

# *On The Scriptural Notion of Varna: Is India on the Rise?*

---

*A discussion of the scriptural notion of varna is presented to show how its true meaning has been distorted through the declining phase of the Indian culture. Evidence points to the rise of India and the concomitant restoration of the correct interpretation of varna.*

---

**Pradeep B. Deshpande**

*Chemical Engineering Department  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, KY 40292  
U.S.A.*

Isn't it puzzling that the Hindu society which gave birth to the most tolerant religions would have so many problems arising out of caste distinctions. It is a universal attribute of the dark side of human beings that leads them to seek domination over others on the basis of a certain sense of superiority for one reason or another. The catastrophic consequences that have resulted in this millennium when some cultures took these feelings of superiority to the extreme on the basis of race or religion are too well known. However, perhaps in no other society are the problems arising out of societal structure as severe as those arising out of caste considerations in India. There are literally hundreds of subcastes with many members of each claiming a unique place in the hierarchy. The question naturally arises whether the varna distinctions in the scriptures that are so revered by Hindus in general are somehow responsible for the problems arising out of caste considerations.

The root meaning of the Sanskrit word *varna* is color. While dictionaries often equate varna with what has come to be known as the caste system, this is a degenerated interpretation as we hope to show. The earliest reference to the names commonly associated with the four castes may be found in Rigveda. The two relevant hymns from Book 1 are:

*When they divided Purusha, into how many parts  
did they arrange him?*

*What was his mouth?, his two arms?, What are*

*his thighs and feet called?*

*The Brahman was his mouth, his two arms were made the Rajanya (warrior), his two thighs the Vaishya, and from his feet, the Shudra was born.*

The varna distinctions, on the other hand, are alluded to in chapter 4 and clarified in Chapter 18 of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The correct interpretation of the varna distinctions requires an understanding of the three *Gunas* (states of mind, character). Shri Krishna says “That which seems like poison at first, but tastes like nectar in the end, is the joy of *Sattva*, born of a mind in peace with itself. Pleasures from the senses may seem like nectar at first, but are bitter as poison at the end. This is the kind of happiness that comes to the *Rajasic*. Those who are *Tamasic* draw their pleasures from sleep, indolence, and intoxication. Both in the beginning and in the end, this happiness is a delusion. He goes on to say “No creature, whether born here on earth, or in the heavens, or anywhere else in creation, is free from these three qualities born of matter. Shri Krishna then says

*The different distributions of the three gunas and karma give rise to the fourfold varna distinctions created by me. Though I am the author thereof, know Me to be action-less and changeless.* (18.41)

A person (*Jiva*) in whom *Sattva Guna* predominates is classified as a Brahman.

*Control of the mind and of the senses, sustaining hardship for the sake of duty, tranquility, purity of heart, patience, humility, learning, austerity, wisdom, and faith, are the duties of the Brahman, born of his nature.* (18.42)

In the Kshatriya *Sattva* seasoned with *Rajas* prevails.

*Courage, strength, fortitude, dexterity, generosity, leadership, and resolve to never retreat from battle, are the qualities of Kshatriya, based on his nature.* (18.43)

In the Vaishya, *Rajas* predominates with a sparing presence of *Sattva* and *Tamas*.

*Cultivation, protection of cows, and trade are the duties of the Vaishya.* (18.44)

In the Shudra, *Tamas* regulated by *Rajas* is in the forefront.

*Service to the society is the duty of the shudra.* (18.45)

In this classification there is no hint that the *Gunas* may be acquired hereditarily. Indeed, in an early episode of Mahabharata itself a Kshatriya King is depicted as selecting a commoner from among his subjects to succeed him to the throne over his many sons reasoning that the latter did not possess the correct combination of the *Gunas*. In spite of these clear directions, the caste system has arguably become the most stubborn obstacle to progress. So troubled was Mahatma Gandhi about the notion of varna distinctions in the Gita (which he revered) that he once observed “No scripture is a scripture if it cannot withstand the scrutiny of logic”.

If the correct meaning and interpretation of varna distinctions are abundantly clear from the foregoing discussion of the relevant verses in the Gita, then, the reader would be baffled as to what the root causes of problems arising out of caste considerations are. Shri Krishna himself offers the following clues in chapter 4.

*Yada yada hi dharmasya glanir-bhavati Bharata Abhyutanam-adharmsya tada-tmanam srjamy-aham.* (4.7)

*(Whenever there is decline of dharma, and rise of adharma, I embody myself, O' Bharata .)*

and

*Paritranaya sadhunam, vinashaya cha dushkratam dharma samsthapanarthya, smabhavami yuge yuge.* (4.8)

*(For the protection of the good, destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of dharma, I am born age after age.)*

The implications of these two verses are profound indeed, especially considering that they were articulated over three thousand years ago. They imply that the rise and decline of cultures are a natural part of our evolutionary heritage. They also allude to the cyclical nature of the rise and decline of cultures. *Sattva Guna* induces dharma while *Rajas* and *Tamas* promote adharma. *Sattva* dominates in a period leading to sustained rise but when the culture rises to the ultimate level of enlightenment, decline must necessarily follow. During the period of decline, *Rajas* and *Tamas* become dominant until a certain low point is reached at which point *Sattva* takes hold again, and so on. Interestingly, the scientific analog of these observations is the suggestion that genes undergo transformation from one *yuga* to the next leading to the repeated rise and decline of cultures.

It is interesting too that these ideas apply to all cultures, not just the one in India. For example, the evidence of the rise and decline of Greece is shown in Figure 1. Figure 1 depicts the persons of Greek origin listed in the Encyclopaedia Britannica plotted as a function of the century in which they flourished.

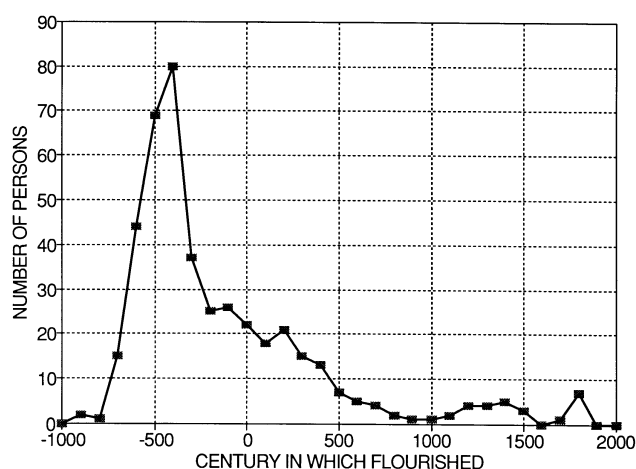


Figure 1. Rise and Decline of Greece

It is assumed that an indication of how well a culture has done may be obtained by examining the number of persons from that culture listed in the reputed reference. Note the unmistakable peak at 400 B.C. The culture that laid the foundation of western democracy and culture and the one that produced the likes of Aristotle, Archimedes, Socrates, Plato, and Homer, in a short span of a few hundred years, is today consid-

ered by many to be the weakest link in the European Community. Similar plots for Germany and Great Britain show evidence of rise and decline as well.

There appears to be an interesting connection between the rise and decline of cultures and the concept of *karma*. During the period of rise, *sattva* dominates and each successive generation does better in some sense than the previous one, leading to the hypothesis that the benefits of good *karma* are being accrued. In the period of decline, *Rajas* and *Tamas* dominate and each successive generation does worse than the previous one, leading to the belief that the penalties of bad *karma* are being realized. The evidence about the rise and decline suggests that the effects of *karma* will be felt by the society at large; its application to individuals will often lead to results that cannot be easily explained.

While the Encyclopaedia Britannica is an excellent source of information on western cultures, it does not contain sufficient information about the contributions of eastern cultures. An attempt has been made here to construct the evidence of rise and decline of the Indian culture. Figure 2 shows the evidence pertaining to the last cycle. After rising to towering heights during which immortal works such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, were written, Indian culture declined. The varna concept passed through the hands of Manu and degenerated into the caste system where heredity (the caste at birth), rather than the individual's capabilities and attributes, became the determining factor. The period of decline has seen the dominance of *Rajas* and *Tamas*, and a concomitant misinterpretation of the notion of varna distinctions of the *Bhagvad Gita*.

There is yet another point requiring explanation. Even the *Manusmruti* (laws of Manu) speaks of only four castes. Why then are hundreds of subcastes compounding the difficulties? The answer may well lie in our heritage. A famous verse from Book 1 of Rigveda says:

*God is one, the wise call him by many names.*

A culture in decline, misinterpreting the notion of varna, is also likely to misinterpret the meaning of this hymn. The reader is aware of the literally thousands of deities worshiped in India which by itself is not inconsistent

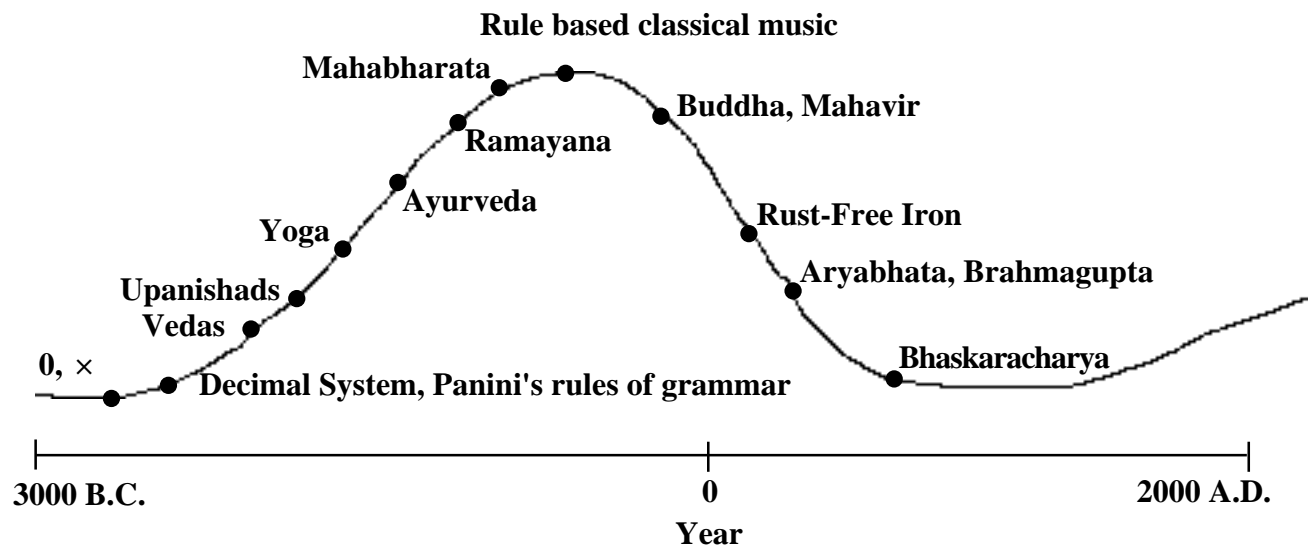


Figure 2. Rise and Decline of India - Last Cycle  
(There is considerable uncertainty about the dates)

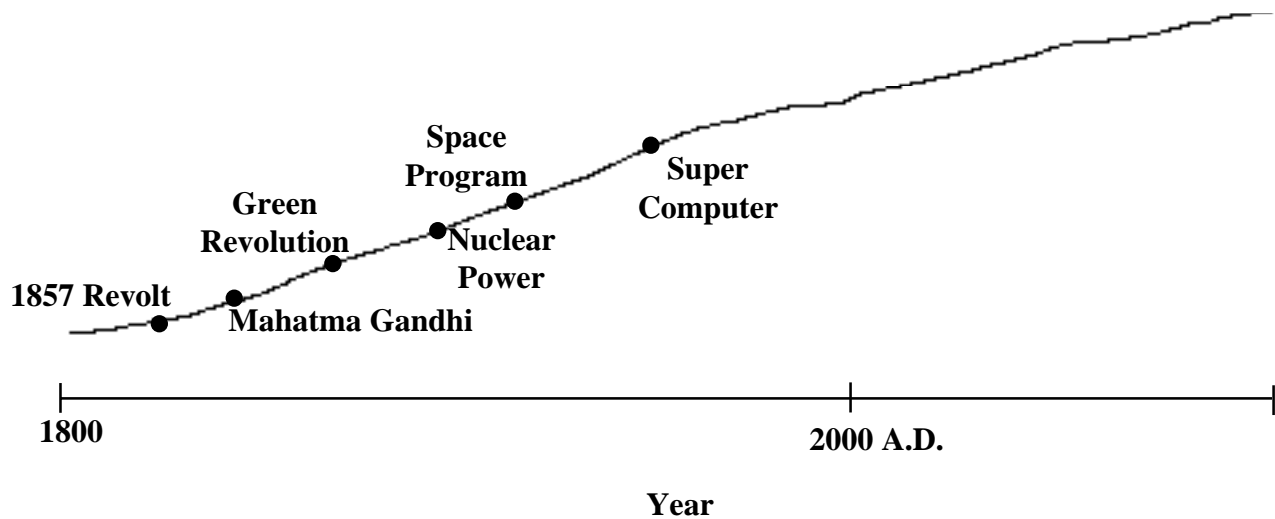


Figure 3. Imminent Rise of India - Next Cycle

with the hymn. However, the conflicts they have given rise to has no rational basis. Similar reasoning could have resulted in a further subdivision of the four castes into the form that has been prevalent in more recent times.

The rise of Japan in the last twenty or so years and the recent historical developments suggest that eastern cultures which had declined a long time ago are on the rise again. There is wide agreement in international circles that Japan, China, and India will be three of the four dominant global economies in the first quarter of the next Century. Figure 3 shows the evidence of the imminent rise of India. It is expected that during the ascent, *Sattva* will once again become dominant and the true interpretation of varna distinctions will become apparent. Glimpses of enlightenment have become visible in recent years. For example, efforts by the society to uplift the members of the lowest castes, the presence of the members of all castes in all field of endeavor, rising levels of inter-caste marriages, etc. There is still a long way to go but there is little doubt that soul searching about the true interpretation of the notion of varna has begun.

### Acknowledgments

The English translations of the verses cited are taken from the commentary on Bhagvad Geeta by Swamy Chidbhavananda (Tapovanam Printing School, Tirupparaitturai, Tamil Nadu, India, 1992) and Eknath Easwaran (Nilgiri Press, Tomales, CA, 1990). The helpful comments of Prof. Kunwar Bhatnagar of the School of Medicine, University of Louisville, Dr. Thangam Rangaswamy of Rangaswamy & Associates, Inc., and Dr. T. K. Ananthakrishnan of the Du Pont Company, are gratefully appreciated.

### References

1. **Swamy Chidbhavananda**, "Commentary on Bhagvad Gita", Tapovanam Printing School, Tirupparaitturai, Tamil Nadu, India, 1992.
2. **Pradeep B. Deshpande and Phoebus M. Christopher**, "On the Cyclical Nature of Excellence", Reflections, No. 1, September 1993.
3. **Eknath Easwaran**, "The Bhagvad Gita", Nilgiri

Press, Tomales, CA, 1990.

4. **"The Encyclopedia Britannica"**, The University of Chicago Press, 1991.

5. **Anil Nauriya**, "Not a Radical, But A Reformer", Indian Express, January 8, 1995.

6. **S. Radhakrishnan and C.E. Moore**, A Source Book in Indian Philosophy, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1973.

### About the Author

Pradeep B. Deshpande is Professor and a former Chairman of the chemical engineering department at the University of Louisville where he heads a Center for Desalination: Modelling, Optimization & Control. He is also President of Simulation and Advanced Controls (SAC), Inc., a Louisville-based company specializing in Monitoring, optimization, and advanced control of batch and continuous processes. He has over twenty three years of academic and full-time industrial experience. Dr. Deshpande is an author or coauthor of five books in process control; the latest is entitled Elements of Artificial Neural Networks with Applications in Chemical Engineering and Chemical & Biological Sciences, published by SAC in July 1996. He has also developed a number of control algorithms and published seventy five papers, He has received several awards for his work including the 1990 Donald P. Eckman Award in process control education given by ISA. Pradeep consults for several companies and offers continuing education courses all over the world. He is a member of AIChE and a Fellow of ISA. [Tel. No. (502) 852-0885; FAX No. (502) 852-6355, e-mail: pradeep.deshpande@louisville.edu]