



## Review Paper

# Varna System: The Forgotten Meaning

Akshay Shivdas

CAD-CAM Mechanical Department, Visvesvaraya National Institute of Technology, Nagpur, India  
akshyup@gmail.com

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## Abstract

*This paper brings to light the real meaning and significance of the Varna system. Varna system today is the most misunderstood, wrongly interpreted universal truth. Its real meaning has got buried under the exploitative and dehumanizing ideology of the caste system of the Hindu society and remained confined just to it. The caste system was formed keeping in consideration of the concept of Varna system and Varna system being a universal truth defined the layout of this caste system with ease. This caste system served the political interests of uppercastes and made the life of lower castes miserable. Hence the caste system faces a worldwide criticism and this complete blame hurls up on the Varna system. Those who come forward in defense of the Varna system fail to justify it because even they don't understand what the Varna system actually is. Just because Varna system is mentioned in the scriptures of Sanatan dharma, Hindus come in defence of it. They usually put their efforts in turning the image so formed of the Varna system, from birth based to karma based, which even is not a proper justification. This paper presents a completely disparate interpretation so far over the Varna system and gives an account on the true and forgotten meaning of the Varna system.*

**Keywords:** Varna System, wrongly interpreted, Caste system, birth to karma, disparate true meaning.

## Introduction

The concept of the Varna system dawns in the most ancient text of the world the Rigveda. It is mentioned in the Purusha Sukta verse of the tenth mandal of Rigveda. Purusha-Sukta is the hymn 90 of book 10 of the Rigveda, dedicated to the Purusha, the Cosmic Being. This Cosmic being is defined in verses 1 to 5 of the Sukta. He is described as a being who pervades everything conscious and unconscious universally.

The later verses 11 and 12 state that the Virat Purusha was divided into mouth, arms, thighs, feet. The Brahman was Virat Purusha's mouth, of both his arms Rajanya (Kshatriya) was formed. His thighs became the Vaishya, Shudra was produced from his feet<sup>1</sup>.

Interpretation of this verse was done too literally by the ancient people. Here the four categories i.e. Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra never signified to any personified meaning. The verse as written was, from his mouth Brahman was born, from his arms Kshatriya was born, his thighs gave birth to Vaishya and feet gave birth to the Shudra, but what people read it was from his mouth Brahman class people were born, from his arms Kshatriya Class people, from his thighs Vaishya Class and from his feet Shudra Class people were born.

The outcome of this wrong interpretation is what is reflected mainly in our understanding of the Varna system and further reflected in the class system of Hindu society.

## Literature Review

**Richa Sharma:** The ambit of this paper is to analyze some Indian Classics namely the Rigveda, the Bhagavad Gita and the Manusmriti, focusing on the origin of Varna system. This paper concludes by stating that Varna system first had flexibility in the Rigvedic period which allowed individuals to change their Varnas, but later its flexibility diminished. And eventually the Varna system evolved into a rigid caste system, a strict division of society where birth determined one's status. Therein, the verse 13 of chapter 4 of Bhagavad Gita is quoted followed by the author's inference, 'So, it is clear that primarily it is the karma that decides what Varna one belongs to'<sup>3</sup>.

**Criticism:** Varna system can never evolve, it is a permanent truth and a fundamental principle. But yes it can be said that, the class system which originated in ancient times with the aid of the concept of Varna system, evolved into a rigid Caste system. The word for word translation of the first part of the verse 13 of chapter 4 of Bhagavad Gita states that, 'The four Varnas, by me were originated, on divisions of Qualities and Actions.' The later part of the verse says<sup>2</sup>, 'Of it, the author is me, though actionless and inexhaustible.'

Nowhere, in the verse it is said by the Krishna which could indicate that any person is supposed to belong to any of the Varnas he created. Krishna just said that he created four Varnas based on Qualities and actions. Whose qualities and whose actions, Krishna didn't mention. So to conclude that the

qualities and actions mentioned in the verse belong to humans only, is not a comprehensive examination. Non-living things too have qualities or properties and they too can perform actions e.g. machines can perform various tasks or the earth performs the action of decomposition of substances or the properties exhibited by metals, nonmetals or metalloids. So it is not proper to conclude that the verse denotes that the karma or qualities decides what Varna a person belongs to.

**Dr. Khanin Barman:** This paper focuses on Varna-Shrama-Dharma, which means 'duties to be performed as per Varna'. It states that Varna Shrama Dharma is an inevitable principle for maintaining Hindu society and it stands for the spirit of egalitarianism as in this system no Varna is found superior or inferior. This paper highlights key issues of caste system and tries to find out the problems that the society is suffering in regard to prevailing caste system. This paper mentions Gandhi's views and states that Gandhi was also not above a conservative Hindu as for him too Varna was determined by birth rather than by Qualities. This paper concludes with the statement that Varna or caste system must be eliminated from Hindu society as the prevailing caste system itself bears the germ of untouchability<sup>4</sup>.

**My criticism:** 'Two wrongs make a right' can be understood by this statement – 'Varnashramadharma is an inevitable principle for maintaining Hindu society.' First wrong is Varnashramadharma. It says about the prescribed actions for an individual of a specific Varna. Since it is not possible to classify any individual into a particular Varna, the explanation of which is accounted in my interpretation of the Varna system, this word is invalid. Second wrong is the Hindu society. The word Hindu is a Persian word which means a thief, dacoit, kafir, morally fallen man. A Persian dictionary titled Lughet-e-Kishwari describes this meaning which is also assisted by Britannica Encyclopaedia<sup>5,6</sup>. Hence this statement implies, the invalid practice of Varnashramadharma is inevitable in a society of evil and morally fallen people.

What is described about Gandhi is correct. Gandhi claims that he has read Bhagavad Gita, Qur'an, Bible. But there is a difference of land and sky in reading and understanding. He even opposed his son's conversion to Islam. But anyways, he greatly blessed this world with an art of fighting peacefully. His stand may be wrong in 99 points, but his 1 point is commendable of Satyagraha, wherein a protester has to make his opponent feel guilty by undergoing self-suffering. A kind of emotional blackmail of the type- Eat the food I cooked for you or I will hurt myself.

The concluding statement states that Varna or Caste system must be eliminated. Here the author merges both the words to imply the same meaning. But Varna system and Caste system can never be used with the same meaning. Varna system cannot be eliminated as it is created by the supreme God itself, but the caste system can surely be eliminated since it is created by humans.

## Disparate Interpretation of the Varna system

The Varna system is the all-pervading truth of this material world. This truth can be denied but cannot be ignored. Because this truth forms the part of our everyday life. The four components of the Varna system are the four basic pillars or the building blocks of each and every system that we deal with every day. Be it any kind of system in this universe. Be it a computer system or a defense system or any government or non-government organization or any other system. Till today, the interpretation of the Varna system remained confined in just classifying and organizing the human system. Time to rise above from it. When it is said that the Varnas were born from the Cosmic Being which pervades in everything conscious and unconscious universally, let this Varna system be applied to everything conscious and unconscious universally.

The basis of this Varna system is the Trinity of the Sanaatan dharma or the Trinity of OM, the three elements that form this universe or the three Gunas of the universe. There is no word in English language as translation for the concept of Guna<sup>7</sup>. The usual but approximate translation of the word Guna is 'quality'<sup>8</sup>. But this translation does not sufficiently describe the word. As per my understanding, one translation of the word could be 'element'. In Bhagavad Gita, verse 17.2 says about the three Guna (sattvic, rajasic and tamasic) as innate nature of an individual<sup>9,10</sup>.

Hence, those three Gunas or elements are Saatvik (White, Neutral, Creator, Brahma), Rajas (Red, Positive, Preserver, Vishnu) and Tamas (Black, Negative, Restoration, Mahesh). These are the basic elements of any existing thing. Be it anything. An object, a mass, or any entity. These three basic elements of the entire universe could also be compared to Neutron with neutrality, Proton with positive charge and Electron with negative charge.

In Sanaatan Dharma, OM is the Supreme and Almighty God. And since OM is basically composed of these three elements of Trinity and since these three elements are present in everything, it is said that God is Omnipresent.

These three elements also represent the phases of a cyclic process, be it any cyclic process in the universe. Every cyclic process starts with Satvik, maintains with Rajas and ends with Tamas. For example, consider that you ask your father for a new computer and you get one. That's the initiation or creation process or Saatvikta. At that time your computer is brand new, updated and error free and you have a neutral attitude or Saatvik attitude towards it. As the time passes by, minor errors arrive in your computer and you keep on repairing it and keep using it. That is your positive attitude towards the issues of your computer. That's maintenance phase or Raajasikta or your positive attitude. As the time passes by and you keep repairing your computer, a moment comes when you are fed up of repairing your computer time and again.

At that time, you finally decide to dump your computer. That's your negative attitude towards your computer or Taamasikta. Finally, you dump your computer and ask your father for a new computer and the cycle continues! Likewise, this Trinity can be applied to each and every cycle of this universe. So, these three basic elements are also the attitudes of a person.

Varna means colour. But why? As seen in the above paragraph, every entity in this universe is made up of three basic elements or attitudes or qualities. These qualities or attitudes are 1. Satt guna (Neutral nature) 2. Rajo guna (Passionate nature) 3. Tamo guna (hopeless and resetting nature). And these qualities or attitudes are denoted by the colours: 1. Sattva -White, 2. Rajas - Red, 3. Tamas - Black. Hence the name 'Varna system'.

Today's foremost query is, has it got something to do with Birth or even with Karma (actions) of an individual, or the prevailing Caste system? Answer is absolutely not. No human can be categorised into any Varna irrespective of his birth or actions. Reason is as follows.

As the human society progressed, humans dealt with many issues like external aggression, internal problems, etc. At that time, the people who had intellectual quality (Satt guna) took the responsibility to protect and preserve the knowledge. Those were called Brahmins 'in context of the national system'. People who had the qualities of a fighter (Rajo guna) took the responsibility of defending their nation and people, those were called the Kshatriyas. People who had the qualities of trading and merchanting (combination of Rajo guna + tamo guna) were called Vaishyas. People who had the qualities of Selfless service, those who gave their lives for social change and purification of society, those who were 'fed up' of existing evils of society and became social activists (Tamo gun) were called the Shudras. Shudra never means low or cheap. It is the misinterpreted Sanskrit word. In reality Shudra means 'Pure'. The Hindi word 'Shuddha' is derived from the Sanskrit word Shudra. So, people at that time started relating their karmas or actions or activities with the Varna system, which was mentioned in the Vedas, and they found an exact similarity of their social actions with the mentioned Varna system. Hence they started categorising the society as per the Varna system. Eventually, what that was started with the basis of actions became hereditary and took the form of birth based caste system.

Hence, birth has no relation to Varna system. So, Hindus defend the Varna system by giving it a form of action based classification of humans. By this they are repeating the same mistake which was done by the ancient people. This claim of actions or karma of an individual being the real basis of Varna system could also be proved wrong. Consider a scientist who calls himself a Brahmin on the basis of his karma. He is always engrossed in studying, researching and acquiring knowledge. And this surely makes him a Brahmin as per his actions but only at that point of time. The next morning when he gets up

from sleep, he is going to get himself cleaned by taking a bath. What role is being played by him at that point of time? According to his karmas, he is a Shudra since he is purifying himself at that moment. Later when he is gathering money for his research he does the karma of a Vaishya. When he is protecting his research by obtaining copyrights and patents, he is a Kshatriya by his karmas. This is how, the same scientist who is performing his research work plays the role of all four Varnas. So how can he be classified into any one Varna?

Instead that Scientist is composed of all four Varnas. Because he has a brain which is his Brahmin component, he has a digestive system, hormonal system which forms his Vaishya part. He has an immune system to guard himself from diseases. This forms his Kshatriya part. His blood circulation and urinary system, which purifies his blood, forms his Shudra part. Hence, you cannot classify a human in any particular Varna since all the Varnas combined together forms a human. Therefore, neither birth nor actions can be a basis to justify Varna based caste system.

Since the Varna system is said to pervade in everything conscious and unconscious universally, it can be said that those four basic Varnas are also individually composed of the four basic Varnas! Let us understand how. The Brain is said to be the Brahmin component of human body system as seen in the above example. But this Brahmin Brain consists of a Memory which is the Brahmin component of the brain as it keeps on performing the action of storing the knowledge. The Brain is always protected by its outer covering of skull or the blood clotting system to prevent damages caused to brain which form its Kshatriya component. The brain consists of various neurons which manage all its activities and trade of signals to and from the brain which forms its Vaishya component. Finally, what happens when you sleep? Rest and repair of the brain cells. That action of restoring is performed by Shudra component of the brain. Also, experience is the best teacher, but who is the student? Human brain. Which part of the human brain? That part of the brain which is connected to our intelligence and aptitude. It constantly evolves and upgrades our thinking by throwing the waste and bad thoughts out and inculcating good ones in. Since this is a purification process, the intelligence and aptitude forms the Shudra part of the brain, because Shudra means pure. Now even if you try to subdivide the Brahmin part of brain i.e. the memory, into four Varnas again, you can surely do it as the memory system also consists of various types of memories. Hence it is almost impossible to find the end of this infinitely recurring four divisions and subdivisions. That is why it is said that every system in the world is composed of the four Varnas, which even includes the composition of the individual Varnas itself.

Second query is, is anyone of these is superior over any other? For this the answer is absolutely not. These 4 Varnas put together are equally important for any system to exist. You take out any one of it and the whole system collapses. Just like if you

want to capture any empire, you just have to hit any one of its four pillars. Those four pillars are its Varnas- knowledge, defence, economy, social services. Either destroy its economy or its defence system or its class of learned men or its class of social services. Destroy any one and the complete empire collapses. It's not always necessary to destroy the defence system so as to capture an empire. If one is able to destroy other empire's economy pillar, it will cause impact on its other three pillars. Fall in defence budget, social services budget, education budget ultimately causing end of all Varnas of a nation and it becomes prone to be captured easily. Else, if the pillar of all the learned class is destroyed education will hinder as without universities a nation cannot produce economists, it cannot even maintain moral values without education, no leaders and no progress in science and technology. A state without education we decay completely. Fall of knowledge pillar will eventually impact the rest of the three. If defence system is weakened, rebels will go out of control in an empire which put to halt nation progress and end the rest three Varnas. If the pillar composed of social services class is destroyed, an empire becomes prone to crimes, produces anti-nationals, the foundation thought on which an empire was made is forgotten since no one is there to restore that fundamental idea or objective on which the nation was made and hence the empire decays from within. Moral values of the nation are degraded, women are disrespected, selfless sacrifices of soldiers and citizens for the nation are not paid off, integrity of responsible authorities is questioned, which leads to disbelief in one's own nation and will aid the downfall of rest three Varnas. And hence all Varnas are connected and equally important in existence of any system. Failure of one Varna means the destruction of all the remaining three Varnas. So how can one Varna be superior over any other Varna?

Knowledge (Brahman), Economy (Vaishya), social services (Shudra) and Defence (Kshatriya). These are the four pillars of any empire, or any organisation, or any task, or any kind of existing system.

Now, how Varna system is important to succeed in a task? Imagine you want to open a shop. First thing you got to do is to make a literature survey of the market or to study about the market trends, products available, forecasts, competitions, etc. When you study or when you acquire knowledge for your shop you act as a Brahmin. Next thing you got to do is be an accountant to manage all your trade and transactions in the shop. At that moment you act as a Vaishya. Now, you have to make arrangements to protect your shop by shutters, locks, CCTV cameras. When you manage that, you act as a Kshatriya. And the last thing you must do, unless which your shop will never sustain in the market is to maintain the shop by rearranging, re-cleaning, restoring and replacing all the stuffs before you start your business on the next day. Also by collecting reviews from your customers and constantly upgrading your loopholes, you have to restore your shop. At that time, you act as a Shudra.

Consider an industry; it also has a Research and Development Department (Brahmin), Production Department and Sales and marketing Department (Vaishyas), Quality control Department (Shudras), Security systems and emergency provisions of an industry for its safety (Kshatriyas). Also in Computer systems, Database storage systems (Brahmin), Firewall, Antivirus (Kshatriyas), Browsers and operating systems (Vaishyas) and Trouble shooters and service centres (Shudras).

So, can a nation stand without these four pillars? No. Can a good shop, or an industry or a computer system run without any one of these four pillars? No. Can a human body survive without any of these pillars? No. Hence all the Varnas have the equal status and none of the four is superior or inferior. This is what is the Varna System.

## Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to bring forward the true meaning of Varna system and its universal significance. By the above justification, the importance and reality of the Varna classification cannot be neglected; neither the concept is outdated to be applicable in the present era.

The interpretation of the Purusha Sukta hymn was done too literally by the ancient people. The four categories i.e. Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra never had any personified meaning. That is, a Brahman never meant a human, a Kshatriya never meant a human warrior, Vaishya and Shudra words also did not imply a human. Neither the verse implies that Brahman class people were born from Virat Purusha's mouth nor the Kshatriya class from his arms, Vaishya class from thighs nor the Shudra class people were born from Virat Purusha's feet. This wrong personified interpretation of the Varna system is what that is reflected in our understanding of Varna system and further in the class system of the Hindu society. The words Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra never signify any person or any caste or creed, but they denote the basic components of which everything is composed of.

And therefore, the birth based Caste system and Karma based classification and discrimination system is an insult and misuse of the Varna system to meet the selfish wants of the upper classes. Rather they are mere feeble minded theories lacking the in depth understanding of the sacred scriptures. And if the Virat Purusha, who originated the four Varnas, would have been alive and a person in real, he or she would have filed an affidavit of a Defamation case against the existing caste system! Hence, the names having any resemblance to the four Varnas, that are given to the communities within the caste system, must be changed and renamed owing to the contempt of the Varna system therein. By this, it could be possible to eliminate the discriminating caste system and replace it with a flexible and discrimination-free Samaaj system to lead a healthy social life.

This type of classification tool that the Varna system provides us is most useful to plan and accomplish any task successfully since it aids the strategy of divide and conquer. Keeping all these inferences under consideration, the Varna system can be defined as the method of classifying or organizing any task or any system into four basic components, i.e. Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, based on the Trinity of OM, and each of which can be again recurringly subdivided into those four basic components, so as to understand, decode, compile or organize any task or any system.

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