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VARNA SYSTEM IN SELECTED INDIAN CLASSICS

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**ABSTRACT**

The ambit of this paper is an analysis of some Indian Classics namely; The *Rig Veda*, The *Bhagavad Gita* and The *Manusmriti*, focussing on the origin of the Varna System in India. Tracing the origin of the Varna System in the Purusa-Viraj in the *Rig Veda*, the paper would move on to its explanation in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Although the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Manusmriti* provide a rational explanation of the Varna System as a system based on one's Karma (actions/duties), the Varna System eventually evolved into a rigid division of society on the basis of one's caste which was determined by birth.

**KEYWORDS:** Varna System, Classics, Meaning, Origin, Aptitude, Birth, Division of Society

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**INTRODUCTION**

Varna is a Sanskrit term, derived from the root 'Vrnoti' meaning "to cover, to envelop". The word finds its first mention in written form in the *Rig Veda* where it stands for "outer appearance and colour" besides the figurative "race, colour, kind, sort, character, property, quality". In Indian Classics there are many explanations about the origin of the Varna System, some mythical and others socio-historical. Among these, the Purusa-Viraj is the most widely accepted. This particular story/hymn is found within the *Rig Veda*, a very significant text in Hinduism, which may have its origin between 1500 to 1200 BCE, although its precise date of origin is a matter of some debate. The Varnas are the primordial make up of society and to this day, this system persists in much of India. Varna System has been mentioned in the Purusha Sukta verses of the *Rig Veda* (Book Ten, Hymn 90.11-12.). This famous hymn describes how the world was created by dismembering the cosmic giant, Purusa, thus forming the four social Varnas from certain body parts:

When they divided the Purusa how many portions did they make? What do they call his mouth, his arms?  
What do they call his thighs and feet?

The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made. His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced. (*Rig Veda* 11-12)

This particular section of the hymn provides a basis for understanding the Varna System and reinforces the hierarchy by placing one Varna above another anatomically. But there is no indication in these that birth is the essential determinant of one's Varna. The Rig Vedic society had a flexible Varna System which allowed individuals to change their Varnas.

Varna System has also been described in the *Bhagavad Gita* (literally meaning The Song of the God). The *Bhagavad Gita* is a 700-verse Hindu scripture that is part of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata* is traditionally ascribed to the sage Ved Vyasa; the *Bhagavad Gita* is a part of the *Mahabharata*. So it is also ascribed to him. Its date of composition varies from 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE to 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE. The *Bhagavad Gita* is absolutely clear about the Varna System. The *Bhagavad Gita* uses this word in Chapter 4, Shloka 13. In this Shloka, Lord Krishna says, "The four-fold caste system has been created by Me according to the differentiation of qualities and actions. Though I am the author, know Me as non-doer and eternal." So, it is clear that primarily it is the Karma that decides what Varna one belongs to. For instance, if an individual had been born to a Brahmin yet he indulged in work of trading, then according to the *Bhagavad Gita*, that individual would be considered not a Brahmin but a Vaishya. This is how the Varna System has been interpreted in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

In the post-vedic period, the division is described explicitly and in great detail in the *Manusmriti*. The *Manusmriti* (or "Laws of Manu"), also known as *Manava-Dharamsastra*, is the most important and earliest metrical work of the *Dharamsastra*, written between 200 BCE to 200 CE. The text presents itself as a discourse given by Manu, the progenitor of mankind, to teach his students, including Bhrigu. Bhrigu then relays this information in the *Manusmriti* in which Manu, the law giver, divides Hindus into four Varnas. The *Manusmriti* closely followed what had been laid down in the *Rig Veda*, that is, Varna was to be determined on the basis of one's Karma. Manu gives full freedom to every person to change and grow in character and Varna and attain freedom from this world. Manu sums up the relative status and functions of the Varnas in Chapter 2, Verse 155 of the *Manusmriti*. In this Verse, Manu says, "The Brahmin acquires his status by his knowledge, the Kshatriya by his martial vigour, the Vaishya by wealth; and the Sudra by birth alone."

Varna is a fundamental concept underlying the Hindu society since its earliest times. In fact, it was not a social segregation of individuals in the society; it was rather a statement of how any society would be arranged. It did not say that society should be classified into classes, it laid down what classes or kinds of people would exist in any society. Every Hindu had to follow general moral codes, each had to perform individual duties according to his or her own aptitude, capability and nature. These were called Sva-dharma, literally "Own duties", which were regulated by the Varna System. Thus, the Varna System seems to have originated as a natural division of labour in the society based on an individual's inborn abilities and tendencies.

The Varna System as laid down in the religious texts right from the *Rig Veda* to the *Manusmriti* was based on four hierarchically arranged Varnas viz., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, with the 'Untouchables' placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. A brief description of the four different Varnas is as under:

**Brahmins** (Priests, Teachers, Preachers and Intellectuals)

Brahmins were the intellectual class who followed the principles of simple living and high thinking. They were entitled to study and teach the Vedas, perform rites and rituals for themselves and for others and obliged to serve and preserve the sacraments and to accept alms and also give charity. They were expected to show exemplary behaviour and develop all ideal qualities, especially honesty, purity, knowledge, austerity and wisdom. According to Manu, a Brahmin was an incarnation of dharma, born to serve and protect the dharma.

**Kshatriyas** (Kings, Governors, Warriors and Soldiers)

They were the martial class, who were physically strong and were commanded to dedicate their life to protect the people and society from the external aggression and to maintain the internal law and order. They were to bestow gifts on the Brahmins, offer sacrifices, study the scriptures and to deal uncompromisingly with crime and lawlessness and dispense justice. It was the responsibility of the Kshatriyas to protect the Varna system and the social order and lavish the priests with generous gifts at every opportunity.

**Vaishyas** (Cattle herders, Agriculturalists, Artisans, Businessmen, and Merchants)

Vaishyas were the productive class of the society, who were expected to tend and protect the cattle, lend money and cultivate the land, study the Vedas, offer sacrifices and give taxes to the Kshatriyas. They had the right to perform and participate in certain Vedic rituals but they were not allowed to marry the women of higher castes. Making the society prosperous was their primary function. They were to generate wealth and distribute it for the social well-being.

*Shudras* (Labourers and Service Providers)

They were the labour class, whose only duty was to serve the other three Varnas. They were not required to observe any Vedic rituals or samskaras. Placed further on the margins were the Untouchables who performed the onerous and defiling tasks of others.

Varna System remains one of the most interesting and debateable topics in literature. Hindu mythology represents men of lower Varnas ascending to positions of eminence and authority. Some great characters in the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* belonged to lower Varnas. Lord Rama was assisted by those men who were of humble origin, and lived in the forests and were totally ignorant of the Vedas. Lord Krishna was brought up by the cowherds. Only three or four incarnations of Lord Vishnu belonged to higher Varnas. Of the ten only two, the incarnation of Vamana and the incarnation of Parshurama, were from the Brahmin Varna. Rama, Krishna and Buddha belonged to the Kshatriya Varna.

Many ancient rishis and sages also had humble origins. Vishwamitra was a warrior by birth but practised austerities like Brahmins and became a great rishi. Sage Parashar, the law giver, was born in a family of lower Varna (chandala). Rishi Valmiki belonged to a tribal family of traditional hunters. Rishi Vashishta was the son of a prostitute while Sage Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata*, was born to a fisherwoman. Satyakaam Jabala was also the son of a prostitute who did not even know the name of his father. Karna, a Kshatriya, the son of Kunti, was brought up by a family of lower Varna while Dronacharya, the teacher of the Pandavas and the Kaurvas, belonged to a Brahmin family but excelled in martial arts.

#### CONCLUSION

However with the passage of time the flexibility of the Varna System started diminishing. What had begun as an important principle of Hindu social organisation in the Vedic times, began to take on the shape of an orthodox Caste System based on heredity. The Brahmins, being experts in conducting and interpreting rituals laid out in the sacred texts, emphasised the ritual and scriptural aspects of caste. They quoted chapters and verses from the scriptures and in doing so justified a rigid Caste System and their own position in it to a large extent. Interestingly, the Brahmins were conversant with Sanskrit language, which was regarded as 'Deva bhasha', or the language of the gods. It was also the language in which incantations in rituals were made. It followed that Brahmins who were fluent in the language of the gods treated themselves as superior to the rest of the people. This consolidated their position in society a great deal. The *Manusmriti* came to be interpreted in ways that suited the interests of the Brahmins as well as the Kshatriyas (Rulers/Warriors) and eventually the Varna System evolved into a rigid Caste System, a strict division of society where birth determined one's status.

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