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## Origin and growth of caste system in India and its criticism

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### Abstract

This gives us a clue to the success of Hinduism in keeping a firm hold upon his heterogeneous elements of the Indian population and its wonderful power of absorbing alien races and cultures, though apparently it is not a pro-selytising religion. The Brahmins would not regard any foreign religion as antagonistic to their own. They would say to the foreigners that their religions were only varieties of the one eternal religion, Brahmanism, and that they belonged to one or other of the four varnas into which the whole mankind was supposed to be divided.

**Keywords:** varna, Jati, Purana, Manu, Mahabharata, Nishadas, Andhras

### Introduction

According to the most prevalent belief the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras are said to have been separately created from the mouth, the arms, the thighs and the feet respectively of the Creator. The oldest extant passage in which this idea occurs is the Purusha Sukta (90.12) of the tenth book of the Rigveda, though the representation there is somewhat vague. The idea gains wide circular in the Dharmasastras and the Puranas, and Manu accepts it without questioning in I. 31, which is often cited as an authoritative pronouncement on the subject. Yet it would be a mistake to suppose that this was the only theory about the origin of the varnas among the writers of the sacred books of the Hindus. There are other theories as well, though they did not gain much circulation in later literatures and have consequently did not gain much circulation in later literatures and have consequently fallen into the background.

### Objectives

1. To identify origin of Varna concept
2. To identify different sub-sects in Varnas
3. To identify Varna concept in different Puranas
4. To identify varna and jati terms in Hindu literature

Thus the varnas are variously said to have sprung from the words Bhuh, Bhuvah, Svah (Satapatha Brahmana, II. 1, 4); from the three Vedas, Brahman from the Sama, Kshatriya from the Yajur, and Vaisya from the Rigveda (Taittiriya Brahmana, III. 12, 9); from different classes of gods and asuras (S. P. Br. XIV. 4, 2, 23); from the imperishable, the perishable and other principles (Harivamsa, 11816). Mankind is said to have been divided into four varnas according to qualities in the Treta age (Vayu Purana, IX. 161-165); or according to complexion white, red, yellow, and black (Mahabharata, Santi, verses 6969-43). Again in various passages in the Brahmanas, the Epics and the Puranas the creation of man is described without the least allusion to any separate creation of the four varnas (e.g. S.P.Br. VII. 5, 2, 6; XIV. 4, 2, 1; Tait. S. VI. 5, 6, 1; Vishnu Pur. V. 33). Curiously, the verses of the book of Manu immediately succeeding the passage, which describes the creation of the different varnas from the different parts of the body of the Creator, contain another and more elaborate story of the creation of mankind without reference to castes by the ten primeval Rishis, Marichi, Atri, Angiras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Prachetas, Vasistha, Bhrgu and Narada (I. 32-41). In several Puranas (Vishnu Pur. IV; Bhag. Pur. IX) it is stated that the descendants of some of the sons of Manu belonged to the four different Varna's.

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It is thus seen that in spite of the popularity of the Purusha theory of the origin of Varna's in later times, the sacred books give different and often contradictory and fanciful accounts of the origin of Varna's and exhibit the greatest varieties of speculation on the subject.

Traditional Origin of Jatis According to Manu, the four original varnas were created from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet respectively of Brahma. Then many castes or jatis were produced by a series of crosses first between members of the four varnas and then between the descendants of these initial unions. Thus arose 1. Murdhavasikta (Brahman and Kshatriya). 2. Mahishya (Kshatriya and Vaisya). 3. Karana (Vaisya and Sudra). 4. Ambastha (Brahman and Vaisya). 5. Nishada or Parasava (Brahman and Sudra). 6. Ugra (Kshatriya and Sudra). 7. Suta (Kshatriya and Brahman). 8. Magadha (Vaisya and Kshatriya). 9. Vaideha (Vaisya and Brahman). 10. Ayogava (Sudra and Vaisya). 11. Kshattri (Sudra and Kshatriya). 12. Chandala (Sudra and Brahman). 13. Avrita (Brahman and Ugra). 14. Abhira (Brahman and Ambastha). 15. Dhigvana (Brahman and Ayogava). 16. Pukkasa (Nishada and Sudra). 17. Kukkutaka (Sudra and Nishada). 18. Svapaka (Kshattri and Ugra). 19. Vena (Vaideha and Ambastha). 20. Sairindhra (Dasyu and Ayogava). 21. Maitreyaka (Vaideha and Ayogava). 22. Margava or Kaivarta or Dasa (Nishada and Ayogava). 23. Karavara (Nishada and Vaideha). 24. Meda (Vaideha and Nishada). 25. Andhra (Vaideha and Karavara). 26. Pandusopaka (Chandala and Vaideha). 27. Ahindika (Nishada and Vaideha). 28. Sopaka (Chandala and Pukkasa). 29. Antyavasayin (Chandala and Nishada).

Secondly, many castes were formed by degradation from the original varnas on account of non-observance of sacred rites. These are called Vratyas. Thus Vratya Brahmanas were known as 1. Bhrijjakantaka, 2. Avantya, 3. Vatadhana, 4. Pushpadha, and 5. Saikha. Vratya or degraded Kshatriyas became 1. Jhalla, 2. Malla, 3. Lichchhivi, 4. Nata, 5. Karana, 6. Khasa, 7. Dravida, 8. Paundraka, 9. Odra, 10. Kamboja, 11. Yavana, 12. Saka, 13. Parada, 14. Pahlava, 15. China, 16. Kirata, 17. Darada. Degraded Vaisyas became 1. Sudhanvan, 2. Acharjya, 3. Karusha, 4. Vijanman, 5. Maitra, 6. Satvata.

### Criticism of Manu's theory

On the face of it the theory seems to be highly fanciful and absurd. Firstly, it assumes that in one way or other the whole population of the world is descended from the four original Varna's. Thus even foreign nations like China (Chinese), Yavana (Greek), Saka (Scythian), etc., are said to have been Kshatriyas at one time, but now degraded to a lower status because they have ceased to observe the prescribed sacraments. In other words, the Chinese, the Greeks, the Scythians, the Dravidians belong to the same stock as the Indian Kshatriyas, and are ethnically more closely related to them than the latter to the Indian Brahmanas and Vaisyas. Secondly, castes which were compact tribes like the Andhras, castes which had developed out of trade guilds like the Ambasthas, castes which represented the distinction between different classes of labor, between fishing and hunting, agriculture and handicrafts, are all supposed to have been produced by inter-breeding. Thirdly, there is a great divergence of opinion among the writers of law-books about the names of the castes produced by mixed unions, which only proves what a large part was played by fancy and imagination in the

derivation and tabulation of the so-called "mixed" castes. What are we to believe when we find, for instance, the Nishadas being called an original caste, "the fifth varna" (Yaska, Nirukta III. 8), being supposed to have been produced from the body of Vena, according to Vishnu Purana I. 13 and Hari-Vasmas V; and being derived from the union between Brahman and Sudra, as in Manu (X. 8)?

Risley (The People of India, pp. 70-92) has observed several processes by which castes are formed besides those mentioned by Manu. Thus

- (1) A whole tribe of aborigines, or a large section of a tribe, enroll themselves in the ranks of Hinduism either under their own tribal designation or under a new caste-name which can be easily distinguished from those of the standard castes, e.g. the Rajbanshis of North Bengal, the Bhumij of West Bengal, the Gonds of Central India.
- (2) "The functional or occupational type of caste is so numerous and so widely diffused and its characteristics are so prominent that community of function is ordinarily regarded as the chief factor in the evolution of caste. Whatever the original impulse may have been, it is a matter of observation at the present day that not only almost every caste professes to have a traditional occupation, though many of its members have abandoned it, but that the adoption of new occupations or of changes in the original occupation may give rise to sub-divisions of the caste which ultimately develop into entirely distinct castes." The Sadgopas, or those milkmen who have taken to agriculture, the Madhunapits, or those barbers who have become confectioners, the Chasadhobas, or the washermen who have become agriculturists, offer illustrations of new castes being formed by changes of occupation.
- (3) "The sectarian type comprises a small number of castes which commenced life as religious sects founded by philanthropic enthusiasts, who having evolved some meta-physical formula offering a speedier release from the cycle of births and the law of karma had further persuaded themselves that all men were equal, or at any rate that all believers in their teachings ought to be equal"; e.g. the Lingayats (though there is a tendency among them to reorganize themselves on the lines of ordinary caste system), the Jat Vaishnabas of Bengal, the Sikhs (if they can be called Hindus).
- (4) "Castes of the national type.-There exist certain groups, usually regarded as castes at the present day, which cherish traditions of bygone sovereignty and seem to reserve traces of an organization considerably more elaborate than that of an ordinary tribe." The Newars of Nepal and the Mahratta-Kunbis may be taken as examples of such a survival.
- (5) "Castes formed by migration. If members of a caste leave their original habitat and settle permanently in another part of India, the tendency is for them to be separated from the parent group and to develop into a distinct caste". Thus the Rarhi and Varendra Brahmanas of Bengal, the Gour Brahmanas, the Dravid Brahmanas, etc., though subcastes of the Brahman stock, are to all intents and purposes separate castes so far as the rights of connubium and commensality are concerned.
- (6) "Castes formed by changes of custom. -The formation of new castes as a consequence of the neglect of established usage or the adoption of new ceremonial practices or secular occupation has been a familiar

incident of the caste system from the earliest times." Thus the Ajodhya Kurmis of Behar and the Kanaujia Kurmis of the U. P. pride them-selves on their prohibiting the remarriage of widows, and have attained a higher rank in the estimation of the Brahmans than ordinary Kurmis. On the other hand, the Gauria Rajputs of Gurgaon and Delhi lost connection with the other Rajputs since they took to widow-remarriage.

Those who would not care anything for Brahmanical usages were called Mlechchhaas or Dasyus and were let alone. But those who felt any the least respect for the Brahmanical institutions were told that their status in society, that is, the estimation in which they would be regarded by the Brahmans, would depend entirely upon the greater or less strictness with which they followed the teachings of the Sastras. No force was applied or even necessary. Unconsciously and imperceptibly the alien barbarians would be tempted by the unfailing bait of higher social status to give up their old practices and conform more and more to the Brahmanical usages. It is only when the tolerant and pliable Hinduism met the iconoclastic and anti-hierarchical creed of Islam that its progress was checked, and those very means which so long acted like the hands of an octopus turned against it and began to tear its own vitals. Risley's theory on Varna division Risley states, "Assuming that the writers of the law books had before their eyes the same kind of social chaos that exists now, the first question that occurs to one is:- From what source did they derive the theory of the four castes?... it is possible that the Brahmanical theory of castes may be nothing more than a modified version of the division of society into four classes-priests warriors, cultivators and artisans – which appears in the sacerdotal literature of ancient Persia... It is a not suggested that Senart's theory

More reasonable than the theory of Risley is that of Senart about the origin of the caste system. In his opinion caste is the normal development of ancient Aryan institutions, which assumed a peculiar form because of the peculiar conditions in India. It is not difficult to assign the beginning of caste system in the shape of varna division to the Indo-Iranian period of history as the fourfold division of society is found both in the Avestan Persia and Rigvedic India. Thus in ancient Persia there was the Athravas (priests), Rathaesthas (warriors), Vastriya Fshuyants (cultivators), and Huitis (artisans). The only important difference lay with regard to the fourth class, which was the artisan class in Persia, and the servile or Sudra class in India. But this difference is more apparent than real if we consider that the pursuit of handicrafts was mostly assigned to the slaves or Sudras in India. Senart, however, goes beyond the Indo Iranian period to find out the beginning of the system. He observes the following points of similarity between the Indian system and the early Greek and Roman social institutions Gens, curia, tribe at Rome; family, phratia, phyle in Greece; and family, gotra, jati in India. "The Gotra denotes an eponymous group which is reputed to descend intis entirety from a common ancestor, who should properly be a rishi, a legendary priest or saint." The Romans never married a woman of their own gens, and the Roman patricians like the Indian Brahmans enjoyed the hyper-gamous rights of marriage which were abolished after a long struggle by the Lex Caneulia. The issue of a mixed marriage took a lower rank than those of pure patrician descent. Strangers were not allowed at the

sacrifice of the gens. The Indian custom of the transfer of the wife from her Gotra to that of her husband at the marriage had its parallel in the Roman confarreatio. In respect of marriage the Athenian group system presents striking resemblances to the Indian Gotra, and membership of a phratia was confined to the children of the families comprising the group. There were restrictions even in the matter of eating with strangers. The family meal was regarded as sacred, and from the Roman charistia were excluded not only strangers but any members of the family who had degraded themselves by unworthy conduct. (Huka pani bandh). (Les Castes dans l'Inde III. 4).

#### Criticism of Senart's theory

The greatest importance is attached by Senart to the principle of exogamy or prohibition of marriage within one's Gotra as a fundamental basis of the Indian caste system and he traces it to the Indo-European period. It is difficult to agree with him, seeing that the rule forbidding marriage within the Gotra was not in existence among the Rigvedic Indians and that the beginnings of such a custom can be traced in the period of the Brahmanas only and that it was not till the Sutra period that we find any strictness in its observance. From a study of the Vedic literature it is not possible to presume its existence with the Indo-Aryang from the earliest times. Besides, in India, Gotra is only one of several kinds of exogamy, eg. Exogamy due to territorial vicinity, due to a common surname regarded as a sign of relationship, and above all, due to a common totem. Secondly, restriction on inter-caste or inter-class marriage seems to be practically unknown in the Rigvedic period, the only disapproval being with regard to marriages with the Sudra population, and in that case it was actuated more by racial and cultural hostilities than by any other a motive peculiar to Indo-European mind. Thirdly, the idea of pollution by touch with lower classes and the prohibition of inter-caste dining were absent in the earlier Vedic period and they, too, first, appear in the period of the later Samhitas and Brahmanas in connation with the non-Aryan

Sudra. Fourthly, the division of society into classes and guilds to some extent hereditary in character is not a peculiar feature of the Indo-Iranian or Indo-European society. It is a natural product of the evolution of human society, especially when the king and the priests gather round themselves a kind of sanctity and divinity. Ancient Egypt, for instance, shows a division of the people very like that of the Indo-Iranians (Herodotus II. 164). Fifthly, Senart's thesis that "these classes (Brahman, Kshatriya, Valøya, Budra) may be exceedingly ancient; it is only in later times that they have been superimposed on the castes; different by nature and origin, the true castes, or the organismes from which they sprang, were from the beginning more diverse and more numerous;" is not tenable. As will be shown in the succeeding chapters that many castes were formed by the splitting up of the four varnas along with those which were formed from tribal or national groups, but the motive spring of which was supplied by the varna system. Had there might have been tribal or totemestic groupings and that also not among the more advanced sections of the people, but there would have been no caste system.

In the first stage the Indo-Aryans were divided into three orders or varnas. They had no scruple in marrying indiscriminately among themselves, while racial hatred made them avoid contact with the non-Aryan Sudras. The

memory of this age is preserved in the Mahabharata, Anushasana Parva, Where it is stated that "the son of a Brahman by wives of the three varnas is a Brahman. Only four varnas are known to exist, a fifth does not exist." In other words, the son invariably belonged to the order of his father, whatever might be rank of his mother. Such a statement is not subscribed to by any of the Dharmasastras. As, however, the Vaisyas came into greater association with the Sudras and became more polluted with non-Aryan blood than the other two classes, aversion came to be felt towards the union in marriage with a Vaisya girl. This stage of caste development is represented in a sloka of the same Anushasana Parva which states that "of the four wives of four orders of a Brahman, in the two higher he himself (i.e. a Brahman) is born, in the two lower less pure sons are born who belong to their mothers' varnas." This state of things evidently continued till about the time of Manu, who also does not assign a separate caste to the son of a Brahman father and Kshatriya mother. With the hardening of caste rules in course of time even this freedom was restricted. In the later Dharmasastras we find that none could become a Brahman who was not born of Brahman parentage on both sides. When the marriage with a Sudra woman was so much abhorred and blamed, we can easily conceive the horror and detestation which a Brahman in his racial pride would feel at the sight of Brahman women marrying a Sudra. No words are too strong to condemn such a marriage, and as a deterrent it is enacted that the issues of such union should occupy the humblest position in society, or rather live outside the society. Thus we see that the development of inter-caste marriage restrictions was principally due to the racial difference between the white conquerors and the black natives and the desire of the former to preserve their purity of blood. Occupational basis of caste

According to some, common occupation or division of labour is the chief, if not the sole, cause of the foundation of the caste system. This theory has found a most logical and dogmatic champion in Nesfield, who holds that occupation, is the sole basis of caste and excludes all influence of race and religion from the origin and growth of the system. In his opinion caste originated in India long after the Aryan invaders had been absorbed in the mass of the native people and all racial distinction between the two sets of people, Aryan and aboriginal, had disappeared. Different occupations grouped together men from different tribes into guild castes, which then borrowed the principles of endogamy and prohibition of commensality from the customs of the old tribes and thereby solidified themselves into isolated units. The ranking of any caste as high or low depends upon whether the industry represented by the caste belongs to an advanced or backward stage of culture. Thus the castes following the most primitive occupations like hunting, fishing, basket-making, etc., are regarded as the lowest, the metal-workers, agriculturists, and traders are higher in rank, while the highest caste is of those who are priests and teachers. Lastly, Nesfield states that "the old four-fold varna division was never actually in force in India except as a current tradition, the only reality which attaches to it to this day." He rejects the statements and beliefs of the Brahmanical literature concerning the origin of caste and takes his stand on the ground of ethnography and comes to his conclusions from a general observation of the subject from present day experience.

Criticism of Nesfield's theory

The first objection against this theory would be that it is not likely that the caste system originated at so late a date when the Aryans and the non-Aryans had been united into one people, and that at that time the Aryans were in a very backward stage of culture when the more advanced arts and industries were unknown among them. Secondly, this cause was present everywhere, both in India and Europe, but was too feeble to develop caste system anywhere else than in India. Even the state-enforced division of work on hereditary principle by the Theodosia Code under the Roman Empire failed to generate caste. Moreover, if Nesfield's notion were correct, all men of one occupation, as for instance, cultivation, trade, weaving, ought to belong to the same caste, at least in one locality. But that is not the case. "Experience shows, on the contrary, how caste prejudices hold apart people who should be united by the same occupation carried on in the same place. We have seen what a variety of occupations may separate members of the same caste, and this not only in the lower classes, but even in the highest. Nowhere is the abandonment of the dominant profession sufficient in itself to cause exclusion. Occupations are graded according to the degree of respect which they inspire, but the degrees are fixed by conceptions of religious purity. Nesfield himself states that Brahmans may be found carrying on all trades except those which would entail ceremonial pollution and consequent loss of caste.' If the most despised castes multiply themselves into new sections who look down upon the primitive stock, it is not because these adopt a different profession, but merely because they renounce a certain detail of their hereditary occupations which, according to current prejudice, entails pollution. Certain groups of sweepers are in this position...To grant to community of trade a place among the motive-forces active in shaping the destiny of the caste is a very different matter from claiming it to be the all-sufficient origin of the system. (Senart).

### **Tribal basis of caste**

Tribalism is another important factor in the development of the caste system. In this matter the aborigines contributed more than the Aryans. "Savage nations are subdivided into an infinity of tribes which, bearing a cruel hatred towards each other, form no intermarriages, even when their language springs from the same root and only a small arm of a river, or a group of hills, separates their habitations." (Westermarck). The Aryans when they came into India had outgrown this stage of tribal endogamy, and so there was no possibility of tribes like Anu, Yadu, Krivi, Srinjaya developing into castes. From what we find among the non-Aryanised aborigines of India we can easily believe that the practices of totemistic exogamy and tribal endogamy were particularly strong among the Dravidian and Munda or Austro-Asiatic peoples of India, which kept the various tribes asunder like so many castes. This feature of social organization is also observed among the aboriginal tribes of Australia, who are supposed to be somehow related to the Pre-Dravidians of India. Again, even before the coming of the Indo-Aryans, there had been great cultural differences among the natives of India,

Whether in Australia, Malaya peninsula and islands, or in the Chota-Nagpur plateau of India, nowhere is any sign of a respectable culture and social organization to be found among the modern representatives of the Austro-Asiatic race foundation of the early Hellenic culture. Moreover, it is



unaccountable as to how the Indian Aryans came to have such a distinctive culture with the system of caste, doctrines of transmigration of soul, law of Karma, theory of illusion, etc., Theories about the identity of the Dravidians with the Sumerians and the increasing knowledge about the culture of the Sumerians in Ur and other ancient cities of Babylonia naturally lead to the imagination of a cultural conquest of the Aryan conquerors by the civilized Dravidians. Slater in his book, *The Dravidian Element in Indian Culture*, contends that caste is Dravidian and that it was adopted by the semi-Dravidized Aryan conquerors of India. Similar theories about Dravidians becoming priests to the Aryans and forming the Brahman caste have been advanced by Pargiter in his *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*. A detailed criticism and refutation of Pargiter's theories has been made in the present writer's book, *The Arabization of India*, Appendix II, and need not be repeated here. Slater's data are not satisfactory and his arguments are not convincing. In the absence of any assured knowledge on our part of the conditions of India before the coming of the Aryans and of the Dravidian culture at an early date, say about B.C. 1000, we are not in a position to gauge the extent of Dravidian influence upon Vedic culture and society. As regards the Pre-Dravidian influence upon the Aryans, as has been suggested by Levi, Przyluski and some other scholars, the chances of gaining light are poorer still. For the time being we shall have to remain satisfied with the view that the varna division of society was mainly Aryan in character, though accentuated by the peculiar conditions of the early Aryan conquerors in India, and that the formation of Jati castes, many of which were tribal in origin, together with some of the practices like untouchability, infant marriage, etc., was due largely to aboriginal influences. (Origin and growth of caste in India: 1931:25-35: nripendra kumar dutt)

### **Cosmopolitanism and Law of Karma**

The Indian religion and social system were cosmopolitan and not national, the prevailing conception being that there is only one eternal religion, Brahmanism, the other religions of the world being only varieties or corruptions of the same, and that all the peoples of the world form one community divided into four varnas. Unlike in other countries, the Indian tribes and classes did not revolt against the hierarchical order or against the nature of their occupations, however mean, and this was due to the influence of the doctrine of metempsychosis, which assigns the work and status to every man according to the inexorable law of Karma, or action in previous lives. Thus even the most wretched man with his most degrading occupation remains satisfied with the belief that the miseries of his present life are the result of his sins in his previous life, and that if he submissively performs his caste duties in this life he will be born in a higher caste in the next life. (Hist. of Civilization in Ancient India I. pp. 233-34).

"The Hindu mind is both religious and speculative. It jealously upholds tradition and is singularly insensible to the joys of action and the call of material progress. It offered largely a field for a social organization composed of extremely archaic elements, and obedient to an all-potent sacerdotal authority which regarded immutability as a duty and the established hierarchy as a natural law. With striking aptness this system is particularly associated with the most permanent, if not the most characteristic, of the dogmas which dominate the religious life of India, namely,

metempsychosis. The immobility of the limits which the caste imposes upon life is justified and explained automatically by a doctrine which founds the terrestrial condition of each individual on the balance of his previous actions, good and bad." (Senart).

### **Conclusion**

Comparing the conditions of Ancient India and Mediaeval Europe which might foster the growth of caste, Romesh Chunder Dutt observes, "The clergy, the knighthood, and the people of Europe in the Middle Ages answered in some respects to the Brahmans, the Kshatriyas and the Vaisyas of India. But the resemblance is in appearance only. The clergy of Feudal Europe did not marry and its ranks were recruited from the ablest, the cleverest, and the most learned among the people. The people too in the darkest days of feudal oppression had more of tough life and rude vigor than the passive and submissive citizens of the Gangetic plain. The people in Europe soon formed leagues to protect their commerce, fortified their towns to meet the marauding barons, formed municipal corporations and trained themselves to arms to defend their interests in those insecure times. Ambitious scions of baronial houses often mixed with the people, and fought their battles in the field and in the council board; and this healthy admixture, which the caste system prevented in India, revived and strengthened the people in Europe. Feudalism and the absolute power of the clergy decayed as trade and commerce and political life rose among the people; and the danger of the people being divided into three "castes" if it ever existed in Europe, passed away once and for ever."

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