Analytical Study of *Varna* system in Indian Philosophical Tradition

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Abstract : The origin of human society is the result of a long process of development. Society consists of a group of human beings living together with mutual co-operation and exchange; sharing same language and a way of life. Individual and social contemplation has contributed a lot to all civilizations of the world since ancient period in order to regulate and control society. The culture which was initiated by *Vedic rishis* in the ancient period has continued up to the present times even after a passage of thousands years and this has been the salient feature of Indian history and philosophy. This paper explores *varna* system- a significant aspect of ancient Indian social life as reflected in its Philosophical tradition with the help of *Vedic* literature. Ancient thinkers divided the society into four *varnas- Brahmin*, *Kshatriya, Vaishya* and *Shudra*. The *varna* system- a form of social organization of the *Vedic* period has its impact on Indian society of the present time. The form of *varna* system has transformed with the passage of time on the basis of action birth, colour, system and social status. There came change in ages, thoughts, civilizations still *varna* system has been there in Indian society in one or the other form. The paper also includes the views of some important modern thinkers on the *varna* system and emphasizes the there is a need to provide right direction to the present day caste system that is a distorted form of the ancient *varna* system.

Index Terms - Varna system, ancient Indian social life, *Vedic* literature, modern thinkers on the *varna* system, present day caste system.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The *Varn-ashram* system was the essential element of ancient Indian social life. Ancient thinkers divided the society into four *varnas- Brahmin*, *Kshatriya, Vaishya* and *Shudra*. The *varna* system – a form of social organization of the *Vedic* period has its impact on Indian society of the present time. The form of *varna* system has changed with the passage of time on the basis of action (*karma*), birth, colour, system and social status. There came change in ages, thoughts, civilizations still *varna* system has been there in Indian society in one or the other form. The *varna* system in ancient Indian philosophy is aptly known through various literatures and the ideas of the thinkers.

II. *VARNA*-SYSTEM IN *VEDAS*

The word *varna* is originated from the root *varani* or *vari* which means to choice therefore *varna* means *vriti* or to choose a specific system. The word *varna* has been used in *Rigveda* which classifies the initial form of social organization of the early *Vedic* period. The *Purush Sukta* is the verse where *Chaturvarna* is elaborated. This hypothesis is based on four organs of *Adi Purusha*.

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ब्राह्मणोऽस्य मुखमासीद्बाहू राजन्यः कृत।

उरूतदस्य यद्वैश्यः पद्भ्यां षूद्रोऽजायत्।। (*त्पहअमकं* –10.9.12)
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In this verse the whole human society is imagined as a *Virata Purusha* and it is said that the *brahmin* originated from the mouth of that *Virata Purusha* and the *kshatriya* from his arms; *vaishya* is born from his abdomen and *shudra* from his feet. In this way, through *varna* system various *varnas* or groups were divided on the basis of their main '*guna'* and '*karma*' and their actions (*karma*) were prominently organized. The concept of '*guna*' is considered to be originated with the *varna* system. Human beings attain greatness by the virtue of their *guna*. There are three *gunas -sattva, rajas* and *tamas* that are found in nature.

The human being, who has dominance of *sattva guna*, wants to live his life with peace. The one with pre dominance of *rajas guna* tends to be greedy and has lots of desires. The individual with pre dominance of *tamas guna* remains idle and careless. Some of the *guna* are hereditary and some are derived from the environment. These *guna*s constitute nature of the individual. His actions (*karma*) have been determined on the basis of his nature. Human being with *sattva guna* was considered to be the *brahmins* in

ancient society. The one who had *rajas guna* became *kshatriya* and the one who had the combination of *sattva* and *rajas* became the *vaishya* and one having *tamas guna* was considered to be *shudra*. This was the *guna* theory of the origination of the *varna* system.

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सत्वं राजस्तमश्चैव त्रीविधादात्मनोगुणान्।

यैर्व्याव्येमान्स्भितोभवान्महान्सर्वान ष्षोषतः।। (*इंदन ँउतजप* –12.24)

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Sattva guna was characterized by study of *Vedas*, *tapas*, *gyna*, *shauch* (purity). Control of senses and meditation of soul were the duties of the *brahmins*.

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यतु दुःखसमायुक्तमप्रीतिकरमात्मनः।

तद्रजोडप्रतिघं विद्यात्सततं हारि देहिनाम्।। (*ठतींज ँ ठीपज* –12.28)

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The *kshatriya* had the prime duties of chivalry, adventure, administration and safety of the subjects. *Tamas guna* implies the attachment and the form of its subject is clear.

<div align="center">

;तु स्यान्मोहसंयुक्तमव्यक्तं विषयात्मकम्।

अप्रतर्क्यमिविज्ञेयं तमस्तदुपधारयेत्।। (*ठतींज ँ ठीपज* –12.29)

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Greed, sleep, habit of asking for things and arrogance are characteristics of *tamas guna*. The combination of both the *rajas* and *tamas gunas* were reflected in the *vaishyas* and the *shudras* were characterized by the predominance of *tamas guna*.

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त्रयाणामपि चैतेश षा गुणानां यः फलोदयः।

अग्रयोमध्यों जघन्यष्च तं प्रवक्ष्याभ्यषेष्षतः।। (*ठतींज ँ ठीपज*)

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Hence, the *brahmins* were characterized as noble characteristics and virtuous; *kshatriya* as having middle level; *vaishyas* as having middle-level and lower level characteristics.

III. *Varna* system in the *Puranas*

Puranas have analyzed appropriately the foundation pillar (*varna* system) in order to give comprehensive account of social organization of the ancient India.

According to *Vishnu Purana*, the *brahmin* who has predominance of *sattva guna* is born from the mouth of Vishnu; the *kshtriya* having predominance of *rajas guna* is born from the arm of Vishnu, the *vaishya* exhibiting *rajas* and *tamas gunas* is born form the thigh of Vishnu and the *shudra* with *tamas guna* is born from the feet of Vishnu:

<div align="center">

अजायन्त द्विजश्रेष्ठसत्वोद्रित्ता मुखात्प्रजाः।

वक्षसो रतसोद्रित्तास्तथा वै ब्राह्मणोऽभवन्।

रजसा तमसा चैव समुद्रिक्तास्तथोरूतः।

पद्भ्यामन्याः प्रजा ब्रह्मा ससर्ज द्विजोत्तम।

तमः प्रधानास्ताः सर्वाष्चातुर्वर्ण्यमिदं ततः। (*टर्पीदन ्नतंदं* –1 / 6 / 4–5)

त्वन्मुखाद्, ब्राह्मणास्त्वत्तो बाहोः क्षत्रमजायत।

वैष्यास्तवोरूजाः षूद्रास्तव पद्भ्यां समुदगता।। (*टर्पीदन ्नतंदं* 1 / 12 / 63–64)

मर्यादा संस्थापयामास..................वर्णानामाश्रमणां च (*टर्पीदन ्नतंदं* –1 / 6 / 32)

यज्ञनिष्पत्तये सर्वमेतद् ब्रह्मा चकार वै।

चतुवर्णं महाभाग यज्ञसाधनमुत्तमम्।   (*टर्पीदन ्नतंदं* –1 / 6 / 7)

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According to *Vishnu Purana*, *chatuvarna* has been created with the objective of performance of *yajna*.

Mastya Purana also considers the origination of *varnas* from God.

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वामदेवस्तु भगवानसृजन्खुतो द्विजान।

राजन्यान्सृजदबाहो र्विटषूद्रानुरूपादयोः।। (*डॅजलं ्नतंदं* –4.28)

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Vayu and *Brahmand Puranas* also reflect that the *chartuvanas* has originated from *Brahma*. In *Vayu Purana*, the *kshatriyas* are considered to be born from abdomen rather than from the arm:

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वक्त्रादस्य ब्राह्मणाः सम्प्रसूता यद्वक्षतः क्षत्रिया पूर्वभागे।

वैष्याष्चोरोर्यस्य पद्भ्यां च ष्षूद्राः सर्वे वर्णा गात्रतः संप्रसूता।। *(Vayu Purana*-4.24)

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Bhagavat Purana has also considered the origination of *varnas* in the context of imagination of God's creation and unity of the world.

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सहस्त्रषीर्षा पुरूषः सहस्त्राक्षः सहस्त्रपात।

</div>

पुरुष एवेद सर्व यद्भूतं यच्चभव्यम।। (*ठींहंअंज च्नतंद* – 4.13)

This world is the body of the *Virata Purusha*. Human beings were intimated about the origination of *chartuvanas* by imagining all four *varnas* as various parts of this body of this *purusha*. This creator was seen as having thousands heads, eyes and feet; he who was both past and future and the creation originated from him. In this system every *varna* has its own importance. This system is called divine because all *varnas* affiliated to it be under their own *varna* and not violate this law.

IV. *Varna* system in the *Bhagavad Gita*

The *Bhagavad Gita* has described the origination of *varna* system in the form of divine theory.

चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः।

तस्य कर्तारमपि मां विद्धयकर्तारमव्ययम।।(*ठींहंअंक ळपजं* 4.13)

In *Bhagavad Gita*, Sri Krishna says that I have created four *varnas* on the basis of *gunas* and *karmas*. I am its creator and destroyer. I should be known as God who is non-doer despite the fact I am doer (cause) of this creation. The reason is I am not interested in the results of karmas and karmas do not affect me. In this way, the one who gets to know the reality of me, he is never bound to *karmas*.

The *Bhagavad Gita* accepts basic characteristics as the origination of *varna* system. Nature of a human being reflects the *guna*. Out of the three *gunas* (*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*) found in nature, the human beings with the predominance of *sattva* are the *brahmins*; the ones having predominance of *rajas* are *kshatriya*; human beings with *tamas* are *vaishya*; and the ones having *tamas* are called *shudras*. The *Gita* describes the fruits of *karmas* based on *gunas* that the noble fruits *sattva* of the doer are happiness, knowledge and detachment etc, unhappiness is the fruit of rajas and ignorance is the fruit of *tamas*.

कर्मणः सुकृतस्याहुः सात्विकं निर्मलं फलम।

राजसस्तु फलं दुःखमज्ञानं तमसः फलम्।। (*ठींहंअंक ळपजं* –14.16)

The *Gita* has described various duties of all four *varnas* as follows:

Duties of the *Brahmin*-According to the *Gita*, *brahmin* is originated from the mouth. Therefore, on the basis of his superior origin, the *brahmins* have the duties to control the conscience, senses, observe internal and external purity, forgiveness, simplicity, self-study, reverence, teaching-learning and to attain knowledge of God. Purity, self-control, purity, being content, forgiveness, simplicity, affection to God and truth are the natural qualities of the *brahmins*.

Duties of the *Kshatriya*- *Kshatriyas* were related to the ruling class. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the natural *karmas* of the *kshatriyas* were described as bravery, chivalry, strength, skillfulness, facing the war, charity and having affection with God.

'   शौर्य तेजोधृतिर्दाक्ष्यं युद्धे चाप्यपलायनम्।

दानमध्विर भावष्च क्षात्रं कर्म स्वभावजम्।। (*ठींहंअंक ळपजं* –18.43)

Duties of the *Vaishya*- *Vaishyas* adopted agriculture as their *karma*. Their prime duty was to strengthen the social structure economically. According to the *Gita*, farming, cattle-rearing, sale-purchase and truthful behavior were the duties of the *vaishyas*.

कृषि गोरक्ष्यवाणिज्यं वैष्यकर्म स्वभावजम्'' । (*ठींहंअंक ळपजं*–17.44)

Duties of the *Shudras*-The main duty of the *shudras* was to serve other *varnas*. Service was their main occupation and natural *karma*.

परिचर्यात्मकं कर्म ष्षूद्रस्यापि स्वभावजम्'' (*ठींहंअंक ळपजं* –18, 44)

Therefore, according to the *Gita*, the basis of *varna* system has been the *karma* that was both based on duty and conduct.

V. *Varna* system in the *Manu Smrti*

In the *Manu Smrti*, society has been divided into four classes on the basis of duty and action and these four classes have been termed as *varga*. These four *varnas* of the *Manu Smrti are*- brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas, shudras. The position of the four *varnas* was determined on the basis of their *karmas*.

Duties of the *Brahmin*- It is said in the *Manu Smrti* that "the brahmins are the best as they have the capacity to defend the *dharma*". (Chapter 9, 4.17)

Manu has placed the *brahmin* class at the highest place in the social order and expected them to behave as suited to their esteemed place. Terming conduct prescribed in the *Vedas* as the *dharma*, Manu has instructed the *brahmins* to always adopt this sacred

behavior prescribed by the *Vedas*. He has warned that the *brahmin* who deviates from this sacred behavior, he, in fact, does not deserve to be known as the *brahmin* and does not attain the fruits as described in the *Vedas*. *Brahmin's* duties as described in the *Manu Smrti* are – to control over the senses, teaching-studying, sacrifice, to give and take charity.

Duties of the *Kshatriya-* To safeguard subject against the external invasion, to provide security during the internal turbulence, care of the subject and to rule with a vision of progress, non acquisition, to face the battlefield and to follow their *dharma* are considered main duties of the *kshatriyas*.

<div align="center">प्रजाना रक्षाणं दानमिज्याध्ययनमेव च।</div>
<div align="center">विषयेष्व प्रसक्तिष्च क्षत्रियस्य समाधानः।। (मनुस्मृति –1.89)</div>

Duties of the *Vaishya-* To purchase and buy necessary things by paying appropriate price, farming, to defend cattle are duties of the *Vaishyas* .

<div align="center">पषूनां रक्षणं दानमिज्याध्ययनमेव च।</div>
<div align="center">वणिक्पथं कुसीदं च वैष्यस्य कृषिमेव च।। (मनुस्मृति –1.90)</div>

Duties of the *Shudras-* The responsibility of the *shudra varna* is to serve people of the rest of the three *varnas*.

<div align="center">एकमेव तु ष्षूद्रस्य प्रभुः कर्म समादिषत्।</div>
<div align="center">एतेषामेव वर्णानां षुश्रूष षामनः सूयया।। (मनुस्मृति –1.91)</div>

According to Manu, the people of *shudra varna* are supposed to be in the service of other *varna* without paying attention to the criticism or admiration of the others. Manu has placed the *shudras* at the lowest place and prohibited them to study the *Vedas*. Therefore, the position of any of the *varnas* in the social order, according to Manu, depends on the comparative importance of the duties performed by that *varna*.

VI. Kautilya's views on the *Varna* system

Kautilya is the supporter of the *varna* system for the ideal social order. According to him, the main duty of the king is to maintain the *varnashram* duties and not to let other living beings deviate from their *dharma*.

VII. Modern Thinkers' views on *the Varna* system

Swami Dayananda Saraswati supported the *varna* system but he was of the view that the caste system of the present times is totally different from the *varna* system on which the Vedic society was based. He protested the idea considering birth as the basis of the caste and he opined that *varna* or caste of human being should be determined on the basis of his aptitude, characteristics and actions. According to him, *varna* theory based on psychological and professional parameters can resolve the many social and professional conflict.

Mahatma Gandhi's views about the *varna* system were different from his contemporary thinkers. He was an advocate of the *varna* system but according to him, its basis should be the birth not the *karma*. He opined that the *varna* system is a scientific system and the law of inheritance is an eternal law. There will be anarchy if human beings desert their legacy In this way, Gandhi supported the *varna* system on the basis of the birth yet he viewed that all works are of equal social importance and no work should be considered inferior. The work of a sweeper could have the same importance as that of a scientist. Therefore, everyone must have equal right in the public life.

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar considered the *varna* system as the root cause of the present day caste system and untouchability which was inhuman and an extreme form of the inequality. According to him, the *varna* system was totally unscientific, impractical, unjust and without dignity. He considered it offending the skillfulness in the economic field and increasing orthodoxy, inertia and disgust in society. He considered the inter-caste marriage not the all caste feast as a way to destroy the caste system. Mixing of blood can bring a sense of belongingness.

VIII. Conclusion

On the basis of the ideas contained in the above mentioned ancient literature and expressed by ancient and modern thinkers, it can be concluded that the *varna* system has been prevalent right from the origin of society. With the passage of time, its basis kept on changing. In reality, the *varna* system is a scientific system of society which is useful in maintaining the order of society. Each *varna* of society should be given duties and rights to work in their own working fields by establishing their positions on the basis of their *gunas* and *karmas* and no *varna* should interfere in other's work field. There is a need to maintain such social order. Each *varna* of society is as important for the existence of society as each organ of the body is important for the existence of life. In *Puranas*, the origin of the *varnas* was considered from the mouth, arm, thigh and feet, it means that each *varna* created by God was given its own place and there was no sense of inferior or superior *varna* and this was an attempt to make *varnas* active towards performing their important duties. This was with intention that a society can attain a prosperous, developed and just form when all its members discharge their duties according to their *varna* without any ill-will and being biased. The *varna* system of Indian Philosophical tradition gives a reflection of the Justice theory of the Western thinker Plato and both of them could be achieved only when each *varna* and each individual fulfill their duties in order to make a better society.

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