Caste Complexity In Indian Culture: Traditional Notions Of Hierarchy Explored

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Abstract

The Indian tradition places a strong emphasis on social stratification and inequity. They manifest themselves in everyday life as an unequal distribution of positions within the caste and class structures that make up the civilizing system of Indian society. The concepts of dharma (normative order), karma (personal moral commitment) and jati (caste)[1], which together make up the fundamental elements of Indian culture and distinguish the Indian cultural tradition as a cultural tradition unlike any other, are also the fundamental principlesof hierarchy and social stratification. In the following article, an effort has been made to present, from the perspectives of a variety of academics, a comprehensive and in-depth investigation of the deeply ingrained, traditional aspects of caste that are seen in Indian society.

Keywords- Varna, Jati, Class, Caste, Dharma and karma, Indian society.

Introduction

In virtually every aspect of social life, Indian displays a remarkable diversity of customs and practices. The existence of a wide variety of racial, linguistic, regional, religious, economic and social castes as well as economic, linguistic and regional castes divides society into groups with distinct personalities. And these inequalities across India are further complicated by unusually wide gaps between rural and urban areas, between traditional and contemporary ways of life, between the sexes and so on. Traditional Indian society is characterized by a number of fundamental characteristics, such as the following: Indian society is predominatelya Hindu society, and it is built on a number of theological concepts, viz, [2]People are born intogroups- families, clans, sub-castes, castes and religious communities and feel a deep sense of inseparability from these groups; another important theme is social hierarchy[3], which is evident in caste groups amongst individuals, in families and kinship groups; social interdependence is a great theme of traditional Indian society; people are born into groupsand feel a deep sense of inseparability from these groups[4]; punarjanma (re-birth In the first place, the word 'varna' originates from the Sanskrit word 'vri', which translates to choice according to inherent traits.' The literal translation 'varna' into English is çolor', but in this context, the concept of color is most likely being used as a mechanism for classification. According to the Vedic literature known as Yajurveda, this also indicates that colors canserve as a form of categorization. Another viewpoint is that of engaging in a particular occupation; this depicts the way in which Hindu society is segmented according to those occupations. The 'divine theory'[5] of origin of the Varna system states that the four orders of the society are thought to have originated from the act of self-sacrifice performed by Purusha.In this sense, according to Hindu philosophical doctrine, Purusha is the creator, also known as the predominating being. The following can be found in the Purushasukta hymn of the Rig Veda[6]:

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[1] Bayly, Susan. Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age, Part 4, Vol.3, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

[2] Beteille, Andre. ''Varna and Jati.'' Sociological Bulletin 45, No.1 (March 1996): 15-27.

[3] Gupta, Dipankar (ed.) Social Stratification (second edition). New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[4] Singh, Upinder. ''Varna and Jati in Ancient India.'' In Irrelevant History: Essays for M.G.S.
[5] The Book of Peace (the twelfth of eighteen books of the Indian Epic Mahabharata).

In this particular representation of the Creator, the head, the arms, the thighs, and the feet are arranged in a sequence that decreases from heighest to lowest, just as the traditional functionsdo as well. Consequently, this model is frequently recognized for its hierarchical arrangementof the varnas; yet the same model also implies that the varnas are interdependent on one another. The existence of varnas is attributed, in accordance with the 'triguna theory'[7]of the origin of the varna system, to the innate traits, or gunas, that are present in human people. According to the Bhagavad Geeta:

'Guna Karma, Chaturvarnam, Mayashristya, and Vibhagasah.'[8]

The ancient Indian philosophical hypothesis defined three qualities in human people, live objects and inanimate objects, and inhuman activities. These qualities were referred to as Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. The concept of 'sattva'referred to excellent thoughts and actions, aswell as goodness and virtue, truth and wishdom. Rajas are recognizable by their extravagant way of life and lavish possessions, their ardor and propensity for certain excesses, their pride, and their velour. At the very bottom was tamas, which had characteristics such as coarseness and dullness, overindulgence without taste, the ability to carry out laboriousactivity without inspiration, and so on. Consequently, those who possess sattavic qualities are categorized as Brahmans, whereas individuals who possess rajasic qualities are categorized asKshatriyas and Vaishyas, and individuals who possess tamasic qualities are categorized as Shudras. According to one interpretation of the 'karma theory, the varna system is a product of the various occupations that exist in society. There is a discourse in Shanti Parva, vi between the sages Bhrigu and Bharadwaj that explains how all people were initially Brahmans but eventually became different varnas based on the professions that they followed. On the other hand, according to an alternative interpretation of Manusmriti, everyone started out as a Shudra, but over time, they all fell into one of the four different varnas based on their occupation. In a similar manner, according to Herbert Hope Rishley's 'transplantation theory', the Aryanswho settled in India after migrating from Persia or Iran already had a structure comparable to varna. Before the Aryans invaded India, the society in Iran was organized into four parts that corresponded to the four varnas that were prevalent in India at the time. At one point in time, the classification was determined by color. As a result of this, people referred to it as the 'varna system.' It was designed to differentiate the light-skinned Aryans from the dark-skinned Dasas, which means that Indian civilization was initially split into two categories: Aryans and non-Aryans. Subsequently, the Aryans were subdivided into three varnas: Brahman, kshatriya and vaishya.Those who were not of the Aryan race were classified as Shudras and assigned manual labor. People who carried minor vocations, such as those that entitled handling animal and human faces, animal hides, dead bodies and other polluting professions, were considered Untouchable throughout the post-Vedic period.

[6] The Book of Peace (the twelfth of eighteen books of the Indian Epic Mahabharata).

[7] Bhagavad Gita, Chapter xiv, shloka 13.

[8] Bhagavad Gita, chapter iv, shloka 13.

This is when the practice of untouchability developed deep roots and became linked with these people. 'Panchama or Antyaja' were the names given to the members of these lower social classes. They were regarded as existing outside of the Varna system and its scope of application. In point of fact, though, they were a vital component of the Varna system. Consequently, during this time period, the Chaturvarna paradigm was modified by the incorporation of a further heredity occupational category that came to be known as Panchama Varna. According to J. H. Hutton, the notion of Varna is sometimes confused with the concept of caste or Jati, despite the fact that these terms have very different meanings. In addition to this, he notes that the Varna system appears to have initially consisted of four different classes, and that throughout the time of the Vedas, the distinctions between the various classes were not regarded as being absolutely necessary. This suggests that a Kshatriya may have evolved into a Brahman. According to G.S. Ghurye, the term 'Varna' means 'distinction' and is used to designate the color scheme of the various parts of society. Taking the reference from the Rig Veda[9], the name 'Varna' is never applied to Brahmans to Kshatriyas. However, particular colors were connected with the four Varnas. The only difference between the Arya varna and the Dasa varna is that the former refers to those with lighter skin, while the latter refers to those with darker skin. Ghurye is of the opinion that the distinction that existed between the Arya and the Dasa was the root cause of the distinction that existed between the Arya and Shudra. During the time of the Vedas, there were only three distinct castes or classes in Indian society: Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. Despite this, there is some evidence that the fourth Varna, known as the Shudra, was discussed during the later Vedic period. According to him, the Aryans arrived from outside of India and overcome the indigenous population in India. As a result of their victories, the Aryans occupied a higher social standing, while the people who were vanquished were relegated to the lowest position in society.[10] M. N. Srinivas, on the other hand, is of the opinion that the Caste system is a very complicated organizational structure and that it should not be confused with the Varna system. One may tell the difference between a Varna and a Caste by the fact that a Varna refers to a more generic identification of a wider social group in Indian society, while a Caste is more of a localized group. The number of castes, on the other hand, exceeds three thousand. There are only four Varnas. In a similar vein, mobility is nonexistent within the caste system, although, it is present within the Varna system. Svadharma, which translates to 'own duties', governs every Hindu the context of a classed Varna, which indicates that every Hindu is required to adhere to general moral rules and duties according to their nature. The structure of the four Varnas, which correspond to the four social classes, and the system of the four Ashramas, which correspond to the four stages of life, govern the people. The following is a list of the responsibilities that come with each of the four Varnas:

1. Brahman: Education and spiritual guidance are provided by Brahmans, who are responsible for setting the goals of every community as well as its core principles.
2. Kshatriya: The Kshatriya people are considered to be the nobility and the guardians of society. It is required of them to exhibit a substantial amount of physical and mental strength.

[9] Singh, Upinder. ''Varna and Jati in Ancient India.'' In Irrelevant History: Essays for M.G.S.

[10] Srinivas, M.N. Social Change in Modern India. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 1995.

3. The Vaishyas are recognized as the most productive social stratum.

4. Shudra: The Shudras are the only segment of society that is allowed to take employment offered by the other Varnas, which are considered to be occupationally and financially self- sufficient. Shudras are responsible for cleaning, cooking, and other menial tasks.

Different Dharmas: There are two different kinds of dharma (obligation) in the Varna system, both of which are required by the Vedic scriptures. The first kind of dharma is knownas samanya dharma, and it applies to everyone, regardless of their Varna. It consists of a Universal code[11] of behavior, non-violence, truthfulness, cleanliness, control of the senses, non-acquisitiveness, one must not possess material possessions in excess of what is needed for one's bare requirements), devotion to vara (God), confidence in one's parents, love for all animals, and so on. The second category is known as via dharma, and it refers to the unique responsibilities that come with each varna. It could be known as Dharma and it would be a rule of conduct that was unique to each varna.

Some academics believe that the primary characteristics of caste include having:

1. The same name,
2. The same ancestry,
3. The same hereditary profession, and
4. The same tendency to congregate into a single, homogenous society.

S. V. Hereditary membership and endogamy, according to Ketkar, are the fundamentalcomponents of caste when viewed as an organic framework of relations. Caste is said to have an organic nature it comes to the harmonious relationships that exist between the various caste groups. J. H. Hutton (1946) examines the caste system through the lens of its utilitarian aspects. He describes the purpose of the caste as falling into one of three categories:

1. Functions and individual caste members,
2. Functions for communities, and
3. Functions for the state and society as a whole.

G. S. Ghurye (1950) provides a through explanation of what is meant by the term 'caste'. According to him, the caste system has six primary characteristics[12]. These characteristics areas follows:

1. The segmental division of society,
2. The hierarchy of groups,
3. The restrictions of feeding and social intercourse,
4. The allied and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections,
5. The absence of the unrestricted choice of occupation, and
6. The restrictions on marriage.

[11] Swami Vivekananda, India and her problems, chapter IV.
[12] Ghurye, G, S, Caste, Class and Occupation, Creative Media Patrners, LLC, 2021

The caste system is characterized by the consistent practice of endogamy. In spite of this, weeding between people of different castes and religions have become increasingly common in recent years, particularly in urban and suburban areas.

Other points of view on the topic of caste include the following:

1. Karl Marx is of the opinion that the longevity of the caste system in India was directlytied to the Asian mode of production.[13]
2. According to H. J. S. Maine, caste is an example of a non-contractual "status society."He holds this opinion.
3. The integrity of Senart's lineage and the integrity of his occupations are his primaryconcerns.
4. According to the perspective of Louis Dumont, contamination and cleanliness serveas the ideological foundation of Hindu society, which is mirrored in the caste system.
5. Hocart is of the opinion that the establishment of the caste system was predicated onthe observance of particular rituals and the rendering of duties to feudal lords.
6. According to Max Weber, the practice of caste may be traced back to theextraterrestrial tenets of Hinduism.
7. The interpretation of the caste system held by Bugle places an emphasis on inheritedspecialization, hierarchy and mutual repulsion (also known as social distance).

Historic Origin: The Purushasukta hymn that is found in the ninth mandala of Rigveda, which was written during the later Vedic period, has the very first allusion to the hierarchical Varna order. This song laid the groundwork for the extensive social stratification that continues to this day and was the source of its inspiration. According to this hymn, the body of the first man, known as the Purusha, is separated into four category. The Caturvarna system is a name that refers to this structure in its broadest sense. The Shudra caste is related with the feet, the Brahmana caste is associated with the lips, the Vaishya caste is associated with the thighs and the Kshatriya caste is associated with the arms. Because the men of the first three castes are required to go through the Vedic ceremony of upanayana, they are referred to as "twice-born or dvija." On the other hand, the men of the Shudra caste are not permitted to take part in this rite. The untouchables are not included in the Varna social system in any way. During the later part of the Vedic period, the social stratification described in the Purushasukta hymn had become well entrenched in the upper Genetic basin. The Brahmans evolved into a specialized class of priests who monopolized religious rituals; the Kshatriyas developed into warriors and rulers who govern large tracts of land and possessed maximum material resources; the Vaishyas contributed to the social order as merchants, trades, tribute- paying peasants, and cattle-rearing, and the Shudras were associated with the class of domestic servants, agricultural laborers and slaves. At the conclusion of the later Vedic period, the Varna system underwent changes that caused it to become hereditary, endogamous, and based on birth, which resulted in the establishment of Jatis.

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[13] Karl Marx, Das Capital, vol-II, London, 1867.

Iron was used extensively in production throughout the post-Vedic period, which resulted in amassive growth of the economy. This was a defining characteristic of this time period. The large rise in surplus contributed to the already existing economic disparity in the middle and eastern portions of the Genetic basin. Because of this, the setting was ideal for the further stratification of social groups and the establishment of the Varna-Jati system. Classical works such as the Dharmashastras, particularly the Manusmriti, the Upanishads, and the Mahabharata are excellent examples of the social stratification that took place throughout this time period. The text known as the Manusmriti provides an explanation of the four varnas as well as their responsibilities, also known as their dharma. According to the Chandogya Upanishad, a person's Varna is established at the time of their birth, which includes all of their prior lives as well. According to the Vajrasuchi Upanishads, a person's position in the Varna hierarchy is not established at birth; rather it is the level of self- realization that is taken into account.

The Varna system was analyzed in the Mahabharata using not one, but two distinct models: first, as a color-coded system and second, as a behavioral system. According to the initial model, the Brahmanas were represented by the color white, the Kshatriyas by the color red, the Vaishyas by the color yellow, and the Shudras by the color by black. The second model proposed that an individual's actions should be used to establish their position within the social hierarchy. As a consequence, "the Brahmanas were devoted to truth, pure behavior and austerity: the Kshtriyas were inclined to boldness, anger and pleasure: the Vaishyas were pulled towards avarice, and lived off the plough: and the Shudras were fond of violence and covetousness, and they indulged in acts of impurity.' The Bhagavad Gita, which is consideredto be the holiest literature in the Hindu religion, includes a description of the characteristics and occupations associated with each of the four Varnas. As part of their primary responsibilities, the Brahmans are expected to maintain mental discipline and engage in commercial activities and raise cattle, and the Shudras are to render assistance to the members of the three higher castes.

The policies that prevailed during the time of the British Empire gave rise to the caste system as we know it today. Powerful men who linked themselves with king, priests and ascetics rose to prominence in India and witnessed the collapse of that regime. In addition, throughoutthis time period, a large number of previously casteless social groups sprang formed, many ofwhich went on to evolve into communities with distinguishable castes. The British Raj was responsible for further emphasizing the differences between castes and making the hierarchical caste system a fundamental component of the administrative system.

Caste and Varna:

There is a connection as well as a distinction between the two ideas of caste and varna, bothof which will be elaborated on in the next sections, respectively. Varna and caste are two distinct methods that are used in India for the purpose of social stratification. Varna and caste are two distinct methods that are used in India for the purpose of social stratification. The twoare frequently confused for one another and used in the same way. However, the contrast between the two is extremely significant in the field of sociology. The following could be considered the primary distinctions between the two:

According to the "chaturvarna doctrine," there existed four varnas during the Vedic and the post-Vedic period, namely which are of course described before as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. On the other hand, jatis are innumerable. Varnas have four members, whereas jatis have an infinite number of members. These four varnas symbolized the four- fold division of the Hindu society that existed at the time, whereas castes can be found in a very large number of different varieties. It is extremely challenging to determine the precise number of caste that are practiced in India. It is common knowledge that India is home to an astounding number of castes and sub castes – over 4,000 in all. Membership in a caste is defined by a person's birth order, but in the varna system, one's status is denoted by their word. Membership in a caste is determined by a person's birth order. People are always born into one of two different castes, regardless of whether or not they want to identify with that caste. For instance, Brahmins are born into other Brahmin families, Reddy's into other Reddy families, Jats into other Jat families, and so on. The Varna social stratification system, which was prevalent during the Vedic period and was based on one's employment as well as the division of labour in society, was in place. Membership in a certain Varna was defined by an individual's "Karma," or the occupation that they were pursuing at the time. It was possible that it would be altered. According to the Bhagavad Gita[14], with reference to the Lord Krishna explained to Arjuna that an individual's membership in a particular Varna was extremely predicted on the "Guna" in addition to the "karma" of the particular individual. "Varna system was more or less an open system whereas the caste system is regarded as a closed system." The Varna system was regarded as open because it gave possibilities for the individual to alter the membership of the Varna to which they belonged. As an illustration, a man who once belonged to the Kshatriya Varna has the potential to become a Brahmin. In the same way, a Vaishya has the potential to become a Brahmin or a Kshatriya. Even Shudras had the potential to become Brahmins. Vishwamitra is a good example of someone who started out as a Kshatriya but transitioned into the Brahmin caste later on in life. Vedavyasa, the author of the Mahabharata, was born into a family of fishermen who belonged to the Shudra Varna. Later in life, however, he decided to pursue a career in the Brahmin caste. On the other hand, the caste system is considered to be closed due to the fact that membership in a caste cannot be shifted from one group to another. As a result, practically all of the chances for climbing higher or lower in the organizational hierarchy have been eliminated.

The Varna system is sanctioned by the religion, which in this case is Hinduism, in contrast to the caste system, which is not sanctioned by the religion. The history of the Varna system sheds light on the fact that it was divinely designed. Lord Krishna states in the Bhagavad Gita that he was the one who created the four varnas, which is consistent with the widespread belief that the four varnas originated from the four distinct organs of Prajapati Brahma or the divine king[15]. On the other hand, the caste system does not have the approval of any divine power.[16] The Varna system was practiced in India throughout its ancient ages, and one interpretation of the caste system describes it as a deteriorated version of that system.

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[14] Bhagavad Gita, Chapter XIV, Shloka 11.
[15] Bhagavad Gita, Chapter XIV, Sloka 13.
[16] Jatava, D.R. The Hindu Sociology. Jaipur, Surabhi Publications, 2011.

This indicates that the Varna system, in and of itself, may be traced back to the beginning of the caste system. Many intellectuals, like Swami Vivekananda and others, have expressed the opinion that the caste system is not sanctioned by the Hindu religion. According to Swamiji, 'There is no caste in religion that caste system is opposed to the religion of Vedanta.' People talk about the 'varna system' and the 'varna model' in theoretical terms, but in reality, neitherof these things exist. The social stratification known as varna has largely disappeared in today's society. The caste system, along with all of its idiosyncrasies, is still practiced in today's society.

Conclusion:-

The intricate tapestry of the Indian tradition is woven with the threads of social stratificationand inequity, a complex phenomenon that finds its expression in the caste and class structures

Shaping the societal framework. Rooted in the core principles of dharma, karma and jati, this cultural tradition stands as a unique testament to the fusion of normative order[17], personal moral commitment and caste distinctions. As explored through the lenses of diverse scholars, this article delves into the profound exploration of the entrenched traditional facets of caste, offering a comprehensive and profound understanding of its enduring presence in Indian society. Through these examinations, a deeper comprehension of the multifaceted layers of Indian culture emerges, challenging conventional perspectives and inviting broader discourse on the intricate interplay between tradition, hierarchy and societal dynamics.

Reference:

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