



*International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)*  
*A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal*  
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)  
Volume-II, Issue-IV, January 2016, Page No. 238-251  
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711  
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

---

## **Theoretical Literature in the Formation of Caste System and its Implication on Society in Sixth Century BCE to Third Century CE**

### **Shweta Verma**

*Research Scholar, Dept. of History, Jamia Millia Islamia Central University, New Delhi*

#### **Abstract**

*Theoretical literature in the formation of caste system and its implication on society in sixth century BCE to third century CE Indian society represents a complicated social organisation in the form of caste system. Emergence of caste system is a highly contested question in the Indian academia. Historian, ethnographers of colonial and post-colonial India put forwarded several accounts by addressing this question. However, the process of caste system is remained as an unsatisfactorily addressed question in Indian history. The proposed study attempts to capture the formation of caste system and its implication on the society in the Middle Gangatic valley during the period of 6 century BCE to 3 century CE. Because this region represents one of the most rigid caste based inequalities and hence the proposed study attempts to demystify the mystery of how these communities came into existence and what was the dynamics of this process.*

**Key Words: Caste, Social Organization, Hereditary, Hierarchy, Gahapati, Communities etc.**

---

**Introduction:** Caste is a highly contested question in the Indian academia. The Indian Caste System is historically one of the main dimensions where people in India socially differentiate through class, region, tribe, gender, and language<sup>1</sup>. Although this or other forms of differentiation exists in all human societies, it becomes a problem when one or more of these dimensions overlap each other and become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige<sup>2</sup>. The Indian Caste System is a closed system of stratification, which means that a person's social status obligates to which caste they were born. There are limits on interaction and behavior with people from another social status<sup>3</sup>.

Before involving into this Firstly, I would like to deals with the idea of caste. What is caste, its origin and development, its characteristics, how could be one society transformed to form a caste society, its effects and exploring the various aspects of the caste system. How it came into an existence, who imposed it, why did it continue for so many centuries and how the mosaic of sects passes through religion. What are factors that lead to this formation. These are the certain issues, which I would like to deal in my chapter.

**Caste Structure And Characterstics:** The word 'CASTE' uses in everyday life and we used it to distinguish one person from another. We say that such and such a person belong to a particular

---

<sup>1</sup> Sekhon, Joti., *Caste in Modern India*, 2000, pp. 15-20.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 38

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 39

caste. In saying it, we generally mean to convey that he is born of parents or is a member of the family said to belong to a particular caste. In this way, caste is a hereditary group determined by birth<sup>4</sup>. A person remains the member of the caste in to whom he is born and his member does not undergo any change in his status, occupation, education, wealth etc. members of the caste cannot marriage outside their own caste and they bounds in a certain norms. For many castes the occupation are fixed. All occupation is on the respect of the Brahmanas assigned to each caste.

Actually, it is difficult to formulate a definite and permanent definition of caste. The most that can do is to describe the features of the caste system in a particular context, since the caste system is undergoing much modification and transformation.

Defining the word "CASTE" itself is harder than thought to be. Risley<sup>5</sup> defines it as "a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community".

It can also be define as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions<sup>6</sup>. Caste is generally associated with a specific occupation and as mentioned before is a closed stratification, which makes it endogamous<sup>7</sup>. It means the members of each of the many castes marry only within their own caste. Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra all marry within their respective castes.

According to Jha<sup>8</sup>, "it is a system of social stratification characterized by hierarchy, heredity, pursuit of one or few particular occupations, inequality, endogamy, restriction as to taking food from outsiders and notion of purity and pollution associated with hierarchy".

The Indian caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked castes called *Varnas*. They classify according to occupation and determine access to wealth, power, and privilege. Leadership positions in society monopolizes by a few dominant castes<sup>9</sup>. The two upper castes ritually considers as superior to the lower castes<sup>10</sup>.

The occupation of each caste is fixed and all the occupation is on the respect of Brahmanas assigned to them. The Brahmanas, usually priests and scholars, are at the top. The Brahmin class essentially defines by its supposed priority (as the class created first by the creator god), by knowledge of the Veda, and by the monopoly this class holds on the operation of sacrifice.

Following the Brahmanas are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. They were the ruling class and often times collaborated with the Brahmanas as they reigned over their kingdom. A

---

<sup>4</sup> Dutta, N.K., *Origin and Growth of Caste in India*, pp.15

<sup>5</sup> Hutton, J.H., *Caste in India : Its Nature function and Origin*, 1963, pp. 56-63.

<sup>6</sup> Dutta, N.K., *Origin and Growth of Caste in India*, pp. 39-55

<sup>7</sup> Hutton, J.H., *Its Nature function and Origin*, 1963, pp. 59-61.

<sup>8</sup> Jha, V.N., *Social Stratification in Ancient India : Some Reflection*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 19, 3-4 March-April.

<sup>9</sup> Pintane, Andrea., " Brahmanas within the Caste system", Home, CHU, Chico, Web, 11 Oct. 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Brian, K., *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna system and the Origin of Caste*, Oxford University Press, 1994.

Kshatriya characterizes by physical and martial strength<sup>11</sup>. These qualities determined his relations with others: “the Kshatriya is charged with the protection of the higher Brahmin class with rule over (and unrestricted exploitation of) the lower Vaishyas”<sup>12</sup>.

The Priests and warriors said to be “better” than or “superior” to the other castes, and in general, the Brahmans and Kshatriyas regarded as united into a ruling class according to the populace at large. Although the Brahmans and Kshatriyas together proclaimed to be superior to the commoners, the Brahmans never hesitated to declare their own caste as higher than the Kshatriyas. The reason of this, according to the Vedas, is that Brahmans have characterized as being self-sufficient, whereas the Kshatriyas are dependent on priests. Thus, it said that Brahmans can live without rulers, but rulers cannot sufficiently execute their tasks without the aid of Brahmans<sup>13</sup>.

Next are the Vaishyas, or merchants. A Vaishya's duty was to ensure the community's prosperity through agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. The Vaishyas were considered and expected to be weak in position comparison to their rulers, and were infinitely exploitable and regenerative. These oppressions however, usually not boycotted because this presented as a natural state of affairs in the social realm<sup>14</sup>. Later, the Shudras took over agriculture and cattle rearing while the Vaishyas became traders and merchants.

However, though they were “twice-born” and economically strong because they controlled commerce, Vaishyas denied a high social status, for which they resented the upper castes. One expression of this resentment was their support of the anti-Brahminical sects that developed around the Sixth century BCE, like Buddhism<sup>15</sup>.

Then, move on to the Shudras, who are usually laborers, peasants, artisans, and servants. Shudras considered only capable of serving as slaves to the upper three classes.

Shudras enjoyed no rights or privileges, and not permitted to perform any sacrifices or homa, read or learn the Vedas or recite the mantras (prayer rituals). They also not allowed to enter temples and could only serve the upper three castes as a slave, barber, blacksmith or cobbler<sup>16</sup>. They too supported the Buddhism during the sixth century BCE.

At the very bottom are those considered the “Untouchables.” These individuals performed occupations that considered unclean and polluting. Such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and are considered outcastes<sup>17</sup>. The Hindu law books insisted that there were only four Varnas and never a fifth, which used as a reason not accepts the tribal people of India<sup>18</sup>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, Brian, K., *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna system and the Origin of Caste*, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 42.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 49.

<sup>15</sup> “Vaishyas”, Gurjari.net. Web, 12 Oct 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 3

<sup>17</sup> Jha, V.N., *Caste, Untouchability and Social Justice : Early North India Perspective*, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 25, (Nov-Dec., 1997), pp. 19-30

<sup>18</sup> Velassary, Sebastian., *Castesims and Human Right: towards an Ontology of the Social Order*, Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005.

Therefore, not considers to be including in the ranked castes. In some cases, the Untouchables could face criminal charges if they polluted certain things with their presence. For example, it was a criminal offense for a member of an excluded caste knowingly to pollute a temple by his presence<sup>19</sup>. They also forbidden entering the streets in which the houses of the upper castes situated, and there were many customs and laws that kept them beyond the villages and towns.

Since they rated outside the caste system, they were destined to only in the outskirts of the village and were never an integral part of village community. Their services, however, were still essential to the health of the community and therefore still had to be part of the system in order to serve the upper castes<sup>20</sup>.

Caste includes three elements: repulsion, hierarchy, and hereditary specialization. According to Bougley<sup>21</sup>, “a society is characterized by such a system if it is divided into a large number of hereditarily specialized groups, which are hierarchically superposed and mutually opposed. It does not tolerate the principle of rising in the status of groups’, mixture and of changing occupation”. There are many rules in the Indian caste system which caste members must adhere to in order to avoid shunned from their caste members. The two most important characteristics of the Indian caste system have to do with endogamy and occupational restriction.

Members of a caste or sub-caste are required to marry within their own caste. Any violation of this results in excommunication from one’s family and caste. When it comes to occupation, every caste is associated with a particular one to which its members are required to follow.

Another characteristic is that every caste imposes restrictions on its members concerning diet and has its own laws, which govern the food habit of the members. There are two types of food: *Pacca*, which is food prepared with ghee (melted butter), and *Kachcha*, which is food prepared with water<sup>22</sup>. According to the castes, only certain kinds of foods can exchange between certain castes. For example, a Brahman can accept only *Pacca* food from a Shudra, but *Kachcha* food can only accept from a person of one’s own caste or of a higher caste<sup>23</sup>.

Another is the social interaction between castes. There are strict barriers when it comes to the mixing of a superior caste with an inferior caste. Hence, under the caste system every caste abides by well-established customs and well-defined norms of interactions.

A fourth idea is the belief of purity and pollution. Cleanliness considers a very important value in Hinduism, and the caste system enforces this idea. Untouchability was thus a means of exclusives; a social device that became religious only by was drowning into the pollution-purity complex<sup>24</sup>. Therefore, it believed that the higher castes were more pure and less polluted, while the lower castes regarded as less pure and more polluted<sup>25</sup>.

---

<sup>19</sup> Hampton, Andrea., The Untouchables, Home, CHO, Chico, Web 23 Nov, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Velassary, Sebastian., Castesims and Human Right: towards an Ontology of the Social Order, Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005

<sup>21</sup> Bougle, Celestin., Eassy on the Caste System, 1971, pp. 20-29.

<sup>22</sup> Pyakurel, Saurav., “Caste system in India” Rajpoot Botherhood, Web, 29 Nov. 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Velassary, Sebastian., Castesims and Human Right: towards an Ontology of the Social Order, Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005

<sup>25</sup> Pyakurel, Saurav., “Caste system in India” Rajpoot Botherhood, Web, 29 Nov. 2010

A final characteristic that is very important to the stabilization of the Indian caste system is the restriction of caste mobility, which mentioned earlier. Birth in a particular caste confines a person to staying in this caste and restricts and individual is mobility up or down the hierarchy<sup>26</sup>. The caste system is what drives these relationships and these relationships are one of the reasons the caste system stays intact.

**Origin and History:** The origin of the Indian caste system has many theories behind it. Some of them are Religious, Economic, political theory and so on. Caste is a very complex system, where society arranged into different social hierarchy groups. When Aryans enters the Indian sub continent caste system did not exists it evolved over a hundred of years. Here are some stages of transition from Tribes to Caste according to certain periodically phases. Rigvedic (1500-1000 BCE), society was primary pastoral, occupation had not becomes hereditary at this stage. Ranks were open. Tribal people neither practicing endogamy nor any restriction regarding food from others. It is the Matter of achievement rather than inheritance<sup>27</sup>.

In Vedic period first definite indication of four hierarchal inequalities developed with the use of term Varna. It's reference found in the Purushsukta of tenth Mandal of Rigveda. It represents the origin of Varna from the different part of Vishnu<sup>28</sup>. During Later Vedic times (1000-600 BCE) this fourfold Varna appears as a full-fledge social reality with assigned to different occupation<sup>29</sup>. Shudras as domestic servants, slaves and agricultural labours and both Kshatriya and Brahman combined against, two lower Varnas<sup>30</sup>. Thus, caste was in formative stage and *Jati* was imbibing many of the traits of Varna.

At the end of Later Vedic, period (600 BCE) Varna tended to become hereditary, endogamous and birth based leading to formation of Jatis. Inter dinning among the four Varnas was not prohibited, inter Varna marriage did takes place. There was no any practice of Untouchability<sup>31</sup>. In Post Vedic period (600-200 BCE) due to extensive use of iron, change in economy gives rise in surplus accentuated inequality in full fledge class society in the Middle Ganga plain and east. This period was the ideal locale for emergence of more stratified society and consolidation of the Varna-Jati structure<sup>32</sup>.

Dhramsutras of Apastamba, Baudhayana-Gautama and Vasistha (600-300 BCE) reflects the use of *Jati* in sense of caste<sup>33</sup>. Thus, caste has to play an important role in economic life and it developed strong roots in occupation in the birth-based hierarchal class society of early India.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Jaiswal, Suvira., Stratification in Rigvedic Society : *Indian Historical Review*, Vol. xvi, NOS. 1-2, july 1989 and jan 1990, pp. 18-19, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Jha, V.N., Caste, Untouchability and Social Justice : Early North India Perspective, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 25, (Nov-Dec., 1997), pp. 19-30

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 22

<sup>30</sup> Sharma, R.S., Sudras in Ancient India, 1980, pp. 35-50

<sup>31</sup> Jha, V.N., Caste Untouchability and Social Justice : Early North India Perspective, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 25, (Nov-Dec., 1997), pp. 24

<sup>32</sup> Sharma, R.S., State Formation in the Mid Ganga plain, 1998, pp. 42.

<sup>33</sup> Jha, V.N., Caste Untouchability and Social Justice : Early North India Perspective, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 25, (Nov-Dec., 1997), pp. 21.

It would not just the system where groups divided according to religion, occupation and so on, but it means divides a society into race i.e. skin tone<sup>34</sup>. It applied to the four hierarchically ranked occupational categories of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra during Later Vedic period. The caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked castes called varnas. They classify according to occupation and determine access to wealth, power, and privilege<sup>35</sup>. The Brahmans, usually priests and scholars, are at the top. Next are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. The Vaishyas, or merchants follow them, and the fourth are the Shudras, who are usually laborers, peasants, artisans, and servants. At the very bottom are those considered the Untouchables. These individuals perform occupations that considers unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and are considered outcastes<sup>36</sup>. They are not considers to be included in the ranked castes.

The Varnas then divided into specialized sub-castes called *Jatis*. Each *Jati* is composed of a group deriving its livelihood primarily from a specific occupation<sup>37</sup>. People born into a certain caste and became member of a particular caste. They then acquire the appropriate occupation according to their *Jati*. Maintaining this hereditary occupational specialization and hierarchical ranking of system, done through an elaborate ritual system regulating the nature of social interactions between the *Jatis*<sup>38</sup>.

Vedic texts, which have been compiled, legitimized, and interpreted by the Brahmans, provide the rationale for the hierarchical classification and the rituals governing social behavior<sup>39</sup>. There were and still are rules, which lay down concerning appropriate occupational pursuit, appropriate behavior within and between castes, as well as rules related to marriage. Thus, it is a very rigid and complex system.

**Review of Literature:** Few historians, sociologist and anthropologist have written more comprehensively and adequately on the caste. Celestin Bougle (1971), D.D. Kosambi (1975), R.S Sharma (1980), V. N. Jha (1991), Devanathan (1997) Richard Fick (1972), N.K. Wagle (1995), and other's pioneering studies and brilliant insights touch the core of several themes handled by them in their books and numerous articles.

Romila Thapar (1984), Uma Chakravarti (1993), Suvira Jaiswal (1991) is full of fresh ideas and their writing shows a awareness of the latest trends and development in disciplines like history, sociology and social anthropology. Moreover, many other historians have enriched our understanding of tribe and caste transition in the Middle Gangetic valley during Sixth century BCE to third century CE.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ghurye, G.S., *Caste and Race in India*, 1969, pp. 15-25.

<sup>35</sup> Jaiswal, Suvira., *Stratification in Rigvedic Society : Indian Historical Review*, Vol. xvi, NOS. 1-2, july 1989 and jan 1990, pp. 18-19.

<sup>36</sup> Jha, V.N., *Caste, Untouchability and Social Justice : Early North India Perspective, Social Scientist*, Vol. 25, (Nov-Dec., 1997), pp. 19-30

<sup>37</sup> Hutton, J.H., *Caste in India : Its Nature Function and Origins*, 1963, pp. 43-50.

<sup>38</sup> Hutton, J.H., *Caste in India: Its Nature function and Origin*, 1963, pp. 45.

<sup>39</sup> Ghurye, G.S., *Caste and Race in India*, 1969, pp. 29-30.

According to Jha,<sup>40</sup> the *Rig Veda*, the primal man, Purush, destroyed him to create a human society from the different parts of his body and created the four different Varnas. The Brahmins were from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy determined by the descending order of the different organs the Varnas created.

For example, Brahmins, who derived from the head of Purush, considers the intelligent and most powerful Varna because of their wisdom and education and are a representation of the brain. In the same way, Kshatriyas, was considered the warrior caste, created by arms, which represent strength. Another religious theory claims that the Varnas created from the body organs of Brahma, who is the creator of the world in Hinduism.

Historically, however it believes that the caste system began with the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 BC. According to Kosambi<sup>41</sup> an internal fourfold caste system among the Aryan tribes in India developed due to the assimilation of the survivors of the Harappa culture with the conquering Aryans.

The Aryans came from southern Europe and northern Asia with fair skin that contrasted with the indigenous natives in India. They speak Indo-Aryan language, with different socio, culture, religious and political features different from indigenous people of India.

R.S. Sharma<sup>42</sup> also argues that the Aryans possessed a particular principle of social ordering called *Varna Vyavastha*, which based on the four hierarchical divisions of function in society. They placed in order of decreasing importance: religious and educational functions, military and political functions, economic functions, and menial functions.

The Aryans organized themselves in three groups. The first group, Rajayana (later changed to Kshatriya) was the warriors, which followed by the Brahmins, who were the priests. These two groups constantly struggled for political leadership among the Aryans. Eventually, the Brahmins became the leaders of the Aryan society. The final group consisted of the farmers and craftsmen, and called the Vaishyas. The Aryan conquerors subdued the locals and made them servants. In this process, the Vaishyas became the property owners and executives of the society and the locals became the peasants and artisans.

In order to secure their status, the Aryans laid out social and religious rules, which stated that only they allowed becoming priests, warriors, and executives of the society.

Ghurye,<sup>43</sup> argument based on Skin color was an important indicator in determining an individual's caste. As mentioned before, the word *Varna* does not mean caste or class, but color. Having come across people who were very dark in color and had rather snub noses, the Aryans described the earlier settlers as "dark color," as people without noses, and applied them to the term *dasa* or slaves.

---

<sup>40</sup> Jha, V.N., *Social Stratification in Ancient India : Some Reflection*, Social Scientist, Vol. 19, 3-4 March-April.

<sup>41</sup> Kosambi, D.D., *Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical outline*, 1975, pp. 22-25.

<sup>42</sup> Sharma, R.S., *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institution in Ancient India*, 1968, pp. 38

<sup>43</sup> Ghurye, G.S., *Caste and Race in India*, 1969, pp. 29-30.

Between the outcasts and the three Aryan *Varnas* were the Shudras, who were simple workers of the society. The Shudras consisted of two communities: one community was of the locals who suppressed by the Aryans, and the other was the mix of Aryan and local descent. One of the main regulations the Aryans began with was the exclusion of these Shudras from their religious worship. Aryans enjoined that the Shudras should not practice the religious worship developed by them. The various factors that characterize caste-society were the result of the attempts on the part of the upholders of the Brahmanic civilization to exclude the aborigines and the Shudras from religious and social communion with themselves.

Thus, this book gives a very thorough description about the characteristics of the caste system and the nature of caste-groups, as well as a historical walkthrough of how the caste system came about. Ghurye goes into the relationship between race and caste, the origins of the system and even focuses on caste, sub-caste, and kin. This book will aid me in receiving a thorough background of the system and will give me insight on the caste system.

As most of the societies in the world, India had a patriarchal system. Most of the time, the son inherited his father's profession, which led to developing families, who acquired the same family profession for generations<sup>44</sup>. Later on, as these families got bigger, they were seen as communities, or *jat*. Different families who professed the same profession developed social relations between them and organized as a *jat*<sup>45</sup>.

Around the sixth century BCE, many individuals of the lower castes who were suppressing turned to Buddhism. Buddhism actually began as a reaction to the violence of Hindu society, including the brutality of the caste system<sup>46</sup>. Buddhism concentrates not on the society, but on the individual, thus separating religion from the interests of the ruling and dominance.

Although Buddhism does see life as pain, suffering, and reincarnation as a renewal of this suffering, there is a potential escape<sup>47</sup>. The Buddha, himself born into the warrior caste, was a severe critic of the caste system. Buddhism utterly rejects any system of caste, and it actually reached high levels of support during the rule of Ashoka, who adopted the Buddhist concept of ahimsa, or non-violence, and its tendency toward greater equality<sup>48</sup>. He ridiculed the priests who claimed to be superior, criticized the theological basis of the system, and he welcomed into his community people of all castes, including outcasts<sup>49</sup>.

His most famous saying on the subject was, "Birth does not make one a priest or an outcaste. Behavior makes one either a priest or an outcaste"<sup>50</sup>.

According to Bougle<sup>51</sup>, This collection of essays provides a detailed explanation of the Indian caste system as well as some interviews and feedback from Indians who support and oppose the caste system. He discusses the caste hierarchy and priesthood, and includes the effects of the caste system on race, law, economic consumption and production, and literature. Caste is a historical

---

<sup>44</sup> Daniel, Aharon, Caste System in Modern India, "Adaniel Info Site", Web, 4 Nov 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Hinduism and Buddhism, a Comparison, "Essortment articles", Web 14 Nov. 2010

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Malalasekera, G.P., Jayatilleke, K.N., "Buddhist Studies: Caste System", Web 14 Nov. 2010

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Bougle, Celestin., Eassy on the Caste System, 1971, pp. 20-29.

process in his origin and his roots uproots in religion. Conceptually, caste defined as the structure whose pillars are standing on the repulsion, hierarchy, hereditary specialization, endogamy and exogamy as well.

The Indian Caste System is historically one of the main dimensions where people in India socially differentiate through class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. Although this or other forms of differentiation exist in all human societies, it becomes a problem when one or more of these dimensions overlap each other and become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige.

Caste System is a closed system of stratification, which means that a person's social status is obligated to which caste they were born. There are limits on interaction and behavior with people from another social status.

What I found very interesting about these essays is the discussion of how the caste system affected through the Buddhist revolution. I will be able to use this information to talk about how India today has shaped by the history of not only the caste system but the reformation of it from various influences.

Fick<sup>52</sup>, States that can possibly regard as the most extensive work based exclusively on the *Jatakas*. This book, acting on the need of studying the socio-economic condition of India during the time of the Buddha, he collated social and economic data from more than the 500 *Jataka* stories, systematically arranged, and analyzed them.

The book, though, has a marked preoccupation with the issue of caste, with at least eight out of the twelve chapters of the book dealing with the issue. According to the *Jatakas* there was a multiform or chaotic society, which resists at classification and there is no talk of an organization according to caste at that age.

He also calls on casteless profession and includes various social groups ranging from settled and wandering urban artisan to settle and nomadic rural communities as hunters, herdsmen and fisherman and many of the hereditary hired labour and slaves also the part of this casteless category which are less in number. That later came to be called as Shudras the labourers and dasas, who so ever were isolated as despised caste and later identified as candela, Nisada, Pukkusa. While pointing on to later Brahmanical text defined some of these as 'mixed caste'.

R. S. Sharma's<sup>53</sup> two articles published during 1970-1973 hold the idea that the primary factor that revolutionized the material life of the people around 700 BC in Eastern U. P. and Bihar and the birthplace of Buddhism, was the use of iron. It initiated plough agriculture with iron ploughshare, and consequently created a new social setup, a class society.

This society was marked by the rise of state power in which cattle in the form of private wealth to be increased by commercial activities gained much importance and its senseless destruction for the purpose of non-vegetarian food and for the purpose of Brahmanical sacrificial cults came to be discouraged. The voice of protest rose by the trading class and given theoretical and moral support by Buddha and his contemporaries. The most emphatic protest against animal sacrifice registered in

---

<sup>52</sup> Fick, R., *The Social Organisation In North East India in Buddha's Time*, trans. S.K. Mitra, 1920, pp. 180.

<sup>53</sup> We are here referring to Das capital centenary volume (1970) and paper read at the 29 th International congress of the Orientalists (1973)

the early *Pali* texts. The Brahminical attitude to trade was not helpful, with the traders hence assigned a lower place in society. The Buddha took up the cause of this emergent class, having something new to contribute during its rise to power, that is why traders at the first rank became his associates, and Buddhism lent full moral support to the financial and other interests of the trading class.<sup>18</sup>

Kosambi<sup>54</sup>, from tribes to caste maintained that one of the clues to an understanding of the Indian past is the factor of the transition from small-localized group to a generalized society. It was largely the result of the introduction of plough agriculture in various regions, which changes the system of production, broke the structure of tribe and clans, and made caste an alternative form of social organization. Later on these economic changes led to the rise of two classes in the Middle Ganga valley. The first was a class of land-owning peasant called *Grihapatis* (householder) and second was a class of wealthy traders called *Shreshtis* (important person in town) this signified the institution of private property.

Sharma<sup>55</sup>, Works on the history of Shudras traces the transformation of Shudras (who were the servants of upper three Varnas) convincingly shown that term Shudras was not always used to refer to condition of subordination and oppression but also referred as ruling elite during early times. He also writes, "Shudra skills, together combined with the agricultural surplus production of Vaisyas peasants, provided the material basis for development, which in this sense was a Vaisya- Shudra formation". Later on, the Shudra gained some religious and civic rights and in many respects placed on par with the Vaishyas. At the same time, many Shudra artisans and Tribals at lower stages of culture made Untouchables.

Thus, it must recognize, as one should have to go beyond in understanding the position of member of Varna society. More over on cultural facets of caste as those related to ideology of purity and pollution, which evolved over time.

Sharma, The caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked castes called Varnas. They classify according to occupation and determine access to wealth, power, and privilege. The Brahmans, usually priests and scholars, are at the top. Next are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. They follow by the Vaishyas, or merchants, and the fourth are the Shudras, who are usually laborers, peasants, artisans, and servants. At the very bottom, that considers the Untouchables. These individuals perform occupations that considers unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and are considered outcastes. They not considered including in the ranked castes.

The Varnas then divided into specialized sub-castes called *Jatis*. Each *Jati* is composed of a group deriving its livelihood primarily from a specific occupation. People born into a certain caste and became members. They then acquire the appropriate occupation according to their *Jati*. Maintaining this hereditary occupational specialization and hierarchical ranking of occupations said to done through an elaborate ritual system regulating the nature of social interactions between the *Jatis*.

Vedic texts, which have been compiled, legitimized, and interpreted by the Brahmans, provide the rationale for the hierarchical classification and the rituals governing social behavior. There were,

---

<sup>54</sup> Kosambi, D.D., *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, 1956, pp. 55, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Sharma, R.S., *Sudras in Ancient India*, 1980, pp.34-65

and still are, rules that lay down concerning appropriate occupational pursuit, appropriate behavior within and between castes, as well as rules related to marriage.

Thapar<sup>56</sup>, traced the origin of state system in the Mid- Ganga valley to the transition from a lineage mode of agrarian production to a peasant economy of private holding and increasing urbanization. Lineage society would be mainly pastoral and mobile while state was in contrast to it. During sixth century BCE due to the development of technique as iron, change in economy takes place and give rise to a new class of *Grihapatis*. Some of them were so affluent as to turn over part of agricultural cultural surplus into trade and commerce and become *Shreshhis* or rich merchant. While, others were still the peasants and labours.

This new society, were called for a new organization to protect and promote its interest, one which the new agricultural and commercial surplus could sustains as taxes. Thus new states like *Kosala* and *Magadha* came into formations, which were far from the Kurus and Panchala of old lineage system.

Jha<sup>57</sup>, by theorizing his view on caste, class and Untouchability argues that notion of pollution grew historically at different periods, to incorporate several social groups under the 'Asprsyas' category. His work highlights the names of different ethnic and occupational group that had acceded over time to designate as impure and severity of punishment imposed upon them. It is also true that caste did not developed in primitive societies and there is no set notion and ideology of pure and impure. This ideology proceeds as the time passes and caste had come to play an important role in economic life and it develop strong root in occupation, in the birth based hierarchical class society of early India.

Recognizing that Buddhist attitude to caste inequalities attempted to change in structure by distinguish between high and low is clearly applied to Jati(caste) Kula(family) Kamma(occupation) and Sippa(craft). Nature of Untouchability practiced with candela and their economic plight in Buddhist *Jatakas* as who engaged in corpse carrying, hangman, and sweeper and so on. Nesadas engaged in hunting and fishing.

Suvira<sup>58</sup>, Argued that the *Jati* system was an 'elaboration of Varna ideology' reflecting a deterioration and hardening of the class relation, This ideological propaganda was the state of mind or system of ideas and value based on religious principles. More so over, the eating habits, (vegetarianism and non- vegetarianisms), killing of cattle for sacrifice unpopular and not killing upgrade their status just a ideological propaganda, led to wide acceptance of Varna system.

Uma Chakravarti<sup>59</sup> in her landmarks endorses Sharma's argument. According to her, Buddhism emerged in a rapidly changing stratified society where there emerged a sharp distinction between the rich and the poor and the urbanization process was going on. Agriculture was widely spread in the middle Ganga valley region and private property holders like *Gahapatis* emerged as a prestigious class. All these descriptions agree with the Sharma's argument. The meaning of the *Gahapati* is merely a householder.

---

<sup>56</sup> Thapar, Romila. *From Lineage to State*, 1984, pp. 70-71

<sup>57</sup> Jha, V.N., Caste, Untouchability and Social Justice : Early North India Perspective, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 25, (Nov-Dec., 1997), pp. 19-30

<sup>58</sup> Jaiswal, Suvira., Varna Ideology and Social Change, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 19, March-April, 1991

<sup>59</sup> Chakravarti, Uma., *Social Dimension of Early Buddhism*, 1993, pp.52.

Nevertheless, based on the textual evidence Chakravarti argues that they were not mere householders at the time, but holders of private property, and were prosperous, mobile and dynamic. They were one of the major social groups that patronized Buddhism most lavishly. Further, she argues that only the private property holders could do the same, since they had the sole authority to take decisions regarding property and not the people who had common ownership of the property in the *Ganasanghas*. This is somewhat paradoxical in view of the basic teaching of the Buddha regarding renunciation.

The author analyzes, all the names mentioned in *Pali* Chronicles where social and economic backgrounds mentions and through statistical analysis established that major class of supporters of Buddhism came from 'high' families.

Chakravarti's work stands out as a significant contribution to the longstanding tradition of analyzing early Buddhism as a social movement. Here she contends that the earlier studies on early Buddhism were conceptually flawed as they had presumed the reality of the existence of a rigid four-fold varna system as depicted in the Brahmanical texts without any rigorous cross-checking with the wealth of alternative contemporary Buddhist accounts. She had by careful analysis of key Buddhist social concepts found in these texts; enriched and redirected in a major way our understanding of the contemporary socio-political and economic situation and interaction.

She asserts, based on her study of the Buddhist texts, that the Buddhists followed an alternative-simple high and low stratification<sup>19</sup>: this contention holds true in our analysis of the *Jataka* stories. While discussing the sources, she rightly states that earlier studies on Buddhist society lack a proper perspective of time because of their treatment of Buddhist texts as a homogeneous unit. Epigraphic evidence ranging from 200 B.C. to A.D. 200 has also used to substantiate conclusions on social stratification drawn from early *Pali* literature.

Citing from literary references to terminologies uses and refers to; she posits the supremacy of the occupational categorization of labour.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, using the same source categories, she identifies the Gahapatis as an important and influential section of society who were "major employers of labour" but "not a caste or a group whose status was based on birth", rather cutting across groups. She identifies this inclusion of the Gahapatis as a distinct group as the "strength of the Buddhist scheme" and the consequent "weakness of the Brahmanical mode in explaining the politico-economic domain" and exhibits its "rigidity and distance from empirical reality".

Thus, not only is a book one of the more comprehensive treatment of this topic but also it provides -a new language for continuing the discussion.

Chakravarti, has identified a marked tendency of the absence of the *Gahapatis*, who were the emergent class heading the production activities from the Buddhist *Sanghas* and their significant concentration among category of lay followers. This, she tends to explain as the evidence of the tacit recognition by Buddhists of the indispensability of economic functions in society and by extension for the growth and continued existence of their order - this despite their advocacy of renunciation as a means to salvation.

She further posits this immense sensibility to the social milieu as the main reason for the success of Buddhism. While dealing with the problem of stratification, she emphasizes, for the first time, the Buddhist point of view, by giving more importance to Buddhist texts. It has asserted that the inclusion of the *Gahapati* in the system of stratification is the strength of the Buddhist scheme.

She firmly attributes the immense success of Buddhism, though momentary, over Brahmanism only as a direct offshoot of their positive attitude towards the expanding economy and the new class of rich people it produced. The Buddha and his philosophy according to her "represent the most serious and most comprehensive attempt by a philosopher in India to analyze the rapidly changing society in which he was situated." Now based on the premise she postulates that the social reality of the times reflected in the various tenets of Buddhism and its engagement with the social realities of the period produced through the Buddhist faith, a new consciousness and an alternative discourse of the contemporary times; correspondingly thus, its structures and systems were an ultimate reflection of the times.

Wagle's<sup>60</sup> define a comprehensive discussion of the social conditions, which were responsible for the rise of Buddhism. He has adopted a new methodology to analyses the social structure of an earlier age from the works of a relatively later period. 15 The work contains chapters on patterns of settlement, social groups and rankings, kinship and marriage, and occupational divisions.

Analyzing words like *Gama*, *Nigama* etc he tries to explain the patterns of settlements and their relative significance and by analyzing the terms of address used by different members of society, he arrived at an outline of social groupings and rankings. Discussed that society in the age of the Buddha was neither tribal nor caste-divided; through in a way it was both. Actually, it was a complex social structure based on kinship and caste relations, and it seems that the kin and the family operated within the framework of Varna.

Varnas and Jatis with their sub divisions takes to be conceptual categories, and large extended kinship group's real categories including 'Nati' as a new sub category. Wagle considers Brahmanas and Ksatriyas to be real social group and not the Vaishyas and Sudras.

He also considered Janapada chiefly a tribal and not a territorial and geographical unit. The Janapadas in the age of the Buddha are rightly regarded here as tribal, social and cultural units. Tribal hierarchy, which considers in five stages, family extended family, lineage, kin-group and extended kin-group. How big these groups are in terms of members and territory is difficult to show, but their connections with the different aspects of social life in the age of the Buddha have indicated. There was an exhaustive collection of the forms of addresses and greetings used by persons of different groups. On their basis, *Brahmans*, *Buddhists*, and the *Gahapatis* propose as three social ranks. He also throws some interesting light on the position of the Gamanis. The various epithets and names applied to these functionaries disclose their tribal and military origin; the terms Yoddhdfiva, Assiroha, Hatthiroha, Asibandhaka speak for them.

This work is important since the patterns of economic life of the period and its relevance to the rise of Buddhism discusses here.

Aloka Parasher Sen<sup>61</sup>, analyses the historical roots of social oppression and exclusion of the 'other' that have marked the making of identities in the Indian subcontinent. With contributors as varied and renowned as Romila Thapar, Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, Vivekanand Jha, Eleanor Zelliot, Uma Chakravarti, Dagmar Hellman-Rajanagayam, and others, 24; this volume discusses the various historiographical approaches to the study of marginalized society in India for the period before 1500 AD. Significantly, these authors touch on all the major ideas about hierarchy and difference, self and other, to emerge from early India.

---

<sup>60</sup> Wagle, N.K., *Society at the time of Buddha*, 1995, pp.92

<sup>61</sup> Parasher, Aloka., *The Mlecchas in Early India*, 1991, pp. 25-45.

The following ideas of Sanskrit ritual status come in for systematic analysis: *dharma*, *varna*, and their sub categories; family, community, and the political structure - *jana*, *jati*, and related terms; race, colour, and ethnicity- *arya* and *diisa*; indigenous and foreign - *mleccha* and *barbara*; purity and pollution - *dvija*, *sudra*, *antyaja*, *asprasya*. Notions of and data about slavery, gender domination, mobility, Professional and occupational diversity, religious divisions, and sectarian grouping are also engaged with.

It is notable that critical acknowledgement and engagement to the extremes of the practices of untouchability and other social disabilities in Indian civilization can say to have begun with the advent of Buddhism, naturally so, the volume contains a substantive number of essays on the subject taking a marked Buddhist framework. The issue of the 'other' also examines in detail in the book. The works identified casteism and its guarantor the Dharma sustra resulted in the 'othering' of the Buddhist adherents in Ancient India and the Muslims later on in the intermediate and immediate present past.

This kind of Social Stratification distinguishes the Varna divided society found in the age of Buddha in the Mid Ganga plains. Hence, the semi tribal, lineage based political structure of Vedic society had given way to the relatively stable state formations.