

The Varna System as perceived by Veda Vyasa - A Socio-Political Dialogue

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Abstract: Mahabharata the greatest Indian epic authored by Veda Vyasa was intensely concerned with the social conditions which make human freedom possible. The Socio-political history of those times have enabled us to understand the code of ethics prevalent during the epic period.. We find a sustained level of interaction among the members with a high degree of interdependence and autonomy. Each social calling was networked with the other.

The highest place in the Epic 'Mahabharata' was given to Dharma. Vyasa feels that it is Dharma which uplifts the social structure, promotes the welfare of the society and helps an individual to become progressive. In the opinion of Vyasa the extension of the social system was the Varna system. There was interdependence among the four Varnas. The most important contribution of Mahabharata with respect to Varna is that it insists that Varna is a social function and not a person. To each of the four Varnas a corresponding discipline was attached which was naturally interrelated and functional. The common ethical discipline was common to all social functions. The specific discipline was specific to each calling. However, 'Jati' does not find a mention as a caste. The positions were not fixed by virtue of birth.

The society of Mahabharata respected the human being for his attributes. There is a strong and persistent element which emphasised on the relativity of Varna to the conduct. Nobody was accorded position fixed by virtue of birth. Intelligence and ability transcended the barrier of caste system. Vyasa was of the opinion that all human beings sweat, excrete, bleed in a similar manner and their biological composition would be the same. Hence it would be unfair to differentiate human beings on the basis of caste. The epic has given a place of pride to characters like Vidura, Hidimba and many more.

The paper examines how Varna system held the society in balance and took care of the societal equilibrium. The holistic and secular vision of the great poet Veda Vyasa is illustrated

by taking relevant Upakhyanas from the epic which describe what Varna System stood for in those days.. Sources and references would be primarily drawn from the source text 'Mahabharata' by Veda Vyasa. Secondary references would be from edited books, translations research articles, popular articles, newspaper clippings and published and unpublished theses. However, cursory references would also be made from various other sources which deal with the Central Theme of the paper.

Key words: Veda Vyasa, Epics, Mahabharata, Varna System, Caste System, human attributes

Introduction:-

Social history is an area of study considered by some social science. It attempts to view historical evidence from the point of view of developing social trends.

It has a wider space because it deals with everyday people, masses and how they shape the history. It helps us to lay the foundation for a code of ethics. The centrality of this concept is 'Treat people as ends and never as means' All people are of equal value and worth.

Mahabharata spoke about the social conditions which made human life possible. Society is a way of accepted life and it is culture which functions to maintain the society. The concrete elements of the society are the people living in it. These people are the social situations of the society. The people in a society are inter-related in various institutionalized ways like marriage and the like. Society is one of the five dimensions of a nation and is very important in building a social group which shares common ideology, common institutions and common institutions and customs in a sense of homogeneity.

However it is this society which is always an abstraction and never a thing which determines the social status of a human being.

The Varna system is extensively discussed in Dharma-sastra. It divides the society into four Varnas ,brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra.. This quadruple division is an ancient stratification of Society and cannot be confused with caste. The Varna system is understood as idealized human callings. The concept is traced back to Purushasukta of the Rigveda.

Etymology and Origins:-

Varna is derived from the root Vr, which means, to cover, to envelope. To count, classify, consider, describe or choose.” Varna appears in Rigveda as “ colour, outward appearance, exterior form, figure or shape,” Mahabharata calls it as “ colour, tint, dye or pigment.” Contextually it is “ Color, race, tribe , Species, Kind, sort, nature, Character, quality, property.” However, in Manusmriti it refers to Social classes.

Vedas:-

The easiest application of the term is seen in the vedas without the usage of the official terms. However it is also argued that Purushasukta Varna verse is a later addition, possibly as a charter myth.

“There is no evidence in the Rigveda for an elaborate much sub-divided and overarching caste system.”

“A social ideal rather than a social reality.”

- Stepharie Janison and Joel Brecreton.

The post vedic period saw the description of Varnas in Dharmashastra, Mahabharata and Puranas.

The Dharmashastras:-

There is an extensive discussion of Varna system in Dharmashastra. The Dharmashastra period divided Varnas into four . The ancient and medieval Indian texts do not support the ritual pollution, purity and impurity as the basis of Varna system according to Prof. Patrick Olivelle.

Tim Ingold, a famous anthropologist suggests that Manusmriti is a highly schematic commentary on the Varna system. It provides more of models than descriptions. The restriction of who can stand the Vedas is not found in the Vedic era literature. According to Susan Bayly, Manusmriti and other scriptures helped elevate the Brahmin class in the social hierarchy which led to the making of the Varna system. However ancient texts never created the phenomenon of caste in India.

Varna System as visualized by Veda Vyasa:-

Introduction:- The matters relating to Varna are discussed in Section 12.181 of Mahabharata.

It is noteworthy to state that the epic offers two models on Varna. The first model is based on Brighu's views on Varna which was a color-based system. This description is countered by Bharadwaja who says colors are seen among all Varnas. Desire, anger, fear, greed, anxiety, hunger, toil prevails in all human beings. All human beings sweat, bile and blood flow in all human bodies, all of them defecate. So what is the distinction?

Thereafter the epic has laid down a behavioral model for Varna. Anger, pleasures and boldness made a man a Kshatriya. Cattle-rearing and ploughing a Vysya and the remaining Shudras. The Brahmins who the archetype default state of man, dedicated to truth, austerity and pure conduct. Varna is theory is nongenealogical. They are not lineages but categories.

Society in Mahabharata:-

The epic is an epitome of Indian culture and heritage. Mahabharata is the best guide to the Indian ethos. The entire work is a civilization. The epic embodies in itself the feeling of value. On many occasions it has solutions for problems of existence. There are well fired maxims of law, certain legal, moral and ethical principles underlying the fabric of Indian Society. There is a representation of corporate Unity and undivided authority of confederacy. Following a multiple and polygeneous approach this is a New Veda for all people irrespective of caste, creed and religion as against many other texts which closed door for women and shudras.

‘Na Maamushaat Shreshtataram Kinchit.’

Mahabharata said nothing is greater than human being. The epic is a civilization which outwardly looks like it were the direct depiction of exploits of men and women and some being given the tag of Virtuous. The content is replete with social, political economical and cultural relations trying to solve and resolve human problems. The epic has indicated a state of living. The epic has guided the society and its social structure and helped in its due progression.

All the activities were centred from the point of view Dharma which played a pivotal role. The cultural life of people remained restricted to indigenous pastoral life as the main occupation was agriculture and animal husbandry.

With this brief knowledge of the society the paper proceeds to make an attempt to understand the Varna System as perceived by the author 'Veda Vyasa'

Societal Structures:- Structures are the fundamental enduring patterns or the actual behavior of a particular society structures are capable of conferring a states to the society.

The age along dependence of varied cultures has never resulted in a feud. The struggle for one commonly prized object generally leads to a conflict. The struggle for the search for peculiarities of culture process has resulted in different social institutions in India.

Coming to the structure of society in Mahabharata it was described in terms of Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudras. There were the factors defining the power structures of the society. Caste system was firmly rooted in the hegemonic institutions where Bramhamnas were having an upper hand in the societal structure. The find between the paternal cousins is seen level today in the homes of many. The epic has depicted people from different values engaged in similar funds.

Varna systems, chiefly an extension of social system was seen to be progressive in Mahabharata. Many instances are shown projecting the feud between Bramhanas and Kshatriyas which showed their interdependence. The most significant contribution of Mahabharata with respect to Varna is that it said Varna was a social function and definitely did not refer to a person. To each of the Varnas a corresponding discipline was attached which was naturally interrelated and functional. The common ethical discipline was the Samanya Dharama. Specific to each calling there was the specific discipline or the Visheshha Dharma. However it should be noted that Samanya Dharma vouched for ethical discipline. 'Jati' never finds mention as 'caste' anywhere in the epic. Varna positioned itself based on conduct and it was nor fixed by virtue of birth.

Dr. Iravati Karve has mentioned that though the Sudras were mentioned as remnants of Brahmanas and Sutas as servants of Bramhanas and Kshatriyas the Varna Dharma was purely a social arrangement for the smooth functioning of the social structure. It was not only the Brahmin class but even the Kshatriya class underwent many rituals. This is evidenced by the conversation between Kunti and Karna in Udyoga Parva. The Kshatriyas also has a Kinship with Sutas who assumed the role of Advisors. While Vidura preached the Science of polity and ethics, Sanjaya positioned himself as a war chronicle to Dhritarstra.

It can be said with full conviction that the society of Mahabharata respected the human beings for their attributes. There is a strong and persistent element in the epic which emphasized the relativity of Varna to conduct. No position was fixed unalterably by virtue of birth. Vidura was elevated to a position which transcended the barrier of caste, creed and religion because of his intelligence and ability. An analysis also shows that marriage system was highly flexible and intermingling of Varnas was common.

Caste system was fought well in Mahabharata. One should understand Krishna who was open and eager to appreciate the fact that one should act only at the right time. The goal here was to leave the wisdom for generations to come. War is an escalated answer to any atrocity meted out to a human being Dharma here just did not include women objectification or denial of Kingdom to Pandavas but all the social evils. One should think that caste system was well fought in the battle of Mahabharata for Krishna insisted on equality through Gita. His life itself set an example for the society, Therefore, the epic answers solutions to many problems. Moreover in the epic we understand that caste was not a political agenda and was a matter of profession and responsibility. People did violate this in the epic without being contested. Mahabharata is not a story dealing with a single protagonist. It had many protagonists who had their own problems to deal with.

Mahabharata has fought against the caste system based on lineage via Karna. Karna assumed to be a charioteer is actually a Kshatriya and at the end of his life he is acknowledged as a greatest archer by Krishna himself. Openly discriminatory systems like racism, noble blood and the like will instigate rebellious attitude. Covertly discriminatory system like caste discrimination, gender discriminatory system provides a hope to the victim that one day he will see good things, literary works provided legitimacy to caste system. Religions, Caste, cultures, class will become modern day social networks where people will seek to share and look for opportunities within their network rather than believe in them. The Varna system here was not a discrimination strategy but a successful effort to establish Dharma. The epic has ample evidences of people switching over from one value to another to establish Dharma.

It is important to understand the matrix of the then prevailing caste system. Many scholars are of the opinion that four orders and castes were the result of caste and occupation. Many passages in the epic show how flexible caste system was in Mahabharata and

how it later got devolved into the unbonafide system of castes found in India today. Many passages in Mahabharata like the conversation between Yudhishtira and Naga Nahusha (3:179) show the flexibility of caste system during the epic period.

The intervention by vested interests has been the main reason for this kind of a caste divide which is leading the society to a deplorable condition.

Intervention of vested interests:-

It is difficult to trace out when the caste system entered into the life of the humankind. It is not known why the confusion erupted between Varna system and the caste creation.

Today Varna has been mistaken for caste. Both the words are treated as synonyms. Caste is man made. It is a social institution which can be changed and modified according to changing needs of society. The society has failed to understand the real meaning behind the social callings. This spirit of exclusiveness was perpetuated by a group of vested interests who became politically and economically powerful. This soon transformed into an instrument of oppression and intolerance. Human behavior and fellow feeling was thrown aside. This is man-made social evil. The word Brahmin has found expression many times but not in the sense of a Varna. It is very clear that there is no mention of four Varnas in the Vedic period.

With the intervention of urban life, the Shudras were dragged as servants. Man made a rule of conduct which was neither a religious canon nor a word of scripture.

“One becomes a Brahmin by deed, not by his family or birth, even a chandal is brahmin, if he is of pure character.” Vasista was born of a prostitute, Vyasa of fisherwomen and Parashara from Chandals.

- Sanskrit (IX-14-48)

The chief obstacles which prevent the people of the world from living together, enjoying universal brotherhood are the religious and regional differences. In India the sub-divisions and communal divisions have become permanent and people blindly follow them. According to certain practices the common people should not have education and it is the terrain of the Brahmins. The common population has no right to think independently and explore. The so

called priestly class have conveniently intervened and laid compulsive condition regarding education and religion, high and low castes and communities. They have been forced to carry on specific occupations. The common people were made to believe that the priestly class was supreme and they should be obeyed without raising a question.

The non-priestly class was called giants, monsters and rogues. False propaganda was made. The priestly class emphasized the division of society into communal groups. It is indeed unfortunate that the Varnashrama Dharma has converted the earth into wilderness because of the unfair practices. If we do away with religions and communities it is possible to inculcate mutual kindness and faith.

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