

## Varna: A Historical Review

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### ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to identify the historical and material roots of the Varna system. It seeks to trace the course of its origin and explains the social and material factors responsible for the Varna scheme of stratification and in latter periods towards its degeneration. The word Varna primarily connotes in which a person chooses his own profession according to his ability freely and all the Varnas had equal role to play in any society. The division of the society was according to the functions they choose to perform according to their abilities and aptitudes. A drift of changes occurred in latter Vedic period where the flexibility of the Varna system was diminished and it transformed into a rigid caste system. An analysis of different ancient historical texts reveals the variation in occupation alters and not to stick to one's own aptitudes only but they move to other professions also. The professions they choose become hereditary and they tended to crystallize into castes/groups which become their occupational identity and their distinct social status got fixed during the latter Vedic times. The co-relation between Dharma and Varna amalgamated as Varna dharma was based on social functions, cooperation, distribution of duties and responsibilities etc. in accordance with one's talents and aptitude.

### 1. Introduction

The four Varnas of India developed out of very early Aryan Class divisions, for some stratification existed in many Indo-European communities, and ancient Iran had four pistras or classes, comparable in some respects to those of India. The origin of the Varna is found in a hymn of the Rig Veda (X.90), the famous Purusha- Sukta, which describes the mythical legend of the sacrifice of a primeval giant called Purusha, the ideal 'Man' or 'World Spirit'.

*Brahmano'syaMukhanAsidbahurajanyahKritah I*

*Uru tad asyayadvaisyahpadbhayamsudroajayatal I (Rig Veda.X 90.12)*

The relevant passage has been translated thus:

"When (the Gods) divided Purusha, into how many parts did they cut him up? What was his mouth? What arms (had he)? The Brahmana was his mouth: the Rajanya was made his arms; the being (called) the Vaisya, he was his thighs; the Sudra sprang from his feet".

This passage refers to the first three castes not as sprung from, but as identical with, the mouth, arms and the thighs of the creator. But in spite of this difference many regard this hymn of the Rig Veda as the earliest exposition of the later Brahminical view, and regard the essential features of the Caste system as existing even in the earliest Aryan society in India. However this theory has been challenged by many scholars whose views may be briefly stated as follows:

The evidence of the Purusha-Sukta, an admitted late hymn, is not valid for the bulk of the Rigveda, which was produced by the as yet un-Brahmanized tribes of Vedic Indians living in the

Indus region and the Punjab. The caste system was developed only later, when a section of these Vedic tribes migrated farther east. The term Varna literary means Aryan colour, is used in the Rigveda of all the three highest castes of later times, being contrasted only with Dasa (the *Dasa-varna* or aboriginal colour). The Rigveda knows only two Varnas, the *Arya* and *Dasa* and according to P.V.Kane the word Varna means 'colour or light' in most passages of the Rigveda. The contributing factor to the appearance of *Arya Varna* and *Dasa Varna* divisions is attributed to the conquest of the indigenous inhabitants by the Aryans. The *Dasa* and *Dasyus* after being conquered were treated as slaves and Shudra. The word *Dasa* originally meant a member of the peoples conquered by the Aryans in their first invasion of India. The term 'Rajanya', 'Vaisya', and 'Sudra' occur only in the Purush-Sukhta, the term 'Brahmana' also being rare in the Rigveda. The term 'Kshatriya' of which 'Rajanya' is an earlier variant occurs but seldom in the Rigveda. The term 'Brahman' denotes 'a priest by profession' only in some passages, while in others it denotes any person who was distinguished by genius or virtue or one who for some reason, was deemed specially receptive of the divine inspiration. A sharp distinction was made between the three higher classes and the Shudra. The former were twice-born (*dvija*), once at their natural birth and again at their initiation, when they were invested with the sacred thread and received into Aryan Society. The Sudra had no initiation, and was often not looked on as Aryan at all. The term 'Sudra' was evidently applied to the inhabitants of the villages of the aborigines which lived in hunting and fishing and acknowledged the over lordship of their Aryan neighbors. In course of time it included even *dasyu-varna* or dark-skinned people who remained beyond the pale of the Aryan State and who were virtually excluded from the religious and ritual cult of the Aryans. The fourfold division was in theory functional. Manu lays down that the duty of the Brahman is to study and teach, to sacrifice, and to give and receive gifts, the Kshatriya must protect the people, sacrifice and study, the

Vaisya also sacrifices and studies, but his chief function is to breed cattle, to till the earth, to pursue trade and to lend money, the Sudra's duty is only to serve the three higher classes and it is better, Manu adds elsewhere, "to do one's own duty badly than another's well".

The term Varna is used definitely in the sense of Caste without reference to colour, in the Rig Vedic age. Guilds of Workers tended to crystallize into castes, as occupations became more or less hereditary example, Chariot-makers, the smiths, the leather-workers and the carpenters. The role and importance of each division became hereditary during the later Vedic period.

Firstly, the Brahman were a great divinity in human form. It was thought his spiritual powers could instantly destroy the king and his army, if they attempted to infringe his rights. According to *Sathapatha Brahmana*, the Brahmana is acknowledged even by himself unsuited for kingship (V.1.1.12.), in the later Vedic period, some Brahman claimed great privileges and in every respect he demanded precedence, honour and worship. The Brahman of the later Vedic period were divided into exogamous septs (*gotra*), a system which was copied in part by other classes and has survived to the present day. Often the Brahman lived under the patronage of a king or a chief, and was provided for by grants of tax-free land, farmed by peasants, who would pay their taxes to the Brahman, instead of to the king, but there was also land-owning Brahman, who cultivate large estates by hired labors or serfs. The religious Brahman might have a high post at court, and the Purohita's importance in the state was very influential and many sources reveal that before coming to a final decision the king should consult deliberate privately with him (*Arthashastra*). Other Brahman might earn a competence as teachers of the Veda and of other branches of learning. *Kalida's Sakuntala* gives a charming picture of a settlement of such pious Brahman, living simply but not too austere in huts in the forest and other Brahman became solidarity ascetics.

Opinions differed as to whether a Brahman engaged in a secular profession was worthy of the respect accorded to the practicing member of his class, and no clear ruling is laid down. Manu, the most authoritative of the Smritis, is uncertain on this point, and in different parts of the text diametrically opposed views are given. There is a clear remarkable passage in the early *Chandogya Upanishads* about different role of a Brahman. Another early reference to the gluttony of Brahman occurs in the *Aitareya Brahmana* in an interesting passage which describes the other three classes from the point of view of the warrior; here the Brahman is "a receiver of gifts, a drinker of soma, an eater of food, to be expelled at will. There are however few frontal attacks on brahminical pretensions, even in the literature of the Buddhists and in the Gupta times, who came nearest to an anti-brahminical point of view. Varahamihira in his *Brihat-Samhita* assigns different quarters of a city to these classes. This is proved by a number of authentic instances of Brahman adopted the occupations of the classes below them. In the *Dasakumara-charita* (a prose romance) and Hieun Tsang accounts, we hear even of a colony of Brahman robbers living by the occupation of *kiratas* in the vindhyas forests (Madhya Pradesh).

The Brahman in the later Vedic period show a corresponding adjustment. From concentration upon the expensive fire-sacrifice, it has come down to everyday witchcraft, designed for personal gain of all social grades. There are charms to cure disease and possession by demons of disease, prayers for long life, incantations for the obtaining of a husband or wife, a son, charms for royalty and for success in battle (*Atharveda*). Fields, the house, the cattle can be protected by formula, the seed is blessed at sowing (AV.VI.142), exercised of all vermin infesting the grain, there are prayers for success in gambling and the merchant has his own prayer for successful venture (AV.III.15) with a hundredfold gain of wealth through wealth. Naturally, the Brahmana takes smaller fees, generally a porridge (AV.XI.1; II.3) prepared in a special way.

The second class was the ruling one, the members of which were in the Vedic period called Rajanya and later Kshatriya. The theoretical duty of the Kshatriya was protection which included fighting in war and governing in peace. In *Arthashastra*, suggests that Kings were expected to patronize art, letters and learning. In all the sources the king is addressed that he must be prompt in the administration of justice and always accessible to his people. A strong king was always a check on brahminical pretensions, just as the Brahman were a check on the pretensions of the king. Manu describes the warlike peoples on the fringes of Aryan civilization, including the Greeks (*Yavana*), the Scyths (*Saka*). And the Parthians (*Pahlava*), as Kshatriyas who had fallen from grace through their neglect of the sacred law, but who could be received once more into the Aryan fold by adopting the orthodox way of life and performing appropriate penitential sacrifices. This provision might be applied to almost any conquering people, and the Rajputs, in later times the Kshatriyas per excellence, were no doubt largely descended from such invaders. The Kshatriyas claimed and received certain privileges. They continued old customs not in keeping with orthodoxy, with such persistence that the Brahminical lawgivers were forced to give them legal status. Thus marriage by capture was permitted to the Kshatriya, as were the clandestine liaison and the *svayamvara*, at which a girl chose her husband from among the assembled suitors. Sometimes the Kshatriya revolt against the social norms as in case of Buddha and mostly Pali scriptures where the names of the four classes are mentioned together that of the Kshatriya usually comes first. In Vedic times the Vaishya, or mercantile class, though entitled to the services of the priesthood and to the sacred thread of initiation, was but a poor third to the Brahman and Kshatriyas. In the *Aitareya Brahmana* passage to which we have referred the Vaishya is described as "paying tribute to another, to be lived on by another, to be oppressed at will". Other passages in early Brahminical literature show him as a wretched and down-trodden cultivator or petty merchant, who is of no interest to his betters except as a source of profit. According to Manu the special duty of the Vaishya was keeping cattle which were made over to his charge at the creation of the world. The class evidently originated in the ordinary peasant tribes-man of the Rig Veda, but long before the law book ascribed to Manu was composed Vaishya's had many other activities. The ideal Vaishya had expert knowledge of jewels, metals, cloth, threads, spices, perfumes and all manner of merchandise- he was, in fact, the ancient Indian business-man.

Though the Brahmana literature gives the Vaishya few rights and human status, the Buddhist and Jaina scriptures, a few centuries later in date and of more easterly provenance, show that he was not always oppressed in practice. They mention many wealthy merchants living in great luxury, and powerfully organised in guilds. Here the ideal Vaishya is not the humble taxpaying cattle-breeder, but the *asitikotivibhava*, the man possessing eight million *panas*. Wealthy Vaishya's were respected by kings and enjoyed their favour and confidence. It was they, rather than the Kashtriya, who chiefly favoured the rising unorthodox religions of Buddhism and Jainism. They formed by this time, at least in the regions of Magadha and Kosala, a true bourgeoisie, no doubt small in number, but very important. Numerous inscriptions from Sunga times onwards record the great donations of Vaishya merchants and skilled craftsmen to religious causes, especially to Buddhism, and show that they were prosperous and influential.

The word Sudra is of doubtful etymology and occurs only once in Rig Veda, it was perhaps originally the name of a non-Aryan tribe, which became subordinate to the conquerors, and the beginnings of the Sudra class may be accounted for in this way, though it certainly included other elements. According to *Aitareya Brahmana*, Sudra was a servant of another and could be expelled at will. Sudra has no right of property as against the 'Rajanya' especially the king. According to *Kathaka Samhita*, the Sudra cannot milk the cow for the agnihotra-milk. Sudras were not "twice-born". For them there was no initiation into full Aryan status, and they were not regularly considered Aryans, though the *Arthashastra* in its chapters on slavery specifically mentions them as such. The Sudra was in fact a second class citizen, on the fringes of Aryan society. As the rigidity of Brahmanic observances increased, groups which refused to accept orthodox custom, or clung to old practices which were no longer respectable, fell to the ranks of Sudras. There are today castes which are branded by the Brahmans as Sudras because they adhere to customs which have long become objectionable, such as meat eating or the remarriage of widows. Persons born illegitimately, even when of pure high-class blood, were counted as Sudras. Sudras were of two kinds, pure or not-excluded (*aniravasita*) and excluded (*niravasita*). The latter were quite outside the pale of Hindu society, and were virtually indistinguishable from the great body of people later known as untouchables. The distinction was made on the basis of the customs of the Sudra group in question and the profession followed by its members. According to the brahminical textbooks the chief duty of the pure Sudra was to wait on the other three classes. He was to eat the remnants of his master's food, wear his cast-off clothing, and use his old furniture. Even when he had the opportunity of becoming wealthy he might not do so, "for Sudra who makes money is distressing to the brahmans". He had few rights and little value was set on his life in law. A Brahman killing a Sudra performed the same penance as for killing a cat or dog. The Sudra was not allowed to hear or repeat the Vedas. A land where Sudras were numerous would suffer great misery. Thus the textbooks give small hope of happiness to the wretched Sudra, who could do little but serve his betters in unpleasant and servile tasks, and whose only hope was rebirth in a higher social class; but there is good evidence that Sudras did not always live the humble and wretched life laid down for them in the sacred law. There is

mention of Sudras engaged in manufacture and commerce, and by the Mauryan times many Sudras were free peasants. The Sudra had a place of sorts in the Hindu fold, and was encouraged to imitate the customs of the higher classes. Though he might not hear the Vedas, the Epics and Puranas were open to him, and he had a part in the devotional religion which become more and more popular from the post-Mauryan times onwards and ultimately eclipsed the older cults; in the Bhagavad Gita the lord Krishna himself promises full salvation to those Sudras who turn to him. From the point of view of most medieval sects, class and caste were affairs of the body rather than of the spirit, and verses expressing the fundamental equality of all men are to be found in Dravidian devotional literature and in vernacular religious literature of later times. Theoretically Buddhism and Jainism made no class distinctions in religious affairs.

Below the Sudras were the early representatives of the people who were later called untouchables, outcastes, depressed classes, or scheduled castes. Buddhist literature and the early Dharma Sutras show that several centuries before Christ there already existed groups of people who, though serving the Aryans in very menial and dirty tasks, were looked on as quite outside the pale. Sometimes they were called the "Fifth class" (*pancama*), but most authorities rejected this term, as if to insist that they were to be excluded from the Aryan social order altogether. Numerous groups of these people are mentioned, by named which are non-Aryan in origin, and were probably those of aboriginal tribes which came under the sway of the advancing Aryans. Chief of these groups was the *candala*, a term which came to be used loosely for many types of untouchable. The *Candala* was not allowed to live in an Aryan town or village, but had to dwell in special quarters outside the boundaries. Though some *candalas* had other means of livelihood, in theory their main task was the carrying and cremation of corpses, and they also served as executioners of criminals. Certain classes of outcastes or untouchables seem to have gained their unenviable position through the growth of the sentiment of non-violence- for instance *thenisada*, who was a hunter, the fishing caste called *kaivarta*, and the leather worker (*karavara*). The *pukkusa* (this is the Pali form; the Sanskrit is *paulkasa*) who appears as a sweeper in Buddhist literature, may have fallen in the status because members of his class made and sold alcoholic liquor. More difficult to account for are such base classes as the basket-maker (*vena*) and the chariot-maker (*rathakara*).

In early Vedic times the latter was a most respected craftsman, but soon fell to the status of an impure Sudra or outcaste. In Madhyadesa, at the beginning of the fifth century, as Fa-hien tells us, the *Candalas* were required to live outside the boundaries of the towns and market places on approaching which they had to strike a piece of wood as a warning to others to avoid their touch. In the first part of the seventh century, according to Hiuen Tsang, butchers, executioners, scavengers etc., lived in dwellings marked by a distinctive sign and lying outside the city. In the *Dasakumara-charita*, the *Harsha-charita*, the *Kadambari* and other works of the late Gupta period we get vivid glimpses of the dress and manners as well as the religious and social customs of these out castes. In later India nearly every untouchable group imagined that some other group was



lower than itself, and this stratification evidently began quite early. Another class of untouchable was the *mleccha*, a word commonly used for outer barbarians of whatever race or colour. As an invader he was loathed, but once he had come into contact with Indian ways and was less strange and forbidding his status might improve. In fact it was not blood which made a group untouchable, but conduct. Generally there was no chance of an individual rising in the social scale, but for a group this was possible, over a number of generations, by adopting more orthodox practices and following the rule of the Smritis. Thus the India class system was always somewhat fluid.

## 2. Rationale and changes in the Varna system

The Varna framework therefore was visualized as a structure for the integration of varying sub-systems, rather than merely being a reflection of the socio-economic hierarchy. This would account for the seeming changelessness of the rules of social functioning, although within each sub-system, change was clearly registered. That is Varna system was a consciously worked out structure by the mid-first millennium BC is apparent from the late hymn added into the Rigveda. Not only was the stratification rationalized in the concept of Varna, but the function of each group was more clearly defined. The Brahman was now less of the seer and more of the expert on ritual. The more elaborate rituals such as the consecration sacrifices for the rajās required an array of trained professional priests. The simpler *griha* (domestic) rituals described in the *Grihya-sutras*, mainly concerned with of passage, required a single Brahman in most cases. The increasing importance of both categories of rituals emphasized not only the political role of the Brahman as a source of legitimization for chiefs, but also as the authority and sanction of cultural identity in relation to the *grihapatis*, as also for the assimilation of new groups. On the basis of Varna, the elite (Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaishya) would be a closed group with little or no upward mobility. The later Vedic texts also put an emphasis on Varna system. The Varna system, firmed up with Dharma or universal law, was an attempt to establish a social law for the smooth functioning of the society. During the later Vedic age with the shift in the geographical focus, the Vedic people encountered many non-Vedic tribes, interactions with whom led to the emergence of a complex society. Apparently on this account the Atharveda depicts a host of non-Vedic rituals which were sanctioned by the priests. The dominant groups tried to maintain their position by introducing rigid laws; the geo-political compulsions forced them to be less stringent. However the rules were not cast in iron yet. The division of the social groups was based on occupation alone. Thus even in the post-Vedic period, the Varna system did not prevent non-Kshatriyas from becoming rulers, as did the Nandas and the Mauryas. Nor did it stop Brahmans from becoming kings, as became the Sungas. Anyway, the concept of Varna during later Vedic period was rudimentary in nature.

According to Romila Thapar, the key to the understanding of the Varna system lies in not seeing it as a framework of the hierarchial layers of social orders each fitting nearly below the other. It may be more meaningful to see it as a series of vertical parallels, each Varna (pure or mixed) as an independent entity with its own hierarchy based either on a tribal identity or an occupational identity. During the later Vedic period, several functional groups appeared as distinct castes and the social

status of some of them, such as tanners, hide-cleaners, and the like declined. From the sixth century onwards, some changes occurred in social organization. In the Gangetic plains of north India, the Vaishyas were regarded as free peasants, but land grants created landlords between the peasants, on the one hand, and the king, on the other, so the Vaishyas were reduced to the level of Shudras. This modified the old brahminical order, which spread from north India into Bengal and south India as a result of land grants to the Brahmana's, brought from the north from the 5th-6th centuries onwards. Frequent seizures of power and land grants gave rise to several categories of landed people. From the seventh Century onwards, numerous castes were created. A Purana of the eighth century states that thousands of mixed castes were produced by the connection of Vaishya women with men of lower castes. This implies that Sudras and the untouchables were divided into countless sub-castes, as were the Brahmans and Rajput's who constituted an important element in Indian polity and society around the seventh century. The number of caste increased given the nature of the economy in which people could not move from one place to another. In addition many tribal people were admitted into brahminical society on the basis of land grants given to the Brahmans in the aboriginal tracts. Most of these people were enrolled as Shudras and mixed castes. The Kali Age is characterized by *Varansankara*, that is intermixture of Varnas or social orders, which implies refusal of the Vaishyas and the Shudras to perform the producing functions assigned to them, that is, the Vaishya peasants declined to pay taxes and the Shudra refused to make their labour available. They did not respect the Varna boundaries relating to marriage and other types of social intercourse. In the face of such situation, the epics emphasize the importance of *danda* or coercive measures, and Manu lays down that the Vaishyas and Shudras should not be allowed to deviate from their duties. The kings appear as upholder and restorers of the Varna system.

## 3. Caste: A Historical Analysis

Relations between classes and social groups in later Hinduism were governed by rules of endogamy (marriage was only legitimate within the group), commensality (food was only to be received from and eaten in the presence of members of the same or a higher group), and craft-exclusiveness (each man was to live by the trade or profession of his own group, and not take up that of another). Megasthenes noted seven endogamous and craft-exclusive classes in India - philosophers, peasants, herdsmen, craftsmen and traders, soldiers, government officials and councilors. However his sevenfold division is certainly false, but he gives evidence to show that in Mauryan times class barriers were already hardening. Even in the Gupta period, the regulations were by no means rigid. Hypergamous intermarriage was recognized, the rule of craft-exclusiveness was often ignored, or circumvented by the convenient escape clauses of *apad-dharma* (duty when in stress), and in the earlier law books the Brahman was permitted to accept food from an Aryan. It was only in late medieval times that it was finally recognized that exogamy and sharing meals with members of other classes were quite impossible for respectable people. These customs, and many others such as widow-remarriage, were classed as *kalivarjya*- customs once permissible, but to be avoided in this dark Kali age, when men are no longer naturally righteous. When the Portuguese came to

India in the 16th century they found the Hindu community divided into many separate groups, which they called *castas*, meaning tribes, clans or families. The name stuck, and became the usual word for the Hindu social group. In attempting to account for the remarkable proliferation of castes in the 18th and 19th century India, authorities credulously accepted the traditional view that by a process of intermarriage and subdivision the 3000 or more castes of modern India had evolved from the four primitive classes, and the term 'caste' was applied indiscriminately to both Varna or class, and *jati* or caste proper. This is a false terminology; castes rise and fall in the social scale, and old castes die out and new ones are formed, but the four great classes are stable. They are never more or less than four, and for over 2000 years their order of precedence has not altered.

All ancient Indian sources make a sharp distinction between the two terms; *varna* is much referred to, but *jati* very little, and when it does appear in literature it does not always imply the comparatively rigid and exclusive social group of later times. Caste is the development of thousands of years, from the association of many different racial and other groups in a single cultural system. It is impossible to show its origin conclusively, since early literature paid scant attention to it; but it is practically certain that caste did not originate from the four classes. There were subdivisions in the four classes at a very early date, but the Brahman *gotras*, which go back to Vedic times, are not castes, since the *gotras* are exogamous, and members of the same *gotra* are to be found in many Castes.

Perhaps the first faint trace of caste is to be found in the careful cataloguing of trades and professions in later Vedic literature, as if their members were looked on almost as distinct species. In the Pali scriptures many groups of traders and craftsmen are described as living apart; thus we read of villages of Brahmans, potters, hunters and robbers, and of separate quarters in the towns for different trades and professions. Many trades were organised in guilds, in which some authorities have seen the origin of the commercial castes; but these trade groups cannot be counted as fully developed castes. A 5th century inscription from Mandasor shows us a guild of silk-weavers emigrating in a body from Lata (the region of the lower Narmada) to Mandasor, and taking up many other crafts and professions, from soldiering to astrology, but still maintaining its guild consciousness. We have no evidence that this group was endogamous or commensal, and it was not certainly not craft-exclusive; but its strong cooperate sense is that of a caste in the making. Hieun Tsang (a Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, traveller, and translator who described the interaction between Chinese Buddhism and Indian Buddhism in the early Tang dynasty) in the seventh century, was well aware of the four classes, and also mentioned many mixed classes, no doubt accepting the orthodox view of the time that these sprang from the intermarriage of the four, but he shows no clear knowledge of the existence of caste in its modern form.

Indian society developed a very complex social structure, arising partly from tribal affiliations and partly from professional associations, which was continuously being elaborated by the introduction of new racial groups into the community, and by the development of new crafts. In the Middle ages the system

became more or less rigid, and the social group was now a caste in the modern sense. To the present day the life of the lower orders is much affected by caste than by Varna- it is not being a Vaishya or a Sudra, but being an *ahir*, a *kayasth*, or a *sonar* which matters- and corporate feeling is centered around the caste group, whether based on region, race, profession or religion. Professor J.H.Hutton has interpreted the caste system as an adaptation of one of the most primitive of social relationships, whereby a small clan, living in a comparatively isolated village, would hold itself aloof from its neighbors by a complex series of taboos, and he has found embryonic caste features in the social structure of some of the wild tribes of present-day India. Early Tamil literature gives no evidence of caste, but the growth of Aryan influence and the development of a more complex political and economic structure produced a system in some ways more rigid than that of the North. The Chola period is an important feature of South Indian caste structure had appeared, and this has survived to the present day. In the Dravidian country groups claiming to be Kshatriyas were few, other than the ruling families, and Vaishyas were equally rare. Nearly the whole of population were Brahmans, Sudras or untouchables, and the Sudra castes, which formed the mass of the people, were divided into two great caste groups, known as the right and left hands. The great rivalry which still exists between these groups is at least a thousand years old. On the right are the trading castes, some weaving castes, musicians, potters, washermen, barbers and most of the cultivating and laboring castes; on the left are various castes of craftsmen, such as weavers and leather workers, cowherds and some cultivating castes. But we have no evidence of how this strange bisection of society arose. The institution of caste, independent of the government and with social ostracism as its most severe sanction, was a powerful factor in the survival of Hinduism. The Hindu, living under an alien political order imposed from above, retained his cultural individuality largely through his caste, which received most of the loyalty elsewhere felt towards king, nation and city. Caste was so strong that until recent years all attempts at breaking it down have ended in failure. Equalitarian religious reformers of the late middle Ages, such as Basava, Ramanand, and Kabir, tried to abolish caste among new castes, and in some cases divided into castes within themselves. The Sikhs, despite the outspoken sentiments of their gurus and the adoption of rites such as the ritual meal eaten in common, deliberately intended to break down caste prejudice, did not overcome caste feeling. Even the Muslims, for all their equalitarian faith, formed caste groups. The Syrian Christians of Kerala early divided into sections which took on a caste character, and when in the 16th century Roman Catholic missionaries began to make converts in South India their flocks brought their caste prejudices with them, and high caste converts held themselves aloof from those of the lower orders.

#### 4. Conclusion

Caste is one of the major determinants of status in Hindu society and the Varna system of classification is found partly convenient. Moreover it is true that economic interdependence has compelled the higher castes to accept the lower castes as their neighbors as in case of Kashmiri Pandits in Kashmir. The Kashmiri Pandits were the only caste of brahminical Hinduism represented in Kashmir. Along occupational ranks, caste was separated between those who studied Persian and joined

secular professions, and those who studied religious scriptures, Sanskrit and they executed priestly responsibilities. The *Karkuns* (characteristically the merchants and administrative group) were among the earlier who studied Persian and engaged into secular professions and the *Bhasha Bhatta* (linguistic Pandit, derivative from the Sanskrit guru for guide or preceptor) took up learning religious scriptures, Sanskrit and performed priestly duties. To resolve the issue of "who will study what," the Pandits adapted kinship roles into the family classification system. Older men with daughters would request their daughter's son to become the *Bhasha Bhatta* and administer to the religious prerequisites of his maternal grandfather's family. However, the constitution of India is further wedded to the ideal of removing caste injustices. Caste expedites interdependence between persons, economic, ritual

and social. On the contrary, the system of Varna focusses on law of social life and the allocation of duties, where harmony and cooperation were the bedrocks. The Vedic classics tells us that each human being has the capacities of all four Varnas or human types; just as we all share the same type of human body and its different limbs. Each person is potentially a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Varna divisions were based on individual temperament, quality, aptitude and mental state but in latter times it got merged with birth alone. Latter the complexities got more severe and the advent of caste developed. Hence the original Varna system was quite flexible in which one's Varna could be changed based on one's skill and was not fixed as it often understood.

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