

SOCIETY'S CASTE SYSTEM: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS FROM SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S VEDĀNTIC IDEAL OF EQUALITY

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Abstract

Caste or varṇa system is still a live issue in the present era. Many socialists and philosophers try to explain the caste system in their own ways. Swami-Vivekananda is one of them. He accepts the caste system based on qualities. To him, we are created with three qualities or guṇas. That is why we are different from each other by nature. So, we should act according to our nature. These three guṇas make someone a brāhmaṇa or a kṣatriya or a vaiśya, or a śūdra. We should not treat the caste system as hereditary. For a long time, it has been interpreted in the wrong way. That is why there is more dissimilarity in our society. According to him, we differ from each other only in manifestations not in essence. We are the same in essence as Sat-Cit-Ānanda Brahman. Through this paper, I will show how Swami-Vivekananda explains society's caste system from the Vedāntic ideal of equality.

Keywords: Caste, Dharma, Priestcraft, Hereditary, Ṛgveda, Ṛṣihood

Paper

Varṇa or caste system plays a predominant role in ancient India as well as in modern India, though it has been modified based on socio-economic status in the modern era. In general, the term *varṇa* is used in various senses. In *the practical Sanskrit- English dictionary*, Vaman Shivram Apte uses the term *varṇa* to mention colour, hue, complexion, beauty, a class of men, tribe, caste, class, race, kind species, fame glory, a good quality, merit, virtue, etc (Apte 947). In *the Raghuvamśa of Kālidāsa*, it is used as a class (four classes) of men (Kale 127). In some of *Ṛgveda's* verses, it is 'associated with groups of people having a skin of dark or fair colours' (Sharma 65). It is the earliest meaning of the term *varṇa*. Based on account of the colour of people's skin, ancient human society was divided into two *varṇas* or classes. These are *ārya varṇa* and *dasyu varṇa*. The *ārya varṇa* had a white colour and the *dasyus* had a dark colour. In a way, *śūdra* was treated as *dasyu* mainly because of its dark skin. According to P.V. Kane, the term '*varṇa*' itself is not used once in the *Puruṣa-sūkta* (henceforth PS) of the *Ṛgveda*, though the terms *brāhmaṇa*, *rājanya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra* do occur. Moreover, the words *brāhmaṇa*, *rājanya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*

do not occur together anywhere else in the whole of the *Ṛgveda* except in the *Puruṣa-sūkta*, even though the terms *brāhmaṇa* and *kṣatriya* do occur frequently in the *Ṛgveda* (Kane 27). For him, ‘the *Puruṣa-sūkta* is a much later hymn than most of the hymns of the *Ṛgveda*’ (27). The origin of the four *varṇas* is found for the first time in the *Puruṣa-sūkta*. According to the *Puruṣa-sūkta*, this entire world, ‘whatever has been (*bhūta*) and whatever will come to be (*bhavya*) is *Puruṣa* alone. Further (*Uta*), this *Puruṣa* is the lord (*īshāna*) of immortality (*amṛta*)’ (10.90.02). “The *Puruṣa* who was got ready to be sacrificed, had *brāhmaṇa* as his face (or mouth), the *rājanya* (or *kṣatriya*) as his arms, the *vaiśya* as his thighs; and the *śūdra* was born from his feet” (10.90.12). It means that the above-mentioned four *varṇas* originated from different parts of the body of the sacrificed *Puruṣa*. The *Manu Samhita* (henceforth MS) like the *Puruṣa-sūkta* claims that for the sake of the welfare of the world, the Supreme Being creates the *brāhmaṇa* from His mouth, the *kṣatriya* from His arms, the *vaiśya* from His thighs, and the *śūdra* from His feet (MS 1.31). Here, the four *varṇas* are described as of divine origin in the *Puruṣa-sūkta* and the *Manu Samhita*. That is why the four-fold division of *varṇas* in these two *śāstras* is rigid as well as hereditary.

Swami-Vivekananda was known as Advaita Vedāntin. His Vedānta teaching known as Practical Vedānta is different from the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara. Śaṅkara’s Vedānta was in the hands of Sannyāsins: they went into the forest for the realization of Brahman through *jñāna-mārga*. Vivekananda brought Śaṅkara’s Vedānta into our practical life. To him, “Shankara left this Advaita philosophy in the hills and forest, while I have come to bring it out of those places and scatter it broadcast before the workaday world and society. The lion-roar of Advaita must resound in every hearth and home, in meadows and groves, over hills and plains” (Vivekananda Vol. VII 155-56). He, unlike Śaṅkara, does say that one can get *Mokṣa* through *karma-mārga* as well as *jñāna-mārga*. In this way, he harmonized between spiritual life and physical life.

His Vedānta philosophy’s central idea is the idea of oneness in the universe. He claims that we all are equal in the divine essence. To him, all beings (men and animals etc.) are reflections, not real. They are simply illusory reflections. In the universe, there is one Infinite Being and that Being appears as I and as you; but the appearance of divisions is a delusion after all. Only appears to be divided, the Infinite Being has not been divided (Vivekananda Vol. III 10). ‘He is both the subject and the object, He is the “I” and the “You”’ (10). Again he claims that all beings, (great or small) are equally manifestations of God; the difference is only in the manifestation (Vivekananda Vol. I 414). The God in you is the God in all (419). He is the *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* Brahman. He is in all, and he is all. He is the all in all. It means that we as

human beings are divine beings in human covering. When one realizes it through true knowledge, one gets *Jīvanmukti*. It is the aim and end of one's life. After getting *Jīvanmukti*, one can realize one's identity with the Absolute as 'I' am Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. However, it does not mean that Swami-Vivekananda does not accept differentiations in men. These differentiations may be physical, mental, or spiritual in different men. It does not mean that one has the right to get a special privilege to others. However, some important serious questions are: Does Swami Vivekananda accept the hereditary caste system? Can Swami Vivekananda's Vedānta philosophy remove all social evils of the caste system in the present era? Is Swami Vivekananda's caste system opposed to his Practical Vedānta? Does he accept the so-called Brāhmin's priestcraft? Is there any rational explanation for creating different castes in Swami-Vivekananda's philosophy? These and many more relevant important ethical questions need to be addressed to discuss Swami-Vivekananda's Caste system from the Vedāntic ideal of equality.

Caste System Based On Qualities or *Guṇas*

As a Vedāntic, he believes in spiritual equality in men. That is why he claims spiritual equality in the *varṇa* or caste system. He, like Lord Kṛṣṇa, explains the *varṇa* system based on *guṇas*. In the *Bhagavadgītā* (henceforth BG), Lord Kṛṣṇa holds that he creates four *varṇas* based on *guṇas* and *karma* (BG 4.13). The four *varṇas* are brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya, and śūdra. For Swami- Vivekananda, these four castes are everywhere present at all times, in all civilized societies (Vivekananda Vol. IV 447). There are three *guṇas*. These are *Sattvagūṇa*, *Rajogūṇa*, and *Tamogūṇa* According to the Sāṃkhya Philosophy, the *Sattvagūṇa* is 'responsible for the manifestation of objects in consciousness' (Sharma.154). It produces pleasure in one's body. It is white. It is the cause of the power of reflection, upward movement, happiness, and bliss. The *Rajogūṇa* is the main cause of motion, pain, and restless activity in one's body. It means foulness. It is red. And the *Tamogūṇa* is the principle of inertia. It is the cause of apathy ignorance, negativity, indifference, and confusion in one's body. It is dark. "These three *guṇas* which constitute *Prakṛti* are never separate. They conflict and yet co-operate with one another and are always found intermingled" (154-155). It is also mentioned that these three *guṇas* cannot remain static even for a moment. It means that they are said to be ever-changing (155).

According to Swamiji, these three *guṇas* make someone a brāhmaṇa, or a kṣatriya, or a vaiśya or a śūdra. It means that these *guṇas* are present inherently in every *varṇa* or caste, more or less. Every time one or other of these *guṇas* predominates in us in varying degrees and it is manifested accordingly. He explained his above claim with the help of our different pursuits, for example: when we are engaged in serving

for pay, we are in sūdrahood; when we are busy transacting some piece of business for profit, on our own account, we are vaiśyas; when we fight to right wrongs, then the *guṇas* of kṣatriyas come out in us; and when we meditate on God or pass our time in conversation about Him, then we are brāhmaṇas. Naturally, we can change our caste into another. Otherwise, how did Parashurāma become a kṣatriya and Vishvāmitra become a brāhmaṇa? (Vivekananda Vol.V Pp380-381). According to the Indian tradition, Vishvāmitra was a kṣatriya, ‘who officiated as a priest at his brothers’ sacrifice, was a prince of the kuru family’ (Ghurye 44). He was the chief author of *Maṇḍala* 3 of the *Ṛgveda*. He was also the author of the *Gāyatrī Mantra*. By birth, Parashurāma was a brāhmaṇa, but the *guṇas* of kṣatriya come out in him. That is why he fought with many kings to establish righteousness in society. Some scholars claim he had the skills of brāhmaṇa and kṣatriya. It would be noticed in this connection that Vishvāmitra was a kṣatriya, but due to his qualities, he changed himself into brāhmaṇa. Parashurāma was a brāhmaṇa, but due to his qualities, he fought as a kṣatriya. In this connection, Swamiji himself also mentioned that SatyakāmaJābōla, Nārada, Drona, Karna, Vasishtha, and others of questionable parentage were raised to the position of higher castes (brāhmaṇa and kṣatriya) in virtue of their superior knowledge or valour; but it remains to be seen how the maidservant, fisherman, prostitute or the charioteer class was benefited by these uplifting. Again, on the other hand, the fallen from the higher castes were always brought down to fill the ranks of the sūdras (Vivekananda Vol. IV 467).

Therefore, it is not always true that the son of a brāhmaṇa must be a brāhmaṇa. In this regard, he gave an example of a brāhmaṇa, namely, Aghore Chakravarti of Braghbazar, whose nephew became a sweeper. Who is Ṛṣi? In reply, Ṛṣi Vātsyāyana claims that “He who has attained through proper means the direct realization of *Dharma*, he alone can be a Rishi even if he is a Mlechchha by birth” (Vivekananda Vol. III 470). In this connection, Swamiji says that in ancient times, Vyāsa, the son of a fisherwoman, Vasishtha, born of an illegitimate union, Nārada, the son of a maidservant with uncertain parentage, and many others of like nature attained Ṛṣihood (470). There are many examples as Guru Rabidas, Haridas Thakur, etc, where one changes oneself into another caste. Guru Rabidas belonged to the *Chamar* community. His father's original occupation was leatherwork. That work made his family an untouchable caste as the *Chamar* community. However, he changed himself into Guru. He was treated as a Dalit Guru. He was an Indian mystic poet-saint of the Bhakti movement. He was also the founder of the Ravidassia religion. Through his brāhmaṇa qualities, he made himself a spiritual figure in modern society when the so-called rigid caste system was at its peak position. Haridas Thakur was born into a Muslim family but he became a prominent Vaiṣṇava saint. All these above-mentioned examples show

that we can change ourselves in the direction of spiritual figures. It means that one lower caste can change oneself into a higher caste by acquiring higher qualities (Vivekananda IV 290). Therefore, it is clear from the above discussion that Vivekananda does not accept the rigid and hereditary caste system as mentioned in the *Puruṣa-sūkta* and the *Manu Samhita* because the explanations of the caste system of these *śāstras* oppose his qualitative caste system. He preached his caste system based on the Vedāntic ideal of equality or oneness, where everyone can change his caste into another caste in the direction of spiritual figures by doing actions according to his qualities.

Here it must also be clear that the social caste system existed long before the *Bhagavadgītā* and Vivekananda. But the *Bhagavadgītā* preached their qualitative caste system based on Advaita philosophy. It just speaks on the origin of four *varṇas* or castes, and their prescribed duties (*svadharmas*) to get *Mokṣa*. Some important serious queries are: Is there any chance for a lower caste to change his caste into a higher caste? If there is any chance then how does one lower caste change oneself into a higher caste? Is there any example in the *Bhagavadgītā* where a brāhmin's son may be brought up to be a śūdra and vice versa? How do we level our caste in the present era? These and many more relevant important queries were not clearly solved in the *Bhagavadgītā*. It means that there are so many ambiguities about the caste system in it. That is why the *Bhagavadgītā* failed to implement its qualitative caste system in our society in a proper way. As a result, the so-called brāhmaṇas can misinterpret the messages of the *Bhagavadgītā* to the common people till now with their priestcraft (which is in its nature cruel and heartless). On the other hand, Vivekananda tried to explain the qualitative caste system based on his Practical Vedānta. We have seen that Vivekananda solved rationally some of the above-mentioned queries with his Practical Vedānta and we will see that some of the above-mentioned queries will be logically solved from his Vedānta. It means that Vivekananda's explanation of the qualitative caste system is more logical and rational than the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The Caste System is a Natural Order as a Social Group

Swami Vivekananda realizes that human beings cannot live without making a group in society, because they cannot get rid of that. Wherever you go, there will be caste (Vivekananda III 260). Human beings are social beings. It is the nature of human beings to form themselves into groups. They make groups according to their inner inclinations and inherent qualities. The above-mentioned three qualities play an important role in forming such a group. These three qualities predominate in everyone to a different degree. If the qualities of brāhmaṇa predominate in someone then he should perform as a brāhmaṇa. If the qualities of śūdra predominate in someone then

he should perform as a śūdra and so on. It leads that qualities are the guiding principles within human beings. One who does actions according to these qualities, acts spontaneously and freely in society. It is known as the original caste or *Jāti* system. In the system, everyone is free to express his qualitative nature, in this way, it remained for thousands of years (Vivekananda Vol. IV 363). The present society's caste system is not real *Jāti*. It is a hindrance to real *Jāti*'s progress. Moreover, it really has prevented the free action of real caste or variation (363). It means that one should be allowed to live a life according to oneself in the original caste system. One should follow the social duties according to one's qualities otherwise many problems would arise there. That is why the duties of someone should not be imposed hereditary.

For Swami-Vivekananda, the fourfold classification of the social group (caste) is the natural order. It is good (Vivekananda Vol.III 260). It would be noticed that this social group or caste is still the most scientific system. In these groups, one can do one duty and another can do another duty. However, it does not mean that one must claim an advantage over another. It does not mean that there should be any privilege for anyone. It lays equal chances for everyone to rise to a higher, through his own efforts. Thus qualitative caste system grades human beings. To develop society, the original caste system is needed in our society because everyone's capacities to do work are not the same. That is why we need to vary based on the qualitative caste system, but not on the hereditary caste system. In this regard, he claims that the original social caste should not go; but should only be readjusted occasionally (Vivekananda Vol. V 207). Those who want to abolish this original caste system are nonsense.

Most of the teachers from the Upaniṣads to the present day wanted to break the barriers of the caste system which was in its degenerate state (190). In other words, many great teachers made a great effort to break down the hereditary caste system. One of them was Buddha, who tried to abolish the hereditary caste system and tried to re-establish the original caste system which was the most glorious institution in India. To Swamiji, "Caste is a social custom, and all our great preachers have tried to break it down. From Buddhism downwards, every sect has preached against caste, and every time it has only riveted the chains" (316).

The hereditary caste system hinders society's progress and prevents men's natural order. It is a barrier to India's progress. It has been separated among us for a long time. As a result, we cannot realize the truth of a functional division of society. It means that it is opposed to the religion of the Vedānta (316). It is not a religious constitution. If we accept it as a religious constitution then we make a big mistake. It has nothing to do with religion (Vivekananda Vol. IV 195). For this reason, in the past, various great persons like Gautama Buddha, Ram Mohan Roy etc made the great

mistake of holding the caste system as a religious institution. As a result, they tried to pull down caste and religion altogether and failed (Vivekananda Vol. V 23).

The Role of Priest craft for Preaching Hereditary Caste System in Our Society

For him, caste is a very good thing. It is the plan we want to follow. What it really is, not one in a million understands (206). Here he talked about the original caste system, not the hereditary caste system. To him, due to ambiguities and misinterpretation of our *sāstras*, the *brāhmaṇas* preached it as hereditary with their priest craft. Priest craft is one of the main evils of the degenerating caste system in India. The so-called *brāhmaṇas* preached a caste system as hereditary for their own benefit. They kept away lower cast to study *sāstras*. They hold higher social status along with maximum privileges in our society. They give the next social status to *kṣatriya* along with maximum privileges but less to *brāhmaṇas* and the last status to *sūdras* along with minimum privileges. It is the *brāhmaṇas*, who preached the hereditary caste system with the help of their priest craft to get more advantage. In this regard, it is nothing wrong to say that the hereditary caste system is nothing other than a hereditary trade guide. That is why society has no faith in the *brāhminhood* of the so-called *brāhmaṇa*.

For Vivekananda, the enjoyment of an advantage over another is a privilege (Vivekananda Vol. I 425). It means that they keep away us from the qualitative caste system. That is why Swamiji opposed *brāhmaṇas*' harmful system of priest craft. In this regard, Swamiji holds that 'priest craft is in its nature cruel and heartless. That is why religion goes down where priest craft arises (418). The idea of social privilege is the bane of social life as well as human life (413). As a result, he concludes that no privilege mental, physical, or spiritual should be accepted by anyone because human beings are the same in the divine essence. To him, we are the same in power, the same potentiality is in us; we are differed only in manifestation as more or less. Where is the claim to privilege? (413). There is no meaning that someone is born higher than another in the Vedānta Philosophy. That is why no privilege should be claimed there. Again he claims that the Supreme Being is in all human souls. He is the Soul of man. What privilege can men ask? (413-414). Therefore, the philosophy of Vedānta breaks down all privileges that higher castes claim as their own.

The Solution of the Leveling of All Castes

He notices that by degrading the higher castes or by crushing the higher castes or *brāhmaṇas*, the problem of the leveling of caste is not solved. That is why he places stress on education to uplift the so-called lower castes and to develop their ethical and moral values. In this connection, he holds that we can level our society's caste with the help of appropriate education and culture, which is the strength of the higher castes

(Vivekananda Vol. III 306). Again he claims that we have to elevate all our caste first if we want to rise to a higher caste in India, and then there is nothing in our onward path to hold us back (Vivekananda Vol. IV 290). In this way, Swamiji gives a solution to the caste system in India. He also praises British Rule and Mohammedan Rule for removing exclusive privileges and claims of higher castes. To him, One-fifth of our Indian people have become Mohammedans, because the Mohammedan conquest of India came as a salvation to the downtrodden, to the poor. It was not the sword that did it all (Vivekananda Vol. III 309).

A Rational Explanation of Creating Different Castes

For Swamiji, the ideal man of our ancestors was the brāhmaṇa (210). An ideal brāhmaṇa works selflessly to acquire the power of love and propagate wisdom. Ideal brāhmaṇa is moral, spiritual, and good. He is the ideal of humanity and the man of God. He has known the Supreme Being. That is why he must not go. To him, the plan in India is to make everybody a brāhmaṇa (Vivekananda Vol. V 206). Here it would be clear that the ideal brāhmaṇa does not mean the so-called brāhmaṇa that we often see in our society. According to *Śanti-Parva* (henceforth SP) of the *Mahābhārata*, “There is in fact no distinction between the different castes. The whole world at first consisted of Brāhmaṇas. Created equally by Brahman, men have, on account of their acts, been divided into various castes” (SP 188.10). Vivekananda narrated this explanation of the *Mahābhārata* in his own way as there was only one caste which was brāhmaṇa at the beginning of *Satya Yuga*. They have divided themselves into different castes for different occupations by beginning degeneration. As a result, different castes were created in our society. For him, it is the only true and rational explanation for creating different castes. That is why he gives all credit to the brāhmaṇas for more men with real brāhminess have come from them and for all the other castes have come from them (Vivekananda Vol. III 308). Moreover, he also claims that if there is any defect in brāhmaṇas then we must be bold enough to speak of their defects, but at the same time, we must give all the credit to them which they deserve. To him, all the different castes will have to go back to the same condition, in the coming *Satya Yuga* (308). In other words, when the cycle of four *Yugas* (*Kṛta* or *Satya Yuga*, *Treta Yuga*, *Drapara Yuga*, and *Kali Yuga*) turns round then they (different castes) will be elevated to brāhminhood (212). He asks us to strive after that brāhminhood or Ṛṣihood, which should not be stopped till we have attained the goal (470). It means that everyone must do actions with the original caste system on the Vedāntic ideal of equality to get brāhminhood. As a result, everyone will get Ṛṣihood in the upcoming *Satya Yuga*. Every caste will be brought into single groups (brāhmin group), as was the case in *Satya Yuga*. According to him, it is ‘the scheme of human progress that has been laid out in the most perfect order by our ancestors’ (210) and we have to complete the

practical realization of that scheme. Here it would be noticed that the brāhmaṇa's priestcraft and brāhminhood are not identical. Therefore, four castes and many subdivisions of castes were created from brāhmaṇas, which has to be abolished and a single brāhmin caste to be made by uniting them all in the upcoming *Yuga* (Vivekananda Vol. V 407). It would be noted that he wants to establish a brāhminclass society based on the Vedāntic Ideal of equality. One class society means a classless society where no kind of privilege is to be granted.

Concluding Remarks

From the above discussion, I would like to conclude that Vivekananda's qualitative caste system is a discovery of natural originality in us. Though he was influenced by the *Bhagavadgītā's* qualitative caste system, at the same time he felt that it was unable to remove the hereditary caste system and failed to re-establish the original caste system. In other order, it was unable to prevent men's natural order because of its ambiguities. That is why he tried to reform our society with a qualitative caste system where a brāhmaṇa has two sons one can be brought up to be a śūdra and the other a brāhmin. It is an excellent mechanism of social adjustment that provides a chance for everyone to get brāhminhood. In this way, he was able to give a satisfactory explanation of a flexible caste system admitting mobility from one caste to another. To him, it is possible to form such an ideal society by putting Practical Vedānta's principles into practice for spiritual upheaval. It can alone solutions to all problems of our society. To implement Practical Vedānta's principle into practice, he emphasized imparting education to the people, because he felt that real social reform may come from working at the root by making them enlightened. Therefore, if we want to implement Vivekananda's caste system then first we have to educate our people to practice Vedānta's principle; otherwise, there is no chance to escape from the hereditary caste system till now.

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