



From dharma to dogma: The genesis of caste

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FIRST
Column



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Every few years, incidents remind us that caste persists in different avatars. Our Constitution guarantees equality, yet divisions control how we live, marry, vote, and worship. Knowingly or unknowingly, we judge people by birth. Caste survives despite legal systems, educational programmes, and metropolitan anonymity. We wrongly believe social reform alone can fix what is mostly psychological. Caste is not a census number; it is a paradigm of evaluation. People constitute systems; as long as people do not inwardly change, systemic change will not help much.

Caste and the Constitution

The Constitution guarantees liberty, equality, and fraternity. Yet caste persists because exclusivity, superiority, and material benefits are irresistible. Caste has become ingrained in habit, rooted in livelihood, kinship, and identity. Our constitutional principles are like rangoli patterns on the ground; they cannot change the soil underneath. That soil pervades everyday life. Many trades favour one community over another. Marriage remains mostly endogamous, with nine of ten unions within caste. Lineage maps out towns and villages. And when voting time comes, we rarely cast our vote; we vote our caste.

When Caste Masquerades as Dharma

The persistence of caste cannot be explained by sociology alone. Laws may impact behaviour and reforms may change customs, but neither explains nor eradicates how caste has been sanctified in dharma's name.

For humans, consciousness is paramount. An insult to self-worth hurts far more than bodily injury. More than our flesh, we protect our 'feeling' of being right-our dharma. Dharma is the inner compass for right seeing and living, man's most sacred possession, guiding all people.

India's tragedy is that somewhere in history, caste and dharma were kneaded together like salt in dough. What began as a division of labour merged with notions of virtue and sin. Acting within one's caste became dharma; going outside it became sin.

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As long as this false dharma based on birth endures, caste will endure. What is worshipped will not be questioned, and what is not questioned will not change.

The History of Caste: The Distortion of Dharma

To understand why caste became inseparable from Indian life, let us start from the beginning. The *Purusha Sukta* in the *Rigveda* speaks of an all-encompassing Being from whom everything comes. The hymn is metaphorical: the Brahmin came from His mouth, the Kshatriya from His arms, the Vaishya from His thighs, the Shudra from His feet. The symbolism points to how every form of work emerges from the same living whole, without any mention of hierarchy. The *Rigveda* differentiates between *Arya* and *Dasa*, indicating early social stratification. There is still dispute about whether varna was originally fluid or hierarchical. The goal is not to prove a perfect history, but to understand that any tradition has both liberating and limiting parts. It is our ethics which decide which thread we will follow next.

The *Upanishads* are the best argument against caste because they do not just reject birth-based differences; they also reject body identification. The *Vajrasuchika Upanishad* says that caste is not real. The *Bhagavad Gita* said that *varna* comes from *guna* (physical tendencies) and *karma* (choices), not birth.

But by about 400 BC, the *Dharmasutras* had become practical guides. Spiritual

symbolism had now become social distortion, and scriptures were starting to show inequality based on caste. Over time, these grew into *Dharmashastras*, remembered as law codes such as the *Manusmriti*. Here lay the tipping point. The *Purusha Sukta* was reread with harmful additions: claims of Brahmin superiority, prohibitions on hearing the Vedas, and punishments for non-compliance. The spiritual metaphor became a manual of social control.

Later, the *Puranas* reinforced these distortions. With the *Puranas'* dualistic approach came theism, and the social order was declared divinely ordained. Story after story contained subtle caste validation.

Advaita Vedanta maintained a steadfast intellectual stance: since all distinctions are illusory, how can caste be authentic? But as caste became the dominant social system, even *Advaita* found itself compromised between transcendental truth (paramarthik) and practical social order (vyavaharik). The peak of truth was made distinct from the foundation of living.

Caste's story, on the other hand, is not one of unbroken supremacy. Buddha did not accept the authority of the Brahmins. Bhakti poets Kabir, Ravidas, and Chokhamela ridiculed caste. Basava's Veerashaivism and Guru Nanak's teachings went against the idea of hierarchy. But Bhakti emphasised that all individuals are equal in the eyes of God, even as the unequal social hierarchy persisted unopposed.

These movements show that resistance to caste comes from within; it is not imported. But their idea of equality was often reab-

sorbed. What started as a spiritual mistake became a social law, then a habit, and finally heredity. The lesson is serious: to fight caste, you need both spiritual clarity and institutional change.

The Cost of Discrimination

Endogamy, or marrying within one's own group, is at the heart of caste. It keeps bloodlines and a sense of belonging. But communities that marry within closed circles risk losing genetic diversity and cultural exchange. Yet caste continues not just as a belief but also as a source of profit. The priest's ritual authority gave him power over knowledge, while the landlord's caste position made his hold on land and labour even stronger. Endogamy preserved not just bloodlines but property.

The Path Forward: Returning from Smriti to Shruti

The solution cannot principally come from courts; it must arise from understanding dharma itself. *Sanatan Dharma* was never meant to be a set of strict rules and inherited beliefs. It was the dharma of shruti, the direct revelation of truth. Over time, however, we began living by smriti, remembered law, and social convention.

As long as *Smriti* remained faithful to *Shruti*, it guided society; when it diverged, it enslaved society. Much of what we call "Hindu practice" belongs to this later distortion, drawn more from the *Manusmriti* and *Puranas* than the *Upanishads*. We talk about Vedic heritage, yet we live by hierarchies that came after the Vedic period.

This appeal to return to *Shruti* has a crucial objection: what if the texts themselves are

complicit? What if hierarchy is inherent rather than incidental?

We need to consider this criticism. If the *Upanishads* were enough, why did Vedantic philosophy persist alongside millennia of discrimination? Sublime texts alone do not ensure comprehension or accurate interpretation. We need culture and institutions to support scriptural wisdom's right interpretation and dissemination.

Democratisation of Interpretation

We must ask who has the authority to interpret *Shruti*. In the past, only Brahmins, especially priests, had that right. But we cannot have the same gatekeepers who let the truth get distorted in charge of bringing it back.

It is important to make interpretation more democratic. *Shruti* should be accessible not as a privilege but as a birthright of consciousness. This means having translations of the *Upanishads* in vernacular languages, open discourse, and the recognition that spiritual realisation, not lineage, is what qualifies someone to understand the *Upanishads*. When religion diverges from philosophy, it transforms into a blind and violent force, serving as a tool of fear rather than liberation. The *Upanishadic* view starts where hierarchy stops. It sees the sacred not in birth but in realisation.

In Vedanta's light, every division dissolves. The way forward is cleansing religion, valuing truth over tradition, realisation over recollection. No interpretation of any scripture is valid if it violates the principles inherent in the Mahavakyas "Aham Brahmasmi" and "Tat Tvam Asi."

The Path in Practice

It begins with modern, scientific education of the ego-self in school and college curricula. Students must be exposed to the process of biological and social conditioning, the matter of false identities, and the question "Who am I?"

Cultural change valuing the *Upanishads* over the *Manusmriti* must be promoted, as well as rigorous interpretation of *Smriti* texts true to the spirit of Vedanta. Religious institutions must open doors regardless of birth, and spiritual leaders should publicly reject caste-based privilege. Legal and economic measures too remain vital: affirmative action, anti-discrimination enforcement, and equalisation of opportunity. The soil is renewed not by one hand alone but by many—the teacher, the reformer, the legislator, and the rebel.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865