



# HISTORY OF VARNA OR CASTE SYSTEM AND ITS IMPACT ON TODAY'S INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

*The concept of Varna system as described in Vedas, specially in Rig-Ved is often misunderstood as it was based on Birth. But actually, the varna-system was not based on birth but in natural tendencies or qualities of a person. Varna-system was based on occupation and individual qualities. By changing one's occupation one can change their varna (caste). It is as a flexible system because a Sudra can change his varna by performing or cultivating productivity, a Vaishya can change his caste, by the knowledge of Vedas one can become Brahmin. And through inter-caste marriage also one can change their varna. There are several examples of inter-caste marriage in ancient time. Such as Ravan (Brahmin) marry to princess Mandodari (Kshatriya), king Yayati (Kshatriya) married Brahmi's daughter (Devyani) and so on. Again there are some examples found in Hindu historical and mythological texts that through one's tendency or knowledge, one can change their caste (varna). For eg- Kshatriya Vishwamitra became Brahmin because of his penance. Sage Valmiki (the writer of Ramayana) was brought up in a Sudra varna (hunter) family. Valmiki achieved status of Brahmin by his intelligence and hard work. He has a vast knowledge of all the Vedas.*

*This study highlights how varna (caste) system was taken on negative and misunderstood as it is based on birth and how social discrimination arises and how reservation system implements.*

**Keywords:** Varna, Veda, Kshatriya, Brahmin, Caste, Philosophy.

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## 1. Literature Rivew

B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), a jurist, economist, and social reformer, is one of the foremost critics of the caste system in India. His philosophy of caste is rooted in liberal humanism, social justice, Buddhist ethics, and anti-Brahmanism. Ambedkar viewed caste as not merely a division of labor, but a division of laborers, sanctified by religious dogma, especially in Hinduism. Ambedkar held that the Hindu religious scriptures, especially Manusmriti, institutionalized caste hierarchy. His burning of Manusmriti in 1927 was a symbolic act of resistance. Scholars like Gail Omvedt, Anand Teltumbde, and Kancha Ilaiah have examined how Ambedkar's work exposes the theological roots of caste-based oppression. Later in life, Ambedkar converted to Navayana Buddhism, seeing it as a moral and egalitarian alternative to caste-bound Hinduism. His book *The Buddha and His Dharma* outlines his re-interpretation of Buddhist philosophy to establish a just society.

## 2. Methodology:

### 2.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design. It seeks to understand and interpret Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy regarding the caste system through textual analysis of primary and secondary sources. The research is primarily descriptive, interpretive, and historical in nature.

### 2.2 Objectives of the Study

To analyze Ambedkar's critique of the caste system in India.

To explore the philosophical foundations of his thoughts on caste, social justice, and equality.

To assess the relevance of Ambedkar's ideas in contemporary Indian society.

## **2.3 Data Collection,:**

### **Primary Sources:**

Writings and speeches by B.R. Ambedkar (e.g., Annihilation of Caste, The Buddha and His Dhamma, Who Were the Shudras?)

Parliamentary debates and legal drafts (e.g., Draft Constitution of India).

### **Secondary Sources:**

Scholarly articles, books, biographies, and critiques.

Interpretations by historians, political scientists, and philosophers.

Commentaries on Ambedkar's works and legacy.

## **3. Introduction**

The concept of varna-system is found in several texts and Hindu scriptures Rig-Veda, Bhagwat Gita, Mahabharata, Purana, Dharma-sastra. Varnas are divided in social hierarchy, first place was acquired by Brahman (Gods on earth) who have knowledge about vedics and upanishads and their duty is to provide knowledge as they have vast knowledge of vedas. Then Kshatriyas (the warrior or soldiers) their duty is to protect the society. or rule the society. Then the third is vaishya (productivity) they were associated with agriculture, tending cattle, trade and other business, cultivating etc. Then the four varna (caste) which are called Sudhras - they served the all three caste or varnas. There is another class which are called "untouchables" or dalits actually they are out of this four varnas so they called "avarnas". According to veda and puranas untouchables are those who are Sincers or unethical peoples.

### **3.1 Origin:**

About the varna system first mentioned in Rig-Veda, where it is written as- Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Sudhra. In post Vedic period it is describe in Dharmasastra, Puranas and Mahabharat. Varna extensively discussed in Dharmasastra – Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Sudhra untouchables (out caste) untouchables are those unethical peoples. Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaisha are called twice born and allowed to study Vedas but Sudhras and outcaste are not allowed to study Vedas.

In Mahabharata, Varna based on colours and behaviour-

Brahmin (White)- dedicated to truth and pure conduit.

Kshatriyas (Red)- anger, pleasure, boldness.

Vaishyas (Yellow)- Cattle rearing.

Sudhras (Black)- fond of violence, greed, impurity.

Bhagwata Gita describes the duties and qualities of varnas (based on gunas, born of their nature)- brahmins are control of mind and senses, purity, knowledge.(possessing mainly satwa gunas)

Kshatriyas- Boldness, not fleeing from the butt fortitude, prowess. (possessing mainly rajo gunas)

Vaishyas- agriculture, cattle-rearing, trade.( predominant with tamo gunas)

Sudhras- are servant of all three castes.

In ancient time, Brahmin are knowledge person, have vast knowledge of Veda that is why they became teachers but it is not stated that other caste people can not become a teacher or Brahmin. If a kshatriya have that quality or knowledge to become Brahmin then he can change his caste and can become Brahman. There are several examples mentioned here in the paper.

Difference between Ved-Purana Bhagwata Gita's varna-system and Manusmriti and British varna-system.

Manusmriti was written by Manu, after 1500 year of Vedas. The Manusmriti does establish a system where varnas are largely determined by birth, with children typically being identified with the varna of their parents-Manusmriti consider Birth as a primary factor and Karma and quality as Secondary influences. The text describes four varnas as-

Brahmin- Priests, scholars, teachers.

Kshatriya- Warriors, rulers.

Vaishyas- Merchants, farmers, traders.

Sudra- Laborers, servants.

In Manusmriti it is written varna system was based on birth it is generation to generation process. It also not allowed the Sudras and women to read Vedas. This tradition continued in 'Ramcharit Manas' where Tulsidas also state that Sudras and women are not allowed to study Vedas.

Manusmriti it is described that this varna-originated from different organ (parts) of divine power or Brahman. The varna - system is hierarchy system. The Brahmin are in higher level, they have originated from the head of the Brahman & then Kshatriya, they originated

from the arm of Brahman, then Vaishya, they have originated from the thigh of Brahman and lastly Sudhras they originated from the leg of Brahman.

"Among which - Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya are pure and Sudra's are Impure.

### **3.2 British Era -**

It was discriminatory even before, but after coming British it became more rigid. Within the process of the time this caste system became more rigid. In fact, the caste rule is everywhere to be seen. British with the help of Brahmin implement caste system strongly. The reason behind this is simple the British wanted to make the task of administering India more simple and Brahmin takes this advantage because of their ego (they are the top!). For the British the entire system was extremely complex and so they wanted to simplify it, so they popularized the four varna system or caste system in which the Brahmin were classified at the top as the privileged class."

### **3.3 Impact of caste system on society during and after British era:**

The caste system in India has had a multifaceted impact on various aspects of society, creating deep-seated inequalities and social divisions. The caste system creates a rigid social hierarchy where individuals are categorized into hierarchical groups based on their birth, with limited social mobility. The lower class particularly Dalits (formerly known as untouchables) face systematic discrimination and marginalization in various spheres of life, including access to education, employment and basic amenities. Caste-based discrimination can lead to feelings of shame, inferiority and isolation among individuals from lower castes, impacting their mental health and self-esteem."

"In some cases, the caste system has fueled violence and social unrest, particularly when lower castes challenge the existing power structures.

### **3.4 Criticism of caste system by social reformers:**

Social reformers have strongly criticized the caste system in India for its inherent inequality, discrimination and social injustices. Key criticisms include the denial of basic human rights, perpetuation of untouchability, restriction of social mobility and the psychological impact of caste-based prejudice. There are a lot of people in the 19th and 20th century who took concrete measures against our caste system. Among them mainly - Shahuji Maharaj, Jyotirao Phule, B.R. Ambedkar."

Shahuji made efforts to abolish the concept of caste segregation and untouchability.

**Jyotirao Phule** - He was born in the Sudra caste, was very much inspired by the struggle of the slaves in America; in 1873 he established the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' for the upliftment of the lower caste. He refused the sacredness of the Vedas and refused to believe that only the Brahmins should have control over Hindu religion.

### **3.5 B.R. Ambedkar:**

Dr. Ambedkar advocated for the annihilation of caste and the establishment of a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity, as enshrined in the Indian Constitution. In his book 'Annihilation of Caste', Ambedkar denounced the Manusmriti as a source of social and moral degradation. He even famously burnt a copy of the Manusmriti in 1927. As a symbolic protest against its teachings.

### **3.6 Reservation for lower caste:**

Reservations are in place to ensure representation for historically disadvantaged groups, including untouchables. It provides preferential treatment in education, government jobs, and political representation for lower caste.

The idea of caste-based reservation was initially proposed by William Hunter and Jyotirao Phule in 1882, to address social inequalities and untouchability. The British introduced elements of reservation through the Government of India Acts of 1909 and 1919 and the Communal Award of 1933, which proposed separate electorates for various communities including Dalits."

### **3.7 Poona Pact:**

In 1932, the Poona Pact between Gandhi & Ambedkar led to a single Hindu electorate with reserved seats for Dalits, abandoning the idea of separate electorates.

### **3.8 Constitutional Framework:**

Post-Independence, the Constituent Assembly led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, played a crucial role in incorporating reservations for Scheduled Castes (untouchables) in the Indian Constitution."

## **4. Conclusion:**

Caste discrimination is a deeply entrenched issue with historical roots and ongoing consequences, despite the presence of legal frameworks and affirmative action policies. While India's constitution prohibits caste discrimination and provides for affirmative action, social and

economic disparities persist, and marginalized communities continue to face discrimination. Achieving complete equality and social justice requires continued efforts to dismantle discriminatory practices, address historical injustices and promote a more inclusive and equitable society. In this regard education and religious awareness plays an important role. Through religious awareness or oneness because it emphasizes the oneness or brotherhood as describe in Vedanta. No religions text promotes inequality or discrimination. Through proper education the social discrimination will vanished.

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