

Different Theories Regarding the Origin of Caste System of Ancient India



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ABSTRACT

The ancient Indian society has developed twofold coordinated system of social organization. On the one side the whole human life is divided in to four stages namely Ashramas and on the other side the society is divided in to four strata namely varna. Both the systems are concerned with the organization and management of the individual as well as society. Together these two systems of varnas and Ashramas are known as Varnashrama Dharma, the ancient social system that was meant to assure spiritual and material prosperity for both society and the individual. Through this research paper the history of these two systems.

INTRODUCTION

As the *varna* divide the social body, the *ashramas* divide the life of an individual. Assuming the life of a human being is 100 years, each stage is afforded 25 years. The first quarter is called the student phase (*brahmacharya*). During this time of life the individual goes to the home of the guru (*gurukula*), the ancient Sanskrit word for school and lives a life of celibacy serving the teacher and learning what needs to be learned for later years. After graduation the student adopts the next stage of life, the householder (*grahastha*) stage and takes on worldly responsibilities, which include wife, family and career. By age fifty it is recommended that the householder turn his mind back to the ways of spiritual life as in younger days and so moves into the retirement (*vanaprastha*) stage of life. In this stage he passes household responsibilities over to his children, leaves home and enters the forest (*vana*) to be away from the world. Husband and wife perhaps travel on pilgrimages. The *vanaprastha* stage is the gradual winding down of material affairs in preparation for the final stage, complete renunciation or *sanyasa*. In this final stage of *sanyasa* a man will send his wife back to his family, symbolically perform his own funeral rites and spends his remaining days as a wandering ascetic seeking final release (*moksha*) from the world.

The caste system in India is deep rooted in the long-drawn socio-economic, cultural and political history. It has brought about a deep and complete division in the Hindu society. Various explanations are given for the origin of the caste system in India. The origin is a sharp line between various layers of society. So in place of "origin of caste" we should use plural form, viz., "origins of caste". It is said that all human beings are divided into four categories according to their natural aptitudes and endowments. Some possess high spiritual and intellectual qualities, others fighting qualities, still others producing qualities, and accordingly they are placed in various categories. The caste system is therefore based on natural and inherent attributes found in the mankind. But to think of natural qualities of human beings without taking account of the social and material environment in which they are born and nurtured would be going too far. Such a theory of the origin of the caste system obviously serves the interests of those who want to perpetuate this system. It sounds like the statement of Aristotle, according to whom certain people are born to command and others born to obey; the first become masters and the second become slaves.

According to a second theory the caste system is based on notions of purity and impurity. The *Brahmanas* possess the purity of the first degree, the *Ksatriyas* of the second degree, and so on. The ritual ranking of the *varna* and *jatis* is based on their relative purity. The Brahmanas, partly out of their honest desire to preserve the purity of Vedic ritual, partly being the victims of their own ideas of ceremonial purity, and partly also owing to their consciousness of superiority over the aborigines. But the exponents of this theory do not realise that notions of purity and impurity found in primitive and ancient societies outside India did not give rise to the caste system. In the case of India also even working in leather was not regarded impure in Vedic times. In the Vedic age artisans including leatherworkers were parts of the tribal community called *visya*, but in post-Vedic times the emergent classes of priests and warriors not only discarded manual and artisanal labour but hated those who practiced it. In fact the more they moved away from physical labour and primary production the more pure and noble they came to be regarded.

There is a third theory which explains the origin of caste as a legacy from the aboriginal tribal communities of India. According to it every tribe is divided into a number of clans and members of a clan marry within the tribe but outside the clan. When such a tribe is absorbed as a caste in the brahmanical system it continues to marry within the tribe or caste and refuses to have social intercourse with other castes. There is no doubt that once the caste system was set up tribes were converted into castes, but the earliest history of tribal amalgamations would show that tribes entered into marriage relations with one another as a result of war and trade. Marriage served as a form of exchange of women between groups, and this exchange was considered necessary to keep life going. Insistence on marriage within the caste began because of the need of maintaining the privileges of the upper orders, which automatically barred the lower orders from having social intercourse with the upper castes and condemned them to marriage within their circles.

A fourth theory accounts for the origin of the caste system in terms of the division of labour. It is said that the need for occupational division leading to more production and economic efficiency gave rise to castes. There is some validity in this theory. But what is ignored is the hereditary aspect of the caste system. In Vedic times castes were occupational in nature, and change from one occupation to the other was possible. But over the centuries this change became impossible. What is further important, division of labour was effected in such a manner that *Brahmanas* or priests and *Ksatriyas* or warriors were withdrawn from direct production, which was placed in the hands of the *Vaisyas* and *Sudras*.

The origin and growth of the caste system can be better appreciated if we bear in mind that caste is a form of social differentiation. Since social differentiation arises out of social conflicts and unequal distribution of resources and produce, the origin and growth of the caste cannot be understood without a study of social processes which again are intimately connected with changes in material life. Of the many cultures flourished in India the literary records of the Indo-Aryan culture are not only the earliest but contain the first mention and a continuous history of the factors that make up caste.

Of the many cultures that flourished in India the literary records of the Indo-Aryan culture are not only the earliest but contain the first mention and a continuous history of the factors that make up caste. In the Rigvedic time there was no place for individual enterprise. Whether for hunting or for animal keeping, for safety or for settlement the tribe had to work collectively. Hence distribution also was collective and equal. Since struggle for existence was hard and the food scarce, the goal was expansion of the tribe (*praja*) and of animals (*pashu*) for food.

The one-caste society is the mythicised version of the tribal herd bound by ties of kingship and tribal discipline. Men were governed by tribal rules of hunting and war. Tribal wars were fought to extermination. In course of time human labour was replaced by animal labour. Cattle-produce and animal labour yielded a surplus of wealth. It was possible to feed and use men and women captured in tribal feuds. The animal was yoked to the plough and the captive alien harnessed behind. Like animal man became booty of plunder and an article of use. This is how slavery came, the two-caste society, social laws and fusion of tribal blood. When Aryan and non-Aryan tribes settled down and commingled, the tradition of uni-caste society gave way to the bi-caste society of *Deva* (gods) and *Asura* (demons) or the *Arya* and *Dasa* (master and slave). It was not the result of disintegration of the original *vis* but was produced by the impact of the hostile aborigines who were admitted as slaves and wage-earners (*bhataka*) within the Aryan society. The masters and the slaves became two castes or *varna* (color). The white-skinned and the dark-skinned as they are labelled in the *Rigveda*.

Now the duties of society were divided and the *vis* itself was split into three parts. The main body, i.e., the *Vaisya* followed productive pursuits like agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. The surplus wealth went towards the maintenance of two new castes (*varnas*), the *Brahmana* and the *Ksatriya*, marked not by the colour of their skin but by their profession. The *Brahmana* performed sacrifices for general welfare, studied the Vedas and formulated social laws (*dharma*) on the basis of custom and equity. The *Ksatriya* was charged with the defence of the realm and the running of the administration. The three *varna* specialized in their avocations and each was accorded a place in the social hierarchy

suitable to the dignity of its service. Below the three was the fourth caste of Sudra or *Dasa* serving the former and no longer an alien race but a subordinate partner within the Aryan system. The *Purusasukta* of the *Rigveda* gives a mythical story of the origin of the four castes from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of the Lord Brahma.

In the beginning the vocations of the *varna* were not strictly hereditary. A *Ksatriya* could excel in philosophical pursuits and become a *Brahmana*. A well-known story in Vedic literature is that of *Visvamitra* who was born a *Ksatriya* but became a *Brahmana* by acquiring brahmanical knowledge and virtues. The *Satapatha Brahmana* gives a similar story about Janaka, king of Videha. A *Brahmana* might acquire a kingdom by dint of his valour and become a *Ksatriya*. He became known as *Brahma Ksatriya*. In the *Matsya Purāna* the *Brahmanas* descended from the sage *Bhrigu* are described as founders of royal houses. The *Vaisya* and the *Sudra* could improve their status provided they possessed the necessary talents and virtues. Conversely, by choice or by accident, one might be demoted from a higher to a lower caste. The *Aitareya Brahmana* and the *Puranas* give instances of these two categories. Later on, caste and vocation were strictly fixed by heredity according to the laws of the *Smritis*. Social and economic divisions were identified and graded. The *Brahmana*, *Ksatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra* were separated from and related to one another by a set of laws framed according to a scheme of division and synthesis.

Rise of individual enterprise necessarily led to the institution of private property. Anyone could recover some wasteland, turn the virgin soil by means of slaves and bullocks and become owner of agricultural land. In industrial arts the old collective enterprise still prevailed but the income was shared and not jointly owned. The trader made his fortune by exchanging the products of agriculture and industry. In the wake of caste and property came the state. The place of the *vis* was taken by the *rāCDa* (country); the *Vispati* (patriarch) became *Bhupati* (lord of the land). The *Kulapatis* (paterfamilias) who were sharers in the tribal common-wealth were replaced by *amatyas* (officers and councilors), paid men of the king. The state protected private property and took a part of private income as revenue (*bhaga*). It had no hand in social regulation and was only the guardian of the rules of duty (*dharmasya gopta*).

As in the closing period of the Vedic Age, the *Varna* (the classes or the castes) and *Ashrama* (the four orders or stages of life) are the dominant features of society. They gradually become rigid and fixed, but the Hindu society was far from attaining its normal and standardized form in this age. The caste system developed rigidity so far as the Sudras were concerned but there was no rigidity among the upper three classes. The duties of the different castes, as enumerated in the *Dharma sutras*, have been very pithily put in his inimitable analytical manner by *Kautilya* in his *Arthashastra*. He enumerates the duties of the *Brahmana* as (1) *Adhyayana* (study), (2) *Adhyapana* (teaching), (3) *Yajna* (worship), (4) *Yajana* (officiating at worship), (5) *Dāna* (making gifts) and (6) *Pratigraha* (accepting gifts). The *svadharma* or duties of the *Ksatriya* comprised (1) *Adhyayana*, (2) *Yajña*, (3) *Dā a*, (4) *Sastrajiva* (profession of arms as source of livelihood) and (5) *BhutarakCa a* (protection of living beings). The duties of the *Vaisya* are (1) *Adhyayana*, (2) *Yajna*, (3) *Dāna*, (4) *KACi* (agriculture), (5) *Pasupalya* (cattle-rearing) and (6) *Vanijya* (trade). The functions assigned to the *Sudra* are (1) *Dvijatisusruka* (menial service of the three twice-born castes), (2) *Varta* (production of wealth), (3) *Karukarma* (arts) and (4) *Kusilavakarma* (crafts). It will be seen from the above that *Kautilya* points out the common duties of the three higher castes as Study (*Adhyayana*), Worship (*Yajna*), and Making Gifts (*Dana*).

The picture of the caste system as given in Hindu text, however, is very different from what we find in the Buddhist and Jain texts, and even in some parts of the epics. Thus, the *Mahabharata* lays down that one does not become a *Brahmana* by birth but by his conduct, a theory frequently met with in an elaborate form in the Buddhist texts. The *Mahabharata* also declares that the son of a *Brahmana* is a *Brahmana*, even though his mother is a *Ksatriya* or *Vaisya*.

The Buddhist and Jain texts also always openly declare the *Ksatriyas* to be less superior to the *Brahmanas*, and name the *Ksatriyas* first in enumerating the four castes. Thus, although the general framework of the caste system is admitted, the supremacy of the *Brahmana* is challenged in these texts. This view is also indirectly supported by the *Mahabharata*. Although in theory priestly power is higher than the royal power, and the king is a creation of the priest, in practice the king often gets the upper hand. This is quite natural, as the whole political organisation was behind the king, whereas the priesthood had not been organised into a worldly power independent of the state. In any case the Epic, rarely, indicates that the king dictated and the priest obeyed.

The Buddhist texts and other evidence also leave no doubt that the so called mixed castes really resulted from organisations, like guilds, of people following different arts and crafts. The general theory of intermarriage leading to the different mixed castes is puerile in the extreme, and hardly deserves serious consideration. It was a desperate attempt to explain existing social conditions on the basis of the orthodox theory of the four castes. But it has one great value. It shows how the different non-Aryan tribes like *Khasas* and *Dravidas*, and even foreigners like *Sakas*, *Yavanas*, *Chinas*,

etc., were gradually incorporated into Hindu society and formed an integral part of it. The gradual absorption of these foreign elements in the Hindu society is one of the most striking features of the period and testifies to the catholic spirit of the Hindus of that age. Even the hordes of nomadic tribes of Central Asia, not to speak of the civilized Greeks and Parthians, who came to India as conquerors, adopted Indian culture and civilization, and were so completely merged in the Hindu society that no trace was left of their individuality or separate existence as a community.

Both Jain and Buddhist works describe the normal *Brahmana* either as a citizen serving society or as a hermit who has renounced society. The second type is called a *tapasa* or a living in his *Ashrama* in the forest. The first class of *Brahmanas* served as the king's priests and sacrificers, as well as ministers, ambassadors and military officers. Besides the four established castes or Hindu society the Buddhist *Pali* text-books speak of the peoples ranking socially below them as *hina-jati*, "low tribes", marked out by their pursuits of 'low crafts', *hina-sippa*, and instance the workers in rushes, fowlers and cart makers, who were aboriginal peoples; as also mat-makers, barbers, potters, weavers and leather workers. Some texts apply the general term *Milakkha* to peoples lying outside the pale of Aryan society. These include the *hina-jatis*, mentioned as five in the *Vinaya-Sutta-Vibhaga*, viz. *Candala*, *Vena*, *Nesada*, *Rathakara* and *Pukkusa*. Some of these counted as Sudras belonging to Aryan society, while others lay outside its pale. The former is called by *Panini* *aniravasita* (*abahiCkAta*) *Sudra* and the latter, *niravasita*. As examples of the latter, the *Assalayana Sutta* mentions the *Yonas* and *Kambojas* whose society knew of only two classes, employers and employed, or rather master (*ayya*) and slave (*dasa*).

A graphic account of the caste system is given by Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador at the court of Chandragupta Maurya. He enumerates seven classes or castes into which the whole population of India is divided, viz. (1) Philosophers, (2) Husbandmen, (3) Herdsmen, (4) Artisans, (5) Military, (6) Overseers or Spies, and (7) Councilors and Assessors. He adds that "no one is allowed to marry out of his own caste, or to exchange one profession or trade for another or to follow more than one business."

This is undoubtedly a characteristic of the rigid caste system as enunciated in the brahmanical texts, but it is difficult to believe that the seven categories mentioned by Megasthenes really conformed to this. Neither of the last two classes of officials could really form such a close social corporation, and the fourth class, the artisans, must have included a number of such social units. There is no doubt that Megasthenes confused the castes with the professions or occupations with which he was more familiar than others. It is significant that he makes no mention of the fourfold divisions of caste, and his obvious confusion between castes and occupations probably indicates that the broad division of society was based on this latter factor rather than on the theoretical classification in the brahmanical texts of the period. Whatever 'we might think of the accuracy or otherwise of Megasthenes's observations about the caste-divisions in general, we get interesting glimpses of the social conditions of his time from the particulars he records of them. Special interest attaches to his description of the 'Philosophers' whom he divides into two classes- *Brachmanes* and *Sarmanes*. There is no doubt that the first of these refers to the *Brahmanas*. The second is generally taken as the Buddhist *Srama* as, but most likely refers to ascetics as a class irrespective of the particular religious sect to which they belonged.

Early in the 5th century CE, Fa-hien testified .to the prosperous condition of Northern India under the rule of the Imperial Guptas. He clearly depicted the picture of rigid caste system of that time. He says that the low caste *Candala* on the outskirts of the city. Hsuen Tsang, who came to India in the 7th century CE and travelled more widely over the country than his predecessors wrote a detailed account of the life of the people. He mentioned that the division of society was based on caste. Concept of untouchables was in existence. *Candala* or the Sudras had to reside outside the city or village. The *Brahmanas* were held in the highest esteem. The Chinese pilgrim noticed the king was generally Ksatriyas. There were no inter-caste marriages. So, we can say that from this time society in India became more and more mechanical under the regulations of the *Sastras*. The castes and sub castes were rigidly separated. Inter-caste contact was prohibited with strict rules of dining, marriage, touch and ceremonials.

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