritual experiences.

Colonialism and modernity further transformed the understanding of *jāti* and *varna*. Colonial rulers often misunderstood and essentialised the caste system, exacerbating existing inequalities. However, the Indian reformist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries, alongside the work of social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and B.R. Ambedkar, sought to challenge caste-based discrimination and champion social justice.

In conclusion, the intricate relationship between *jāti* and *varna* in the Indian caste system is a dynamic interplay of practical societal organisation and philosophical contemplation. It reflects the complexity of human identity and the ongoing struggle to balance tradition with evolving perspectives. While the *varna* system initially provided a theoretical framework for categorisation, the philosophical underpinnings of Indian thought continually challenged and transformed the rigid divisions, emphasising individual qualities, duty, and spiritual evolution. The evolving relationship between *jāti* and *varna* serves as a testament to the resilience of Indian society and its capacity for adaptation and change, both in social structures and philosophical paradigms. Understanding this relationship offers insights into India's historical trajectory and the broader human endeavour to reconcile societal hierarchies with spiritual aspirations.

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Notes and References

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² 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.

³ Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.

⁴ See [<https://www.britannica.com/topic/varna-Hinduism>].

⁵ The Brahmana was his head, of both his arms was the Kshatriya made. His thighs became Vaishya, and his feet became the Shudra.

⁶ The four varnas are divine creations based on inherent qualities.

⁷ The Book of Peace (the twelfth of eighteen books of the Indian Epic Mahabharata).

⁸ See [<http://www.hindupedia.com/en/theory-of-varna>] (retrieved on 21/03/2014).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The Brahmanas associated with white colour, the Kshatriyas with red, the Vaishyas with yellow and the Shudras with black.

¹¹ Srinivas, M. N. (1964). *Caste in Modern India And Other Essays*. India: Asia Publishing House.

¹² Ketkar, S. V. (1909). *The History of Caste in India: Evidence of the Laws of Manu on the Social Conditions in India During the Third Century A. D.* United Kingdom: Taylor & Carpenter.

¹³ 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. (1946). *Caste in India*, Oxford University Press; Ketkar, S.V. (1979). *History of Caste in India*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications; Ghurye, G.S. (1950). *Caste and Class in India*, Bombay: Popular Book Depot; Sharma, K.L. (2007). *Indian Social Structure and Change*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, pp. 167-168.

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¹⁵ See *Bhagavada Geeta*, Chapter xiv, *śloka* 13.

¹⁶ See Swami Vivekanand, *India and her problems*, chapter IV.