

REFRAMING CASTE: A DECOLONIAL LENS ON INDIA'S SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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Abstract: The research highlights the importance of epistemology, a branch of knowledge which explains how do we know things that we know. Our knowledge about the social structure or caste system in India is dependent on the Orientalist scholarship of 19th century. Therefore, our knowledge regarding caste system remains confined to the orientalist perspective and we start to perceive our own scriptures from a blinkered vision. The absence of a decolonial lens restricts one to understand the merits, timeframe and other nitty-gritties of the caste system. The study adopts an analytical approach while placing reliance on primary sources (Wherever needed) & also some much-overlooked scholarship which is factually robust. This research attempts to present a decolonial (and not post-colonial) outlook to understand *caste*, *varna* and *jati*, how they differ and if they differ what is the difference between them. The attempt here is to understand Caste as it exists today and the colonial interventions that changed the epistemological view towards Varna and Jati. The main purpose is to apply an inter-disciplinary approach between “Coloniality; Civilization & Constitution” to offer a probable solution to the caste discourse. A framework based on analytical reasoning with more reliance on extracts and citations will be used in order to have factual clarity, with connecting the dots in order to arrive at an objective conclusion. The Goal is understanding the as to how did Varna and Jati culminated in Caste due to colonial influences; Definitions defines any concept, if the foundation of a structure is flawed the structure results in chaos, and to address this issue is the theme of the paper.

Keywords: Jati, coloniality, caste, varna, constitution, decoloniality

Introduction

Understanding Decolonial Approach

India that is Bharat, has been a victim of colonization's of two kinds: 1) The Middle Eastern Coloniality and 2) The European Coloniality (Balagangadhara 2021, 80-84), consequently, one after the another, from the last decade there has been a significant shift in the intellectual scholarship in India, the need to revisit our past has taken a toll on the society at large. As well known, India is one of the oldest surviving indigenous civilizations. There is, however, a hindrance to access the experience of the native way of life on its own – OET (Onto-Epistemo & Theology). Therefore, wearing a Decolonial lens is very essential in order for us to understand the native way of life.

What is Decoloniality?

Scholars of decoloniality agree that, while postcolonialism is a state of affairs, decoloniality is a *state of mind* (J Sai Deepak 2021,30). This very state of mind which universalizes one particular civilizational experience on other cultures through colonization in long term leads to the blockage of sorts between the Indigenous culture and the access to their own set of cultural experience, scholars call this phenomenon as “Colonial Consciousness”. (Balagangadhara 2021, 19-20)

What is understood on reading the literature on Decoloniality can be summed in the following way: *“Decoloniality is not the recreation of the past, it is the re-inscription of certain values of the past, in the institutions of the present to formulate a hybrid future, which has a greater quotient of Indigeneity as opposed to Coloniality”*. Decoloniality gives an appropriate prism to take a look at indigenous knowledge systems on its own merit. While, the intent of the post-colonial scholarship and Decolonial Scholarship may seem the same, but the terms of engagement and frameworks of understanding still remain colonial in the post-colonial approach, the Decolonial approach provides a space for alternative epistemology in order to understanding the indigenous approach on its own metrics of OET.

Decoloniality in Indian context

Many of the Ancient indigenous societies has suffered the baggage of colonialism, which has altered the native thought process and way of life - due to the - thought process being altered. From, the purview of India it has led to many issues that needs serious attention. Especially, in the domains such as – Environment, Political theories, Legal domain, Approach towards the philosophy of life, the Indian Social Structures, Religion & many more. The larger problem here is that, India has witnessed not one, but two successive waves of colonization. Given the scope of this article, the specific issue that will be dealt in this article is of, one of the most debated topics in Indian society i.e. “Caste”.

Decoloniality and Moral Relativism

Many scholars have critiqued that; there is a problem of “Moral Relativism” which is just a short distance away from main streaming the discourse on Decoloniality. The critique is not entirely incorrect, it is true that, although Decoloniality has a theoretical framework, but it is equally true that its application is completely local. This is the alleged disadvantage of Decolonial framework, we will address the following alleged disadvantage. Scholars have alleged that, in the framework of Decoloniality, societies can justify anything under the sun in the name of Indigenous Subjectivities. Now, to address this: If it is the case that a culture does not have the right to subjectivity, then it seems the case that, one particular culture (of the colonizers) will universalize its provincial experience and call it a “Universal Standard”. So, the simple question that needs to be addressed is that – *“is the world divided in only two choices 1) Moral Relativism and 2) Universalization of one culture?”*. If this is the problem that Scholars express with the Decolonial approach then, it is a fundamental problem in

understanding the Decolonial approach itself, reason being, that when the Decoloniality is asked and called for in action, it is not asking the “recreation” of the past, rather it is asking to understand the past on its own merits – the good, bad and the ugly, it further asks another question – “*What aspects of the past are relevant in the current day and age?*” Only after a clear discussion on these issues, a particular value of the past may be reinstituted. In other words, when Decoloniality asks for subjectivity, it is not asking for “absolute subjectivity” so to say, it is merely asking for subjectivity in the domains which is relevant, desirable and practically possible.

Literature Review

The Caste System

Scholars say – “*When thinking of India, it is hard not to think of caste*” (Dirks 2002,03). The centrality of the description of India had always had caste at its forefront. However, the entire edifice of caste system, is based on a theory and framework. Here, there is a need to have a separation between the ‘Caste System’ theory and the ‘Theory of Varna and Jati’, the reason why we need to strike this distinction is the following:

“That ‘caste’ is the product of the reconstructionist attitude of the Christian European colonizer in the realm of religion and social organization is again evidenced by scholarly literature. The literature demonstrates that the colonizer’s ethnocentric approach to social organization was foisted on the Indic society as in other colonized indigenous societies, which gave birth to colonial identities, such as ‘caste’ ‘tribe’, and through conflation of Indic lexicon, such as varna and jati, with caste. (J Sai Deepak 2021,303).”

Caste System theory is a framework, under which various things have colluded and some kind of an amalgam is formed, which is not in consonance to Indian Social realities, which is why most of the Indian Society is at a constant confusion and chaos, it has had disturbing instances due to it, it is therefore a high time to study these systems systematically in order for us to arrive at some tentative solutions.

What is the Caste System?

The received view about Indian Society is that there has been systemic oppression on the lower castes due to the existence of Caste System for almost 2000 Yrs. or more, That, there was a caste system throughout the Indian Subcontinent. The question that arises is, is it really possible that A Caste System from such a long period in history be applied across the boundaries of India, and that, the story of India is that of systemic oppression, is it really a Sociological Possibility? Following, relevant extract brilliantly answers the question:

“That the ‘caste system’ emerged as a full-blown social system, simultaneously all over India, some 3500 years ago is a sociological impossibility. It is equally unlikely that this system emerged

simultaneously in several places and converged. To argue any of these is to transform 'the caste system' into a miraculous social organization. No known (or conceivable) social mechanism can help explain any of the above theses. The only reasonable hypothesis is to assume that it emerged in some place at some time. (Sufiya Pathan, Dunkin Jalki *et. al* 2017,05)"

We can understand the Caste System as:

"...the structure that the British tried to develop using different criteria none of which worked in ordering and classifying the data they assembled." (Sufiya Pathan, Dunkin Jalki *et. al* 2017,18)"

That, there are several problems in defining caste and one such problem was faced by the British, as it can be seen repeatedly from their personal correspondences, following is a relevant extract:

"Here we may notice how complicated is the segmentation of Hindu society. It is largely this fact which is responsible for the ignorance of the average Hindu about his caste system, and the difficulty, experienced at successive census enumerations, of obtaining a correct answer to the simple question: "What is your caste?". One man will state his social class, naming one of the ancient varnas— especially if the claim of his caste to belong to that varna is disputable, and he thinks it desirable to assert it. Another will give his endogamous subcaste— especially if it sounds better than his caste. A third will give his exogamous section; a fourth will mention some caste-title. The Hindu, generally speaking, is ignorant of all social distinctions which do not affect him personally, and very careless in his statement of those that do— a fact which makes the task of the enquirer into the caste none the easier." (E.A. Blunt 1931,8-9)

One of the major issues that the British faced was to codify the existing *Jatis & Varnas* into different castes and to group them in certain criteria like Endogamy, Purity, Pollution etc., following is a relevant extract:

"A caste is an endogamous group, or collection of endogamous groups, bearing a common name, membership of which is hereditary, arising from birth alone; imposing on its members certain restrictions in the matter of social intercourse; either (i) following a common traditional occupation, or (ii) claiming a common origin, or (iii) both following such occupation and claiming such origin; and generally regarded as forming a single homogenous community." (M. Farek *et. al* 2017,147).

That, what we can observe from the following extract is - the categories that they listed are not the be all and end all of the *Jatis and Varnas*, neither are they the complete description of the Indian social reality, even the word *Jati* has various connotations depending upon the context of where it has been used, it can be linguistic, occupation based etc. (Samarendra 2011,52).

Methodology

Theoretical frameworks of Caste System

That, the word “Caste” has its own theoretical framework and conceptual origin. “Caste” comes from the Portuguese word “Casta” which was based on the concept of “*Limpeza de sangue*” literally meaning “Purity of Blood”, it’s application in Christian context was yet very clear: People from the traditional Christian families had pure blood simply by virtue of them born into those families and however sincerely, the faith and practices of new converts are they will continue to have impure blood because their ancestors believed in false religions (M. Farek et al. 2017,154). This very distinction was applied to different groups of heathens:

“The Children of marriages between Old Christians and New Christians (with Jewish or Moor blood), and their descendants were considered contaminated. When transferred to India, this principle included Indians, too. To say that someone had a “race of Indian”, for example, was almost equivalent to saying that he or she was like a Jew or Moor.” (Xavier 2012,131)

Further, the parallels are seen in the Surveys conducted in colonial India. Here, the most important officer becomes Sir. H.H Risley (1851-1911), he put up his work on the theoretical frameworks of Max Muller.

Muller gave the following input in a private letter to Risley, prior to Risley’s census of 1901:

“...classification of skulls, hairs, eyes and skin may be brought into harmony with the classification of language...that two must have run parallel, at least in the beginning of all things.” (Malhotra and Neelakandan 2011, 53)

Results and Discussion

Their Census and Their Metrics

That, H. Risley in under his aegis conducted the census of India in 1901 and published the same in Imperial Gazetteer of India which proved to be highly influential, he used an Anthropometric measure of making the classification – this was a science of that time where, size of Nose and Human skull played a pivotal role in describing the hierarchy of castes, following is a relevant extract:

“... enables us to conclude that the community of races, and not, as has frequently been argued, the community of function, is the real determining principle... of the caste system.” (Malhotra and Neelakandan, 2011, pp-55)

Using the very same metrics Risley espoused that, the Nasal Index is inversely proportional to social position, further, he classified Jatis as Hindu and Tribes as non-Hindu, this is how the word “Tribe” got legally institutionalized, and continues to be the legal metric.

Risley, in the same 1901 census decided that Indian consists of 2,378 castes and tribe (including subcastes), and 43 races. To further implement the hierarchy, he did not use an alphabetical framework, but rather in order of what he understood as the “social preference” on his very understanding of “native public opinion.” The same “Nasal metric” was used by Edgar Thurston, who authored “Castes and Tribes of Southern India (1909)” for the caste profiling the India of South. (Malhotra and Neelakandan 2011, 55-59).

That, the use of these Ethnocentric and Anthropological metrics is what can be called as a “Reconstructionist” approach of the European Colonizer, this led the “Castefication” of the organic and ever-evolving – *Varnas and Jati's*.

Following was the problem of the Caste census in India:

“When he [Sir Herbert Risley] became Commissioner for the 1901 Census of India, he was determined to carry out within its framework a grand experiment in classifying and ranking castes in the sub-continent as a whole. ...from the difficulty even of identifying discrete and founded in some census regions over the impossibility of finding any meaningful way of classifying them...”. (Malhotra and Viswanathan 2023).

That, this forcible fitting of the Caste System Theory onto the organic Indian realities till today has proved itself to be a social Catastrophe and continues to cause problems and fissures in Indian society. Therefore, the need of the hour is to organize the Indian Social Structures on native anvils and first of all, to set right the history of the Indian society in relation to its social structures.

Is Dravidian and Aryan a race?

That, the standard story of the Historiography of India has always had the axiomatic truth that – There was some race called as “Aryans”(White in color, with snubbed nose) which invaded India in 1500 BCE and that, they subjugated the native Indians called Dravidian's (Black in color and with big nose) further, they made the Vedas and also made the oppressive caste system which was allegedly foisted on the so-called indigenous Dravidians.

It is beyond the pale of any doubt that this theory has been refuted and put to sleep ad-infinitum. Several scholarly works have already made this a settled debate that, there is no Aryan invasion (for extensive arguments see – Lal 2015, Jain 2023, Frawley and Rajaram 2014). The very edifice of Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT) was on the basis of invasion and composition of Vedas in 1500 BCE; however, no evidence of archaeology is found in that regard, in fact ample of contrary evidence is found (Lal 2015). The claim that Vedas were made in and after 1500 BCE also stands refuted by the same Max Muller who, most extensively tried to prove the AIT, following is a relevant extract:

“Whether the Vedic hymns were composed in 1000,1500 or 2000 or 3000 B.C., no power on earth will ever determine.” (Frawley and Rajaram 2014,24)

That, the question needs to be addressed is – *is there any racial connotation to the word Arya and Dravida* in the entire corpus of Sanskrit literature?

That, the clear answer to this question is that – the application of racial filters to these words does not provide a proper explanation of the words, simply because these are not racially charged words. Following are the translations of the words:

Arya

Shloka - yattv āryāḥ kriyamāṇaṁ praśaṁsanti sa dharmo yad garhante so 'adharmah'.

“But that is Dharma, the practice of which wise men praise; what they blame, is Adharma.
(Apastambha Dharma sutra 1.7.20, 6-7)”

In the above shloka the word ‘Arya’ is translated as ‘wise men’, as we see clearly there is no reference to any race whatsoever. The same can be seen with texts like Mahabharata, Ramayana and Rigveda (Frawley and Rajaram 2014, 19)

Dravida

Adi. Shankaracharya a revered ancient scholar who travelled the length and breadth of India barefooted by the age of 32 writes in his ancient scripture called – *Mathamnyaya Mahanushasana Verse 32*:

“Andhra, Dravida, Karnataka, Kerala etc. Several territories situated in the south are under the Shreengeri Math.” (Mishra 2001, 13)

That, we clearly see here the word “Dravida” is associated in the sense of a “territory”. To simply conclude these words are at best indicators of “character and geography” respectively, but not of race by any yardstick. We therefore need alternative terminologies and epistemology to understand the native Indian texts and hence the need for a Decolonial lens.

Among the first civilizational icons to refute the AIT were Sri. Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda (Lal 2015, 2-3). Among the recent freedom fighters, the notion of race on the word “Aryan and Dravidian” was vehemently refuted by Dr. Ambedkar (Malhotra and Neelakandan 2011,60).

Proposing a theory of Varna and Jati

In the past sections we have shed light on some of the issues of the “caste system” and its theoretical framework. We have seen as to how does the notion of Caste evolved and in what context. In this section a very serious attempt is made in order to understand Varna and jati. In and from the last decade especially there are numerous theories floating in academic circles regarding the Varna and Jati, by and large it is seen that every scholar has their own theory of – *What is Varna and Jati?* – therefore, the attempt in this section will strictly be based upon traditional Hindu texts and the traditional *Gurus* who were ardent practitioners of the tradition.

The traditional theory of Varna and Jati is very different as seen by contemporary scholars, there seems to be a reductionist approach of especially 'Bhagavad Geeta' – its shloka 4.13 (that the Varna are based upon qualities and tendencies. While this is true there are certain problems of interpretation that are ahead of us (Shridhar 2025,165)

The first and most explicit description of the four Varnas can be seen in the Purusha Suktam of the Rigveda, wherein the divine origins of four Varnas are espoused upon:

When they divided Purusa, how many portions did they make?

What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet?

The Brahman...was his mouth, of his both arms was the Rajanya made. His thighs became the Vaisya, from his feet the Sudra was produced (Sharma 2024, 56)

That, the allegation about hierarchy of purity of Race and the alleged aspect that – Since Shudra came from feet, they are impure or less pure – does not hold credibility. Texts like the *Brihadaranyak Upanishad* also mention Shudras as excellent form of Varna (Sharma 2017,137-163).

The Varna – Jati Complex

That, there is a dire need to first define as to what do we mean by Varna and Jati, when we try to understand it, Varna has multiple aspects to it so does jati, but with respect to the basic understanding of the Smriti and Dharmashastras tradition, following is what they mean.

Varna – Varnas are ontological categories, meaning they are 'nature of being'

Jati – Jati has its etymology as '*Janmana Jayate iti*' which means – that which is obtained from birth

There are any number of texts in the Hindu literature that deal with Varna and Jati, however, the specific shloka that will be dealt is the following:

The Four orders of society were created by me (Lord Krishana), classifying them according to the Gunas predominant in each and apportioning corresponding duties to them; through the originator of this creation, know Me, the Immortal Lord, to be a non-doer. (Gita press 2023, 66)

The popular view about this verse from the Bhagavad Gita has been that, the Varna scheme is entirely dependent upon the qualities and tendencies, so, therefore – people could acquire any quality and change their Varna accordingly. However, this is not the case.

Further shloka of the Bhagavad Gita 1.42 says:

“By the evil deeds of those who destroy the family tradition and thus give rise to unwanted children, all kinds of community projects and family welfare activities are devastated.”

The above shloka provides us with the phrase that the Jati and Kula (Family lineage) Dharma is eternal. This shows us that the Jati and Varna both are eternal traditions in Hinduism, the only point of difference is that, there are only four varnas and Jati's have evolved with time (for example: newer professions give rise to different jati).

The question perhaps we need to answer is – Can a person change the Varna and jati in the same life time or not?

To answer this question, we need to take a look at some of the traditional commentators, as to what have they said. On the verse 4.13 of Gits – following is what Adi Shankaracharya espoused:

“...defines svabhava as a reference to innate nature consisting of individual tendencies of being, earned in their past lives, which have become manifest in the present life for yielding their own results. (Shridhar 2025, 168)”

The Varna and Jati scheme is related as – a person gets birth as per the deeds of their past life, but sometimes there can be a dissonance between Varna and Jati, then, complex of sorts is formed. For instance, in Indian history there have been kings who have been from a Shudra lineage. The texts say in such situation that, a person may have any kind of birth but due to their calibre and spiritual upliftment by following austerities they can take upon themselves the vows and duties of other Varnas. However, this does not change their Jati Identity in the same life and therefore an amalgam of ‘Jati & Varna’ is formed – which is to say that if a person is born in a Shudra Jati, will continue to be the same for the rest of the life, but, if that person has taken upon himself the Vows of a Kshatriya – his “*Varna-Jati*” complex would be “Shudra-Kshatriya”. There may have been speculations about the Karma doctrine, that whether the concept of reincarnation is scientific? While no one can actually determine this with surety, however, it is already espoused that the Varna and Jati scheme is not a secular scheme it is a metaphysical scheme and therefore it must be understood on its own anvils if there is a serious pursuit of knowledge. The Varna Jati scheme is flexible in the sense that it allows you to take upon yourselves vows of any particular varna, however, it is also rigid in the sense that it determines the Jati and Varna primarily by birth, and this change is possible only by strict adherence to the vows of any other Varna throughout the life time, however change in the identity is possible in the next life only. (Shridhar, 2025 113-118 & Appendix I). The Jatis gradually evolve and therefore by seeing the *nature of jatis* (Shridhar 2025, 169-170) they are retrofitted onto the Varnas.

Is the Varna & Jati Scheme immutable? The theory of differentiation between Varna and jati vis-à-vis Caste

In this Final section we will understand the key differences between caste and Varna-Jati and also espouse on whether the Birth based Jati identity is immutable.

On the Birth based immutability of Varna and Jati:

Here we will look into one of the very key texts of Hindu Literature i.e. Mahabharata there is a beautiful dialogue between Dharmaraja Yudhishtira and Nahusha (Mahabharata Vana Parva) on this very same issue, relevant excerpts are reproduced below.

Nahusha - If, O monarch, as you assert, a Brāhmaṇa is recognised by certain virtue, then, O long lived one, the distinction of varṇas is to no purpose so long as he does not possess these qualities.

Yudhishtira - O highly intelligent and mighty snake, I think, here in this world it is very difficult to ascertain one's varṇas on account of promiscuous intercourse of all the orders.

Men of all the four orders are without restriction constantly begetting children on women of all the varṇas. And speech, cohabitation, birth and death of men of all the orders are similar in all respects.

It is, on this account, that the wise have asserted that the character is the chief and needful thing.

On the Immutability of Varna and Jati itself:

That, it must be noted, the Varna and Jati Dharma are central to Hinduism as we saw from the Bhagavad Gita as well, however it must be noted that no system in Hinduism is canonical or unchangeable, the much-touted Manu smriti itself declares that any Dharma may be declared to be redundant or void if:

- 1) It does not lead to well-being in the long run.
- 2) If it has become *lokavikrushta* (denounced by the people) (Sharma 2024, 70-72).

However, for this claim to establish itself, serious research is needed.

Conclusion

On the Differentiation between Varna-Jati and Caste

That, we need to differentiate between the Varna-Jati and the Caste system in order for us to rediscover the native culture of India, on the observations made and literature espoused herein we can conclude upon the following observations:

The Yard sticks to belong to a Caste are different from Varna and Jati and therefore, there is a need to revisit the Hindu texts and especially the Itihasa texts (Mahabharata and Ramayana) and the Smriti texts, the reason being that, in the Hindu tradition only two texts claim itself to be depicting the Indian Societal realities and actually occurred events. They are the Itihasa texts and hence, studying them very seriously is the need of the time.

The Theoretical foundations of the Caste System are very different from that of Varna-Jati and hence, this hierarchy of Jatis (now called as Caste) is based upon the foundation that is completely alien to the

India and its history, most importantly no texts in Hindu corpus of literature determine the hierarchy of Jatis.

The Hindu Smriti tradition is not and were never applied by the kings as canonical laws to govern society, they are the guiding light for the society in the aspects where no local tradition or custom exists. The smritis themselves say that customs are greater than Smritis (Yajnavalkya Dharmashastra 1.343).

The story of India has always been projected as a story of systemic oppression, this established view needs a serious scrutiny on the basis of evidence first and not sentiments, studies like that of “Dharmapal’s Beautiful tree” and many more have already provided ample of evidence that must be looked upon in this regard. The humble suggestion is that, evidence and history should make sentiments and not otherwise. However, one must not white wash any history or its part thereof, as espoused earlier, *decoloniality allows the culture to access to its past independent of coloniality to see the good, bad and the ugly in toto*. The larger history of India is the Western description of India and the truths presented by the Anglicist and Oriental scholarship which has its own framework formed by their native cultural experience which was and is then unconsciously or consciously used to understand India.

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