Varna-Jati system

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The comprehension of the varna-jati paradigm or ‘caste’ has been conditioned by imperialistic illusions, tentative gropings of Western scholarship based on flimsy passages in texts, and the misunderstanding of the brilliant ambitions of India’s social system. Stray literary allusions are overblown to find the caste system in overlaps of observations and unanchored vestiges.

The ordering of society has been the constant endeavor of humankind. We find its echoes in the flamoniumi/regnum concept of the Romans, which reflects the Sanskrit brähmanya / rājanya conflation of the sagely and kingly. The Chinese sage Confucius speaks of the “sagely within and kingly without” as the normative ethos of the social order.

The word brähmana goes back to the Indo-European period. It occurs as foramen in the Celtic heritage of Irish. Ireland remained untouched by Roman influence and has been able to preserve this heritage which has been lost on the Continent. It resembles that of India in many points: cow is the measure of prosperity, Sanskrit sasya ‘corn’ is [s] asia ‘barley’, Skt. ary a is aire ‘free man’ in Irish, from which stems the name of the country as Eire.

The word brähmana occurs as flamen in Latin, and rājan as rex. The Rgveda speaks of brahma ca kṣatram ca. These two living palladiums can also be seen in the Roman concept of the state. The
parallel of rex/flamen with rajan/brahman is a fascinating element of ancient Sanskrit vestiges of the bipartite conception of sovereignty. At the height of its power the Roman rex or sovereign Numa split the essence of the regnum and of the flamonium. The two existed in a symbiosis, for values had to be inherent in the functioning of the State.

There are astounding similarities between the obligations of the brähmana and the flamen:

The flamen cannot be made to swear on oath (Plutarch, Roman Questions 44; Aulus Gellius 10.15, Livy 31.50). The brähmana can never be cited as a witness (Visnu-smriti 8.2).

The flamen must not so much as look upon armed troops (Aulus Gellius 10.15). The brähmana must suspend his sacred knowledge whenever he hears the hiss of arrows, or is in the midst of an army, and so on (Manu 4.113-121).

The flamen apart from being forbidden any journey outside Rome, must neither mount a horse (Aulus Gellius 10.15; Plutarch, Roman Questions 40). The brähmana must not study on horseback nor, it seems, sit on any animal or in any vehicle (Manu 4.120).

The flamen must not approach a funeral pyre (Aulus Gellius 10.15). The brähmana must avoid the smoke from a funeral pyre and cease his sacred studies in any village where a funeral procession is passing (Manu 4.69.108).

The flamen must avoid drunkenness and abstain from touching fermented substances (Aulus Gellius 10.15; Plutarch, Roman Questions 109,112). The brähmana must not consume alcoholic drinks (Manu 11.94.96.97).

The flamen is forbidden to touch raw meat (Aulus Gellius 10.15; Plutarch, Roman Questions 110). The brähmana must not eat any meat that has not first been offered in sacrifice (Manu 4.213), and he must never accept anything from the owner of a slaughter-house (Manu 4.84-86), of a distillery, of an oil press or of a house of prostitution.

The flamen may not touch or even name a dog (Plutarch, Roman Questions 111). The brähmana may not read the Vedas when he hears a dog bark (Manu 4.115) nor eat food that has touched a dog, or has come from people who breed dogs (Manu
The brāhmaṇī, wife of the brāhmaṇa, and the flaminice, wife of the flamen, are as important as their husbands in a religious context.

The institution of flamines was opposed to the Luperci. The flamines and brāhmaṇas are the guardians of sacred order, Luperci and Gandharvas are the agents of a sacred disorder. The Luperci are beast-men, swift runners and great ravishers. Their inherent explosive nature cannot remain dormant. It has to be a tumultuous irruption of energy. The activity of the brāhmaṇas and flamines, in contrast, is coextensive with social life by its nature. They are the guarantors, and to some degree the embodiment, of Order.

The coincidences continue on many counts, for example, white is the color of both the brāhmaṇa and flamen, and red is the color of the rājanya and the mark of the Roman rex (Plutarch, Romulus 26). This social symbolism of white and red can also be seen in Iran. They were the rhythm of creative societies where the mystique of virility and morality as the akme of life were the potential continuity of the vital flow. The national flag of Indonesia, the dwiwarna, has red and white bands placed horizontally. They are Śiva and Śakti of Classical Javanese culture as explained by President Soekarno to my father Prof. Raghu Vira in 1951. The Latin fides means a respect for commitments, a respect for justice. The cult of fides is the foundation of Rome’s supreme creation, its law. Fides is Sanskrit śraddhā. Brāhmaṇa was its custodian. The crystallisation of the brāhmanyā”/rājanya or flamoniwn/regnum was the stabilisation of the social system. They defined complementarities, they were not incompatibles.

Biological excellence to promote the vitalization of the future was one of the factors leading to distinctions of the vama-jati system. Eugenia well born (Greek) has been a human concern since antiquity. In 1885 Sir Francis Galton founded the science of eugenics and named it from this Greek word. He defined it as the study of the agencies under social control which may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations physically or mentally. The development of any human was the interaction of two factors: (1) the hereditary factors supplied by parents, and (2) the environmental factors in or by which the individual develops. Transmission of the genetic material is contributed by the parents. Genes are located in linear order on the chromosomes. The two
germ cells of the father and mother unite to form the new individual. The paired genes constitute the phenotype. The genes express themselves physiologically and their appearance is known as the phenotype of the individual. Human evolution occurs in terms of intrabreeding populations. The varna-jati system is the Classical expression of the principles of eugenics so that critical thresholds of intellectual and physical excellence can be sustained over time. Biology speaks of organic momentum and the innate perfecting principle. The three processes of primary isolation, differentiation in characters and the permanent clinching by genetic barriers to intrabreeding have been fundamental to organic evolution of life. The reduction of the intergrading population and selective favoring were genetic mechanisms to bar the production of hybrids poorly adapted to both: varna-jati with its concepts of heredity echoes the theory of natural selection that accounts for the “survival of the fittest” and the “arrival of the fittest”.

The essence, accidence, potentiality and actuality of the varna-jati system is a meta-social teleology of life to ensure the quality of the life-force and the dynamism of a progressive existence. Homo hierarchicus is not exclusive to the Indic social system, but is a universal phenomenon. For example ‘blue blood’ is that which flows in the veins of ancient aristocratic families. It is a translation of the Spanish sangre azul attributed to the oldest families of Castile, who claimed never to have been contaminated by Moorish, Jewish or other admixture. The expression originated in the blueness of the veins of people of fair complexion, as compared to those of dark skin. Varṇa and jāti were a social mechanism to externalise a framework of discipline, clarity and a harmonious balance of inner experience and outgoing living. The psychological roots of this momentous conceptualisation were the continuity of belonging to today, to the day before yesterday and to the day after tomorrow in a historic and futuristic identity.

“Why did Rome crumble under the assaults of the Teutonic hordes when another contemporary empire, the Chinese, withstood all barbarian invasions and several dismemberments of its ‘universal’ state without any loss of cultural continuity” asks Amaury de Riencourt. He points out that the erosion of the family spirit, wide use of contraceptives, social emancipation of women, widespread immorality, dealt a blow to Roman biological fertility. The depletion of Roman manpower due to incessant wars led to ethnic suicide of the Roman empire. The family system of China
preserved her society throughout history, and absorbed biologically and culturally all barbarian invaders by sinifying them. Thus they have preserved Chinese culture intact into the twenty-first century. Likewise the varṇa-jāti system in India kept away the invaders socially, as they could not penetrate families by marrying into them. The jāti-specific culinary restrictions, strict marital codes, inviolable chastity of womenfolk sanctified by the varṇa-jāti structure, led to the preservation of our culture. Though the four varṇas proliferated into thousands of jātis yet they kept the Islamic hordes at bay for a thousand years. Inspite of the devolution of political and military power to the overwhelming Central Asian hordes of the Crescent, the strong hierarchy of the varṇa-jāti prevented intermarriage with the invaders, excommunicated those who converted and alienated them from all relationships. Varṇa and jāti with all their taboos and injunctions became the bastions of our cultural continuity, integration of our social power, and an agonized search for reintegration.

In his tragedy *Prometheus Bound* Aeschylus says: “I shudder to see thee torn by a myriad torments”. The varṇa-jāti too has assured that a millennium of domination did not tear the sanātana identity into a myriad fragments. The concept of varṇa-jāti itself became the fundamental unity of Dharma. It was Order in the midst of threatened deculturation, a social device for our continued existence by matrimonial restrictions, and a crystallization of dharmic security. Foreign aggressions led to social upheavals, but jāti become a bulwark against this anarchy as the impenetrable social fortress, and prevented any genetic engineering by the foreign males.

Every positive phenomenon has a negative aspect, and vice versa. The negative varṇa-jāti barriers have been breaking down with the growth of trade, advent of fast communications, expanding avenues of employment in far-flung places, modern education of women, dissemination of ideas of egalitarianism, the legal concept of equality, rapid technological developments, and other factors. Yet, varṇa and jāti dominate India’s political spectrum, and continue to be in full force in matrimonial alliances. A Dom was a scavenger and basket-maker, but a cultivator in Kashmir, a stonemason in Kumaon, a fisherman in Assam, a hewer of wood in Orissa. The Doms roamed all over the world as gypsies. They all themselves Romany (Rom from Dom).
The jātis were fairly fluid and social mobility was not hindered. Sākadvīpīya brāhmaṇas came from Sākadvīpa or Seistan to cure the leprosy of Sāmba the son of Lord Krishna. The Sun God advised Sāmba to go to Sakadvipa, and bring the Maga priests well versed in the ritual of sun-worship who alone could cure his leprosy. A whole purana, the Sāmba-purana, narrates that 18 Maga families journeyed to India, settled down at Mitravana in Multan, and established their cult of the Sun in Sāmba's temple. These sun-priests with their cleanliness, according to prescriptions of the Videvdad, were integrated into the brāhmaṇa caste. As worshippers of Mithra, their first habitation was designated Mitravana. Mītra is Mishra in the Kafiri dialects of Afghanistan and the Mishra brāhmaṇas of today are the inheritors of their glory.

Great enthusiasm for India began in 1760 after the conquest of Bengal. Sanskrit was the sister language of Latin and Greek. British administrators had studied two Classical European languages in grammar schools and the discovery of Sanskrit was the culmination of the passionate search for classicity. The discovery of the Indo-European family of languages with Sanskrit as a sub-stratum by Sir William Jones was a grand new vision of Western roots. Jones was canonised by a statue in St. Paul's Cathedral. The astronomical “observations made in India, when all Europe was barbarous or uninhabited” (John Playfair, Remarks on the Astronomy of the Brahmins, 1790: 135-192) astonished British and French astronomers by the accuracy of their computations. General Charles Vallancey, a British military engineer, was the founder of a school of writers who theorised on Irish history, language and literature. In 1797 he wrote The ancient history of Ireland, proved from the Sanskrit books of the Brahmins of India. British orientalists and the entire Romantic Movement in Germany thought that the study of Sanskrit and Indian antiquities would bring a Second Renaissance to the West, as the study of Greek learning had been the foundation of the First Renaissance. This Indophilism of the British administrators and scholars shocked the evangelists and they termed it British Indomania. They orchestrated attacks on “Indomania”, for example in the observations of Charles Grant in 1796 on the state of society in India, published in the British Parliamentary Papers. He emphasised that Indians are “a people exceedingly depraved”, and gave a moral hue to his racial-discrimination as he continued: “between which and the European moral complexion there is a difference analogous to the difference of the natural colour of the two races”.

British enthusiasm for India beginning in the 1760s ultimately became British Indophobia on the structure of the pre-existing Indomania. It was the creation of Evangelism and Utilitarianism. Its architects were Charles Grant and James Mill. Grant spoke of complete despotism of the Hindus pervading the government, religions and morals. Thomas Babington Macaulay, scion of a renowned Evangelical family, wrote his Minute on Indian Education in 1835, to form an elite Anglicised middle class of Indians, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. These masks of conquest rested on Mills perception of Indian civilization: “its tendency is evil”. Indian ethnology was put in opposition to Sanskrit.

The led to the academic downgrading of the sanctity of the trinity of the land, mind and heart of India.

The Land of India had been conquered. Its legitimation was sought in Aristotle who had contrasted the unfreedom of the Persians with the liberty of the Greeks. In the Renaissance it was used to contrast the Ottoman Empire with Europe. It was then generalised to India. Sir William Jones wrote in the very first volume of the Asiatic Researches in 1801: “Though we cannot agree with the sage preceptor of that ambitious Prince (Alexander) that the Asiaticks are born to be slaves, yet the Athenian poet seem perfectly in the right when he represents Europe as a sovereign princess and Asia as her handmaid”. The rampant racial segregation in South America and in South Africa became the clinching steps to racia whiteness. The back-projection of this racial interpretation was prefigured thousands of years before in the ‘Aryan invasion’. British conquest was legitimised by the hypothesis that Indians themselves were Aryan invaders of antiquity. Hence Havells Aryan Rule in India.

The Mind of India was fully conditioned by Macaulays Minute to educate the mass of Indians “by a process of ‘filtration’ or interpretation”. Its engrafted Westernisation on the rootstalk of Indian civilization within the paradigm of modernization. Evangelical influence drove the British policy to minimize and denigrate Indias cultural perceptions and achievements. The process continues unabated even in “free” India. It was and continues to be a step to the de-Indianisation of India and to give rise to a self-hating class of atmahano janaḥ of the Ṛgveda.
The **Social Hierarchy** and societal ethos of India was enshrined in the varna-jāti Order. It was the heart of India that had kept her alive for millennia. Brahmin stood at the head of four varnas and he was the religious core, ethical fulcrum, and the doyen of creative thought. Hinduism was termed Brahmanism by the British scholar-administrators. The Brahmins were the strength and stability, the continuity and self-confidence of Hindu society. The anglicists and evangelicals guised as scholars made consistent attacks on the “degenerationist character of brahmin views”. The varna-jāti system was given a racial interpretation and the denigration of the brahmin was the drubbing of Hinduism itself. The four pillars sustaining our society were the power of the intellect, law and order by governance, economic development, and dynamic activity of labor. They were crystallized in Hindu society as follows: the Brahmin as the keeper of intellection and sanctity, the ksatriya as the defender of the social order, the vaisyā as the productive management of economy, and finally the sudra as the work force. The German scholar Prof. Dr. Paul Thieme derives सू-द्रा from पू-द्रा ‘one who grazes cattle’. The first element of the word पू is the syncopated form of पाल ‘animal’, and द्रा ‘to run, drive’ is cognate to ड्रो-मे in aerodrome ‘where the aeroplanes run’. All the four were interactive constituents of a healthy and developing order. The two greatest poets of India, who authored the ageless epics of the रामायण and भारत, were born in lowly castes. They are the supremely venerated of all sages or rishis, and have been the most powerful formative influence in our ethos and in the literary traditions of all the Indian languages.

Indophobia of the 19th century has influenced India’s intellectual development under the guise of socialism and modernism, yet varna-jāti exercises a powerful influence in our emerging political scenario. We have accepted the civilization of science and technology as a contributive aspect of modernism, as a *sine qua non* of human existence. At the same time we continue to treasure our social norms whose core and primary unit is varna-jāti. It is not a dogmatic and petrified category, but helps to maintain the togetherness of the thousands of groupings based on social, economic, sectarian, linguistic and other criteria. While the Western approach has been monocentric and categorical due to a monotheistic god and the decalogue of Biblical commandments, Indic vision has been, and is *advaita* or non-duality, the harmony of multiplicity. We have treasured transcendence, for the Goddess of Learn-
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ing manifests to the man of wisdom and learning the brahmin to tell him: “secure me the treasure” (sevadhīs te ham asmi, gopāya mā). The Guru was adored and venerated as he led to Govinda. Were the two to stand together, the devotee would first worship the Guru as without him he could not attain Govinda. The scorching criticism of the varṇa-jāti system was to see demote the brahmin the Guru, so at Govinda could be replaced by the evangelical god. It was and is the cultural genocide of the eternity of our beloved and sacred Land.

Dr. B. B. Kumar has rendered a historic service to the social, political and cultural life of India by presenting a corrective perception of varṇa-jāti across a spectrum of classical texts and in life as lived today. He points out the motivation of Western scholarship as stemming from the twin poles of (i) imperialism of the last two centuries or neo-imperialism of the present century, (ii) as well as from the evangelist designs of the past becoming more intensified in the present in subtler and invisible operational modes. He points out the cohesiveness of varṇa-jāti that has integrated the plethora of India’s multiplicity. He emphasises the mobility of the system as can be seen at the highest level of sanctity: rishis can be born in any caste. He cites the literary tradition in extenso to show its universal and non-racist premises. The varṇa-jāti are conducive to duty, and not only to rights, and this has a lesson for contemporary formulations. This study of Dr. Kumar is comprehensive and intensive in its scope. He corrects the misconceptions that have been rampant for two centuries and still are so, by presenting the classical and contemporary evidence in the flow his simple and intelligible prose. The book is bound to exercise influence on young India, to comprehend the constructive principles of their society enshrined in an open ambience of the varṇa-jāti paradigm, its social reality and practical validity in family relations, its fostering of togetherness in compliance to values. This book of Dr. Kumar validates the varṇa-jāti as an enhancement of life, as the inclusiveness of social groups, as the commensurability of the joy of sharing with dear ones in inherited norms. Dr. Kumar presents a solid substratum inherent in the reality of our existence. A warm welcome to the book. Tanme manaḥ śivasarikalpamastu.