

# Varṇa in the Bhagavad Gītā: A Philosophical Analysis of Guṇa, Karma, Svabhāva and Svadharma

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## Abstract

The concept of varṇa holds a central place in the Bhagavad Gītā's social, ethical, and philosophical thought. The traditional fourfold classification of Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra has often been interpreted as tied to birth and hereditary social status. However, the Bhagavad Gītā offers a significant philosophical framework for examining varṇa through the interconnected concepts of guṇa, karma, svabhāva, and svadharma. This paper critically examines the meaning and philosophical significance of these concepts, with particular attention to Bhagavad Gītā 4.13 and 18.41–44. The analysis shows that the Gītā presents the fourfold social order through the distinction of guṇa and karma and then explains the duties associated with the four varṇas in terms of qualities arising from svabhāva. The three guṇas—sattva, rajas, and tamas—provide an ethical and psychological framework for understanding differences in human dispositions and tendencies, while karma refers to action and duty performed in accordance with one's nature. The concept of svadharma further emphasizes the importance of performing one's appropriate duty without attachment to its fruits. The paper argues that the Gītā does not explicitly formulate varṇa as a hereditary institution; rather, its philosophical presentation emphasizes guṇa, karma, and svabhāva. At the same time, the paper distinguishes the Gītā's concept of varṇa from the historically developed institution of jāti and caste. By examining Śaṅkara's interpretation alongside modern philosophical readings, the study seeks to clarify the relationship between individual nature, social duty, ethical action, and spiritual realization in the Gītā.

**Keywords:** *varṇa, guṇa, karma, svabhāva, svadharma, Bhagavad Gītā.*

## 1. Introduction

The concept of *varṇa* occupies an important place in the social, ethical, and philosophical thought of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. The fourfold order of *Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra* is presented within a broader framework of *guṇa, karma, svabhāva, and svadharma*. Thus, *varṇa* in the *Gītā* is not merely a form of social classification but is also connected with human nature, ethical action, duty, and spiritual development. Gītā 4.13 describes the fourfold order through the division of *guṇa* and *karma* (*guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ*), while 18.41–44 relate the duties of the four *varṇas* to qualities arising from *svabhāva*. The three *guṇas*—*sattva, rajas,*

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Published: 19 September 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i5.301317>

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and *tamas*—explain different human dispositions and tendencies; *karma* refers to action and duty; *svabhāva* denotes one's characteristic nature; and *svadharma* signifies the duty appropriate to that nature. Śāṅkara interprets *varṇa* in relation to the predominance of the *guṇas*, whereas Sri Aurobindo emphasizes *svabhāva* and *svadharma* in relation to individual nature and spiritual development. At the same time, the *Gītā*'s concept of *varṇa* should be distinguished from the historically developed institution of *jāti* and caste. This study therefore critically examines the relationship among *guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*, and *svadharma* and argues that the *Gītā*'s account of *varṇa* cannot be understood solely in terms of hereditary social status, but must be examined within its wider ethical and spiritual framework.

## 2. Research Problem

The central problem of this study is to examine the philosophical basis of *varṇa* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Although *varṇa* is often interpreted as a hereditary or birth-based social classification, the *Gītā* relates the fourfold order to *guṇa* and *karma* in 4.13 and to *svabhāva*-born qualities in 18.41–44. This raises the question of whether *varṇa* should be understood primarily in terms of birth, or through an individual's qualities, nature, actions, and duties.

The study therefore investigates the conceptual relationship among *guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*, and *svadharma*. It further examines whether *svadharma* represents an inherited social obligation or a duty corresponding to one's own nature and disposition. The interpretations of Śāṅkara and Sri Aurobindo are considered to clarify the ethical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of these concepts. The study also distinguishes the *Gītā*'s fourfold *varṇa* framework from the historically developed institution of *jāti* or caste. Thus, the research seeks to clarify the philosophical, ethical, and spiritual significance of *varṇa* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

## 3. Research Question

The study seeks to address the following questions:

1. What is the philosophical meaning of *varṇa* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*?
2. How are *guṇa* and *karma* related to the fourfold *varṇa* system in the *Bhagavad Gītā* 4.13
3. How do *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* influence nature, character, and action?
4. How are *svabhāva*, *svadharma*, and the duties of the four *varṇas* related in *Gītā* 18.41–44?
5. How do Sankara and Aurobindo interpret the relationship among *guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*, and *svadharma*?
6. How does the *Gītā*'s concept of *varṇa* differ from hereditary *jati* and the later caste system, and what is the ethical and spiritual significance?

## 4. Objective of the Study

The principal objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the philosophical meaning and significance of *varṇa* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

2. To analyse the relationship among *guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*, and *svadharma* in the *Gītā*.
3. To examine the significance of *guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ* in *Bhagavad Gītā* 4.13 and the role of the three *gunas* in human conduct.
4. To analyse the relationship between *svabhāva* and *svadharma* and the duties of *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya*, and *Śūdra* in *Bhagavad Gītā* 18.41–44.
5. To examine Śāṅkara's and Sri Aurobindo's interpretations of *varṇa*, *guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*, and *svadharma*.
6. To critically distinguish the *Gītā*'s philosophical concept of *varṇa* from hereditary birth and the later historical institution of *jāti* or caste, with reference to the ethical and spiritual significance of selfless action.

## 5. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a philosophical, textual, analytical, and interpretive methodology. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, particularly Chapters 2, 3, 4, 14, and 18, serves as the primary source, with special attention to 4.13 and 18.41–44. The study examines the relationship among *varṇa*, *guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*, and *svadharma* through close textual analysis. Śāṅkarācārya's *Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya*, Swami Gambhirananda's translation, Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, and S. Radhakrishnan's *The Bhagavadgītā* are used to compare classical and modern interpretations. The study follows a critical-hermeneutical approach and distinguishes the *Gītā*'s philosophical concept of *varṇa* from the later historical institution of *jāti* or caste. It is interpretive rather than empirical and does not employ surveys, interviews, or statistical methods.

## 6. Meaning of Varṇa

The Sanskrit term *varṇa* has several meanings. According to Vāmana Śivarāma Apte's *Sanskrit-Hindi Dictionary*, it may signify colour, description, explanation, interpretation, praise, extension, observation, perception, form, beauty, caste, race, type, genus, and related concepts.<sup>1</sup> In Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* 48, the term *varṇa* is used in the sense of complexion or colour. The verse compares the dark cloud with the complexion of Śārṅgin (Kṛṣṇa), using the expression *varṇa-caura*, "one who steals the complexion." Here, *varṇa* refers to the visible colour or appearance of the person being described. This usage illustrates an important early meaning of the term, in which *varṇa* is associated with physical colour and appearance rather than with social classification.<sup>2</sup> In *Raghuvamśa* 5.19, *varṇa* is used in relation to the *varṇāśrama* system and denotes social classes. The verse indicates that, in classical Sanskrit literature, *varṇa* was also used in a social and religious sense.<sup>3</sup> In the *Rgveda*, *varṇa* is commonly used to describe colour, brightness, physical appearance, or form.<sup>4</sup> In certain passages, however, it is connected with groups of people distinguished by differences in

<sup>1</sup> Apte, V.S., *Sanskrit-Hindi Dictionary*, p. 901

<sup>2</sup> Meghdoot, 48.

<sup>3</sup> *Raghuvamśa*, 5.19

<sup>4</sup> *Rgveda* 1.73.7; 2.3.5; 9.97.15; 9.104.4; 9.105.4; 10.124.7 (Griffith).

complexion. The *Rgveda*, for instance, refers to Indra as having placed the *Dāsa* colour in a cave of darkness.<sup>5</sup> In the context of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, it refers to the fourfold social classification consisting of *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya*, and *Śūdra*.

This, however, raises an important philosophical question: Is the *varṇa* system determined by birth, or is it based on an individual's inherent qualities, actions, and abilities?

According to *Bhagavad Gītā* 4.13, the fourfold *varṇa* system is organized based on *guṇa* (qualities) and *karma* (actions). Similarly, in Chapter 18, the respective duties of the four *varṇas* are explained in relation to their inherent qualities and natural dispositions (*svabhāva*). Thus, the *Gītā* appears to present *varṇa* not simply as a social status inherited by birth, but as a classification closely connected with an individual's qualities, inherent nature, disposition, and actions.

## 7. The Concept of Guṇa

In *Bhagavad Gītā* 14.5, Kṛṣṇa explains that *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas* are the three *guṇas* arising from *Prakṛti*. These three modes of nature bind the imperishable self (*dehin*) to embodied existence. Thus, the experience of birth, death, and worldly existence is closely associated with the operation of the three *guṇas*.<sup>6</sup>

The *guṇas* should not be understood simply as ordinary qualities belonging to material objects. Rather, they constitute the fundamental elements or tendencies of *Prakṛti* and provide the basis for the manifestation of the empirical world. As explained in the traditional commentary attributed to Ānandagiri, they are the primary constituents of nature rather than qualities that merely inhere in particular substances. The term *guṇa* is also explained in relation to the *puruṣa* of *Sāṃkhya* philosophy and the *kṣetrajñā* of the *Gītā*, upon which the activities of nature ultimately depend.

The three *guṇas* represent three fundamental tendencies of *Prakṛti*. *Sattva* is characterized by luminosity (*prakāśa*), because it reflects and is illuminated by consciousness. *Rajas* is characterized by movement and activity (*pravṛtti*), expressing the dynamic and outward-directed tendency of nature. *Tamas*, by contrast, is associated with inactivity (*apravṛtti*), inertia, negligence, and delusion. Since these concepts have no exact equivalents in English, they may be broadly rendered as goodness or purity for *Sattva*, passion or activity for *Rajas*, and dullness or inertia for *Tamas*. Their significance in the *Gītā* is particularly important from an ethical and psychological perspective.

At the individual level, bondage occurs when the self identifies itself with these modes of *Prakṛti*. Because of this identification, the eternal self becomes involved with the activities of mind, life, and body and seeks fulfillment through ego-centered desires and worldly experiences. The *Gītā* therefore teaches that spiritual liberation requires transcending the three *guṇas*. The liberated person becomes *triguṇātīta*, that is, one who has gone beyond the influence

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 2.12.4.

<sup>6</sup> Radhakrishnan, S. *The Bhagavadgita*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948, commentary on *Bhagavad Gītā* 14.5. P.316

of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. Transcending the *guṇas* enables the individual to realize the freedom and imperishable nature of the spiritual self. The three *guṇas* may therefore be understood not merely as classifications of material nature but also as ethical and psychological principles that influence human thought, character, motivation, and conduct.<sup>7</sup> The *guṇas* in the *Gītā* are not merely psychological traits; they are fundamental modalities of *prakṛti* that manifest themselves at the psychological, ethical, and behavioural levels.

The following discussion examines these three qualities (*guṇas*) in detail:

### **7.1. Sattva**

According to Bhagavad *Gītā* 14.6, Sattva is the purest of the three *guṇas*. Sattva is associated with illumination, clarity, and freedom from affliction. It promotes happiness and knowledge. However, attachment to happiness and intellectual knowledge can also bind a person. Sattva does not completely remove the ego-sense. The knowledge mentioned here belongs to *Buddhi*, which is a product of *Prakṛti*, and is different from the pure consciousness of *Ātman*. Therefore, true liberation requires overcoming ego and all forms of attachment, including attachment to Sattva.

### **7.2. Rajas**

According to Bhagavad *Gītā* 14.7, Rajas is characterized by desire, craving, attraction, and attachment. It creates a strong tendency toward worldly activity and binds the embodied self through attachment to action. As *Ānandagiri* explains, although the true Self is not the actual agent of action, the influence of Rajas produces the egoistic belief, “I am the doer.” Thus, Rajas keeps a person attached to action and strengthens the sense of personal agency.

### **7.3. Tamas**

According to Bhagavad *Gītā* 14.8, Tamas arises from ignorance and causes delusion in embodied beings. It produces negligence, laziness, and excessive sleep, which prevent a person from acting with awareness and clarity. Through these tendencies, Tamas binds the individual and obstructs knowledge, proper action, and spiritual progress. Thus, Tamas represents inertia, ignorance, and delusion, keeping a person attached to an inactive and unconscious state.<sup>8</sup>

In Bhagavad *Gītā* 14.9, the three *guṇas* bind human beings in different ways. Sattva creates attachment to happiness, while Rajas attaches a person to continuous activity and action. Tamas, by covering knowledge and wisdom, leads to negligence and carelessness. Thus, each *guṇa* influences human behaviour differently and becomes a source of bondage through happiness, action, or ignorance.

According to Bhagavad *Gītā* 14.10, the three *guṇas* Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas are present in all human beings, but their degree of predominance differs from person to person. At a particular time, one *guṇa* may become dominant by overcoming the other two. Thus, a person is described as *Sāttvika*, *Rājasa*, or *Tāmasa* according to the *guṇa* that mainly influences his or her character.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 317

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 318

The Sāttvika nature is directed toward knowledge, clarity, and inner peace. The Rājasa nature is restless, desire-driven, and strongly attached to external activities. In contrast, the Tāmasa nature is characterized by dullness, inertia, confusion, and ignorance. Therefore, the predominance of a particular guṇa shapes a person's psychological character, behaviour, and way of life.<sup>9</sup>

## 8. Concept of Karma

The term *Karma* literally refers to action, deed, or activity. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, however, the concept carries a broader and deeper philosophical significance. It denotes the various forms of action in which human beings are inevitably engaged throughout their lives.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* regards action as an unavoidable part of human existence. No person can remain completely inactive even for a moment, because everyone is impelled to action by the three guṇas—sattva, rajas, and tamas—arising from Prakṛti (Nature). Therefore, merely abandoning external activity cannot lead to spiritual liberation.<sup>10</sup> For one who has not attained Self-knowledge (ātma-jñāna), prescribed duties should not be abandoned. The *Gītā* emphasizes that performing one's niyata karma is preferable to inaction. It also distinguishes genuine renunciation from mere external restraint. A person who controls the organs of action outwardly but continues to dwell mentally on sensory objects is considered deluded and hypocritical.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, one who controls the senses through the mind and performs Karma-Yoga with the organ of action, while remaining free from attachment, is superior to one who merely restrains external activity.<sup>12</sup>

The *Gītā* therefore teaches that action is better than inaction, since even the maintenance of the body requires action.<sup>13</sup> The problem is not action itself but attachment to its results. A person has the right to act but not to claim control over its fruits. Hence, one should perform one's duty sincerely without attachment to its results and without becoming inclined towards inactivity.<sup>14</sup> Kṛṣṇa further teaches that one should act while established in Yoga, remaining equally balanced in success and failure. Such equanimity (samatva) is itself called Yoga.<sup>15</sup> The principle of detached action is presented more explicitly in *Bhagavad Gītā* 3.19. The verse instructs one to perform obligatory duties continuously without attachment. When action is performed without attachment to its fruits and is dedicated to God, it becomes selfless action. Such detached action purifies the mind and helps the individual progress toward the highest spiritual goal, namely liberation (*Mokṣa*).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 319

<sup>10</sup> Śaṅkarācārya. *Bhagavad Gītā: With the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*. Translated by Swami Gambhirananda, 2nd ed., 3rd reprint, Advaita Ashrama, 2024. Ch. 3, verse 5, p. 124

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., ch. 3, verse 6, p. 125

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., ch. 3, verse 7, p. 125

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., ch. 3, verse 8, p. 126

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., ch. 2, verse 47, p. 88

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., ch. 2, verse 48, p. 89

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., chapter 3, verse 19, p. 134

Bhagavad Gītā 3.30 further develops this principle in a deeper manner. It teaches that all actions should be dedicated to God and performed with awareness of the Self, free from personal desires, attachment, and egoism. Thus, action is not merely the performance of external duties; rather, through the proper mental attitude, detachment, and dedication to God, action is transformed into a form of spiritual discipline.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Karma-Yoga requires the performance of duty with inner detachment and freedom from selfish desire.

According to Śaṅkarācārya, prescribed action should be performed as an offering to God, without personal desire for its fruits. Such selfless action leads to purification of the mind (*citta-śuddhi*), which prepares the individual for higher spiritual knowledge and ultimately for Mokṣa. Karma-Yoga is therefore an important means of spiritual progress, rather than a rejection of action.

Thus, the Gītā does not teach the abandonment of action; rather, it teaches a transformation in one's attitude toward action. Action performed with desire and attachment causes bondage, whereas selfless, unattached, and God-dedicated action purifies the mind and leads toward spiritual knowledge and liberation.

## 9. Swabhāva and Svadharma

Ordinary human action is influenced by the three guṇas. Actions that ought to be performed, or *kartavya karma*, may therefore display the characteristics of sattva, rajas, or tamas. Spiritual development requires that these actions first be elevated toward their highest sattvic form and then ultimately transformed into a higher form of self-giving to the Divine. This principle of spiritual action is universal. Every human being, regardless of social position or individual character, can progress toward spiritual perfection. Nevertheless, although the fundamental spiritual law applies to everyone, individuals differ considerably in their natural dispositions, abilities, capacities, character, interests, and functions. Therefore, each person also has an individual mode of action determined by his or her own nature.<sup>18</sup>

This individual principle of action is explained through the ideas of *svabhāva* and *svadharma*. *Svabhāva* means a person's natural qualities, character, and disposition, while *svadharma* refers to the duties and actions suitable to that nature. According to Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the *Gītā*, spiritual growth does not require a person to copy the nature or way of life of another. Instead, each person should follow the natural and authentic path of his or her own being.<sup>19</sup>

The Bhagavad Gītā gives particular importance to the principle of one's own duty. Bhagavad Gītā 3.35 connects the idea of detached action with *svadharma*, or one's own duty. It states that performing one's own duty, even imperfectly, is better than performing another person's duty well. Thus, the Gītā teaches that a person should perform his or her own appropriate duty without attachment. This principle provides an important basis for understanding the

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., chapter 3, verse 30, p. 140

<sup>18</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo, Vol. 19, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, Pondicherry, 1997, pp. 508

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 509

relationship between svadharma, guṇa, karma, and svabhāva in the Gītā's later discussion of varṇa.<sup>20</sup>

The Bhagavad Gītā therefore gives great importance to the principle of one's own duty. Arjuna is instructed to follow his *svadharma* as a Kṣatriya. The Gītā further teaches that performing one's own duty imperfectly is preferable to performing another person's duty successfully. This is because genuine spiritual development must proceed from the individual's own nature rather than from an externally imposed pattern.

The concept of Svadharma may be associated with the four varṇas of ancient Indian society: Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra. The Bhagavad Gītā states that the Cāturvarṇya system was established according to the division of guṇa (qualities) and karma (actions). In other words, varṇa is related to an individual's inherent qualities, nature, and the duties appropriate to them. However, when one performs one's prescribed duties with right knowledge and proper intention and dedicates one's actions to God, even ordinary work can become a means of spiritual practice.

Therefore, every genuine form of work can be treated as a form of worship. Whether a person is involved in intellectual work, political activity, business, or social service, the work can have spiritual value when it is performed without selfish attachment and dedicated to the Divine. Thus, the *Gītā* does not say that spiritual perfection depends on the social position or external nature of one's occupation. What matters most is the attitude and consciousness with which the work is performed. A person's natural duties can become a means of spiritual development when they are performed selflessly and offered to the Divine.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, all actions influenced by the three *guṇas* have some imperfections. Human actions naturally have limitations and mistakes. Therefore, a person should not leave their natural work just because it has some defects. Instead of giving up work, one should improve and purify it. A person should perform their own duties without selfish attachment and gradually make their work a means of spiritual growth and realization.

In this context, the concept of svabhāva-niyata karma is particularly important. *Svabhāva-niyata karma* refers to actions that are determined by an individual's own nature, character, and inherent qualities. Proper action should not be guided merely by external social pressure, conventional rules, or a mechanical sense of duty; rather, it should be in harmony with the individual's inner nature, abilities, and unique character.

In this way, guṇa, karma, svabhāva, and svadharma can be understood as parts of one spiritual idea. Although people have different qualities and natural tendencies, everyone can develop spiritually through their own work. Work is not only about fulfilling social duties. When performed selflessly and offered to the Divine, it can become a means of spiritual growth and self-realization. Therefore, svadharma does not simply mean a duty based on birth or social

<sup>20</sup> Śaṅkarācārya. Bhagavad Gītā: With the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya. Translated by Swami Gambhirananda, 2nd ed., 3rd reprint, Advaita Ashrama, 2024. Chapter 3, verse 35, p. 143

<sup>21</sup> Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo, Vol. 19, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, Pondicherry, 1997, pp. 509

position. It means performing actions that are suitable to a person's nature, qualities, abilities, and natural interests.<sup>22</sup>

## 10. Guṇa and Karma

In his commentary on Bhagavad Gītā 4.13, Śaṅkara explains the four varṇas through the principle of guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ, that is, through the classification of the three *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—and their corresponding duties. According to him, the *Brāhmaṇa* is predominantly *sāttvika* and is therefore associated with qualities and duties such as self-control, control of the body, and austerity. The *Kṣatriya*, in whom *rajas* predominates, is characterized by qualities such as courage and valour. The *Vaiśya*, in whom *rajas* is predominant and *tamas* is secondary, is associated with occupations such as agriculture. The *Śūdra*, in whom *tamas* predominates and *rajas* is secondary, is primarily associated with service. Therefore, Śaṅkara interprets the division of the four varṇas in relation to differences in guṇa and karma. The duties associated with each varṇa correspond to the predominance and combination of the three *guṇas*. This interpretation places considerable emphasis on the relationship between an individual's qualities and the activities appropriate to those qualities.

At the same time, Kṛṣṇa is the creator of the varṇa system only from the empirical standpoint. In the highest spiritual sense, He is akartā (non-agent) and avyaya (unchanging), and therefore remains beyond action and its consequences.<sup>23</sup>

The Gītā presents the fourfold social order as based on the division of guṇa and karma. Gambhirananda similarly translates *guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ* as the classification of qualities and duties, making this expression particularly significant.

**Guṇa:** Guṇa refers to the qualities, tendencies, or dispositions that shape an individual's nature.

**Karma:** Karma refers to the actions or duties that correspond to these qualities.

**Vibhāga:** Vibhāga refers to the division, distinction, or classification of different categories.

## 11. Varna and Svabhava

In Chapter 18 of the Bhagavad Gītā, Lord Kṛṣṇa states that the duties of the Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras are differentiated according to their qualities arising from their inherent nature (svabhāva). In other words, an individual's appropriate actions or duties are determined by the qualities and tendencies arising from their nature. Thus, the relationship among svabhāva, guṇa, and karma is particularly significant.<sup>24</sup>

The following section discusses the qualities and duties of the four varṇas.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 510

<sup>23</sup> Śaṅkarācārya. Bhagavad Gītā: With the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya. Translated by Swami Gambhirananda, 2nd ed., 3rd reprint, Advaita Ashrama, 2024. Chapter 4, verse 13, p. 158-159

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., chapter 18, verse 41, p. 547

### 11.1. The Qualities and Duties of the Brāhmaṇa

According to the Bhagavad Gītā, the natural duties of the Brāhmaṇas are determined by their inherent qualities and nature (*svabhāva*). These duties include the control of the internal and external organs, austerity, purity, forgiveness, straightforwardness, knowledge, wisdom, and faith in the teachings of the scriptures. Control of the internal organs refers to the discipline of the mind, while control of the external organs implies restraint of the senses and bodily activities. Austerity signifies disciplined conduct, and purity refers to both inner and outer cleanliness. Forgiveness and straightforwardness indicate a calm, sincere, and simple character. Knowledge represents understanding, while wisdom refers to the deeper realization of truth. Faith signifies trust in spiritual truth and respect for the teachings of the scriptures.<sup>25</sup>

### 11.2. The Qualities and Duties of the Kṣatriya

According to the Bhagavad Gītā, the natural duties of the Kṣatriya arise from his inherent nature and qualities (*svabhāva*). These include heroism, courage, fortitude, capability, steadfastness in battle, generosity, and leadership. Heroism and courage enable the Kṣatriya to face challenges fearlessly, while fortitude helps him remain firm in difficult circumstances. Capability refers to the ability to perform his duties efficiently and without confusion. Not retreating from battle reflects courage and commitment to duty. Generosity expresses his willingness to give, while leadership signifies his capacity to govern and exercise authority responsibly. Thus, these qualities represent the Inherent nature (*svabhāva*) based characteristics and duties of the Kṣatriya.<sup>26</sup>

### 11.3. The Qualities and Duties of the Vaiśya

According to the Bhagavad Gītā, the natural duties of the Vaiśya arise from his inherent nature (*svabhāva*). The natural duties of the Vaiśya consist of agriculture, cattle-rearing, and trade. Agriculture refers to the cultivation of land, cattle-rearing to the care and management of cattle, and trade to the buying and selling of goods.<sup>27</sup>

### 11.4. The Qualities and Duties of the Śūdra

The natural duty of the Śūdra is described as service (*paricaryā*).<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the Gītā connects the duties of both Vaiśyas and Śūdras with their respective *svabhāva*. The performance of these natural duties is regarded in the traditional Hindu understanding as an important means of fulfilling one's prescribed responsibilities. When performed properly and faithfully, such duties are believed to produce religious merit and desirable results.

Hence, the passage suggests that the fulfillment of one's natural duties in accordance with one's *svabhāva* has both social and spiritual significance. According to Smṛti and Purāṇic traditions, those who faithfully perform their prescribed duties may attain higher realms after death and

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., ch. 18, verse 42, p. 549

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., ch. 18, verse 43, p. 549

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., ch. 18, verse 44, p. 550

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., ch 18, verse 44, p. 550

may subsequently be born under favourable conditions, such as in a distinguished family or social position. Therefore, the proper performance of duties according to one's *svabhāva* has both social and spiritual significance, linking individual nature with duty and spiritual development.

A person attains perfection by faithfully performing the duties appropriate to his or her own nature and social role. Through sincere dedication to one's prescribed duties, the impurities of the body and mind are gradually removed, enabling the individual to develop steadiness in spiritual knowledge. Thus, perfection is not achieved merely by performing an external duty, but through wholehearted commitment to one's *svakarma* (one's own duty).<sup>29</sup> Bhagavad Gītā 18.46 teaches that a person can attain spiritual perfection by worshipping the Divine through the sincere performance of one's own duties. Since the Divine is regarded as the source of all beings and as pervading the entire universe, the proper performance of one's duty becomes a means of spiritual realization.<sup>30</sup>

A clear distinction should be made between birth and heredity. The *Bhagavad Gītā* emphasizes *guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*, and their associated duties in its understanding of *varṇa*. However, this does not necessarily mean that the Gītā explicitly rejects birth or hereditary social organization. Its *guṇa-karma-svabhāva* framework allows *varṇa* to be understood beyond birth alone, while not establishing a categorical rejection of hereditary organization. Therefore, *varṇa* in the Gītā and the later hereditary *jāti* system should be understood as conceptually related but historically distinct.

## **12. Varṇa and Jāti: Meaning and Difference**

In the discussion of the Indian social system, *varṇa* and *jāti* are two important concepts. Although these two terms are often used interchangeably in everyday usage, there is, in fact, a fundamental distinction between them.

## **13. Meaning of Varṇa**

*Varṇa* denotes a broad classificatory framework within the traditional Hindu social order. It does not, in itself, constitute an actual functioning social group. Rather, "In later sociological discussions of Indian society, *varṇa* is generally understood as a broad fourfold classificatory framework, whereas *jāti* refers to the numerous concrete, endogamous social groups that constitute the actual structure of caste society." *Jāti*s considered to possess a broadly similar ritual position are conventionally placed within one of the four *Varṇa*s: *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya*, and *Śūdra*, and are arranged within a hierarchical structure. The traditional *Varṇa* scheme is also associated with particular social functions and, in philosophical interpretations, with the three *guṇa*s, namely *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. Nevertheless, *Varṇa* remains a general theoretical framework and cannot fully explain the diverse and complex social organization of Indian society.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., chapter 18, verse 45, p. 551

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., chapter 18, verse 46, p. 551

<sup>31</sup> Dube, S. C. *Indian Society*. National Book Trust, India, 1990, p. 48-49

#### **14. Meaning of Jāti**

Jāti, in contrast, refers to a concrete and functioning social group. It is generally characterized as an endogamous group whose members possess an ascribed social status. Marriage normally takes place within the Jāti, although certain exceptions and variations may occur. Jātis are traditionally organized hierarchically and are often associated with particular occupations. In addition, members of a Jāti commonly share distinctive customs, beliefs, values, cultural practices, and patterns of social interaction. In many regions, Jātis have also developed their own forms of social regulation, including mechanisms for maintaining social norms and settling internal disputes.<sup>32</sup>

#### **15. Fundamental Difference Between Varṇa and Jāti**

*Varṇa* is primarily a broad and ideological system of social classification that places different Jātis into larger categories according to their ritual and social status. *Jāti*, by contrast, is a concrete, endogamous, and functioning social group that directly influences an individual's social identity, marriage practices, occupation, and patterns of social interaction. Therefore, in understanding the actual structure of Indian society, Jāti has a more direct and practical significance than Varṇa.

#### **16. From Varṇa to Jāti: The Historical Development and Structure of the Modern Caste System**

In Hindu social organization, Jāti constitutes a distinctive and independent institution. Historically, the caste system has played an important role in distinguishing Hindu society from other forms of social organization. However, caste has never existed in the same form throughout history. Its structure, characteristics, and social functions have undergone significant changes at different historical periods. The form of caste observed during the time of Megasthenes was different from that described by Al-Biruni; similarly, the accounts of Portuguese travellers reveal a somewhat different form of the caste system. Therefore, it is not possible to understand the caste system comprehensively merely through the accounts of foreign observers. A proper understanding of caste requires an analysis of the fundamental principles, religious ideas, and social practices underlying Hindu social organization.

According to the conventional understanding, Hindu society was divided into four major Varṇas: the Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras. The Brāhmaṇas were primarily associated with learning, teaching, religious activities, and the performance of sacrifices; the Kṣatriyas were connected with governance, warfare, and the protection of society; the Vaiśyas were mainly engaged in agriculture, cattle-rearing, and trade; while the Śūdras were generally associated with service-oriented activities. The relationship between varṇa and jāti is historically complex and should not be understood as a straightforward or linear transition from one to the other. Varṇa denotes a broad fourfold social classification articulated within Brahmanical textual traditions, whereas jāti refers to the numerous localized, endogamous, and socially structured communities that formed the basis of caste society. The emergence and transformation of these groups were shaped by a variety of historical factors, including

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 52-55

occupational specialization, regional diversity, political change, patterns of social mobility, and the incorporation of different communities into the social order. Therefore, the modern caste system cannot be adequately understood as the direct or exclusive historical development of the four varṇas.

Nevertheless, studying the Varṇa system alone cannot provide a complete understanding of the caste system. Jāti developed as a distinct social institution through its own rules, customs, and behavioural norms. Although considerable differences existed among Jātis because of variations in local environments, historical circumstances, and social conditions, certain common characteristics can still be identified. The rules concerning expulsion from a Jāti provide an important means of understanding these characteristics. Marriage with a member of another caste, dining with members of another caste, or abandoning the traditional occupation associated with one's caste could, in many circumstances, be regarded as violations of caste regulations.<sup>33</sup>

Violation of caste rules could result in the expulsion of an individual from the Jāti. Such expulsion subjected the individual to serious social and religious restrictions. Relatives and other members of the caste could sever social relations with the expelled person, who might also be excluded from various social and religious activities. However, caste expulsion was not necessarily permanent in every case. Under certain circumstances, readmission into the caste could be permitted through the performance of prescribed forms of Prāyaścitta, or religious penance. Nevertheless, such an opportunity was not available for every offence. Certain acts, such as conversion to another religion or marriage with a person belonging to another caste or religion, could result in permanent exclusion from the caste.<sup>34</sup>

The basic structure of Jāti was primarily determined by rules relating to religion, marriage, food, and occupation. Jāti was essentially an endogamous social group. In other words, marriage within the same caste was socially approved, whereas marriage with members of other castes was generally prohibited or discouraged. Caste regulations also operated in matters of food and commensality. Questions concerning from whom food could be accepted and with whom one could dine were closely connected with caste status and social distance. Similarly, an individual's occupation was generally associated with the traditional occupation of his or her caste. Since caste status was determined by birth and transmitted hereditarily, an individual normally remained a member of the caste into which he or she was born throughout life.

Another important characteristic of Jāti was its distinctive name and identity. The separate name of a caste strengthened the identity, unity, continuity, and social organization of its members. It also facilitated the identification of caste members and the enforcement of caste rules and restrictions. In this respect, Jāti developed as a highly organized and involuntary social institution. An individual did not ordinarily enter a caste by personal choice; rather,

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<sup>33</sup> Ambedkar, B.R. Writings and Speeches. Vol. 3. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by Prof. Hare Narake, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 2008. P. 141-142.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 143

membership was acquired by birth. From birth, therefore, the individual became subject to the customs, norms, and restrictions of the particular caste into which he or she was born.<sup>35</sup>

The caste system refers not merely to the existence of separate Jātis but also to the relationships, relative positions, and social ranking among different castes. Although each caste maintained its own internal organization and rules, the caste system as a whole was fundamentally hierarchical. Different castes did not enjoy equal social status; rather, relations of higher and lower status existed among them. At the same time, economic and social class divisions also developed within the caste system. Consequently, an individual's social identity could be influenced not only by caste consciousness but also by class consciousness.<sup>36</sup>

The caste system also developed significant divisions based on the ancient Cāturvarṇa framework. First, the Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, and Vaiśyas were distinguished from the Śūdras, contributing to ideas of higher and lower social status. Second, a distinction was made between Savarna and Avarna groups. Communities included within the four Varṇas were regarded as Savarna, whereas groups situated outside the fourfold Varṇa framework were classified as Avarna. This distinction further illustrates the hierarchical and exclusionary dimensions of the caste system.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, a proper understanding of Hindu social organization requires the integrated consideration of Varṇa, Jāti, social class, hereditary status, endogamy, occupational regulation, social hierarchy, and the Savarna–Avarna distinction. The historical and social transformation from the broader Varṇa framework to the complex system of Jāti provides an important basis for understanding the structure and development of the modern caste system.

## 17. Critical Philosophical Analysis

The *Bhagavad Gītā* explains *varṇa* through the interconnected concepts of *guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*, and *svadharma*. *Gītā* 4.13 relates *varṇa* to *guṇa* and *karma*, while 18.41 connects duties with *svabhāva*-born qualities. The three *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—influence human nature and conduct, while *karma* refers to action and duty. *Svadharma* connects duty with one's own nature. Śaṅkara emphasizes the relation between *guṇa* and corresponding duties, whereas Sri Aurobindo gives greater importance to *svabhāva* and spiritual development. Thus, the *Gītā*'s *varṇa* cannot be understood solely as hereditary status, nor should it be interpreted as a modern anti-caste doctrine. Its philosophical significance lies in the relationship between nature, qualities, action, duty, and spiritual realization.

## 18. Findings

The philosophical significance of *varṇa* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* lies not simply in categorizing individuals, but in explaining the connection between human nature and ethical action. *Guṇa* provides the basis for understanding differences in disposition; *svabhāva* expresses these

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 144-145

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 147

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.147-148

tendencies as individual nature; *karma* manifests them through action; and *svadharma* directs such action toward ethical responsibility and spiritual realization.

## 19. Conclusion

The analysis shows that *varṇa* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is closely related to *guṇa*, *karma*, *svabhāva*, and *svadharma*. In *Gītā* 4.13, the fourfold social order is described through the principle of *guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ*, while *Gītā* 18.41–44 connects the duties of the four *varṇas* with qualities arising from *svabhāva*. These passages indicate that the *Gītā* provides a philosophical framework for understanding *varṇa* in relation to qualities, dispositions, and actions rather than explaining it exclusively through hereditary birth. The concept of *guṇa* provides an important basis for understanding human differences in the *Gītā*. The three *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—influence human character, motivation, knowledge, and conduct. They therefore provide a psychological and ethical framework through which differences in human disposition can be understood. In this context, *karma* represents the practical expression of these dispositions through action. Human action is not presented as completely independent of inner nature; rather, one's tendencies and qualities influence the manner in which one acts.

The relationship between *guṇa* and *karma* becomes further significant through the concept of *svabhāva*. *Svabhāva* refers to the characteristic or natural disposition of an individual. The duties associated with the different *varṇas* in *Gītā* 18.41–44 are presented as arising from such qualities and dispositions. Thus, *svabhāva* provides a link between an individual's inner nature and his or her appropriate sphere of action. In this sense, *karma* may be understood as the practical manifestation of one's nature. The concept of *svadharma* further develops this relationship by connecting one's nature with ethical responsibility. *Svadharma* refers to the duty appropriate to one's own nature and circumstances. The *Gītā* does not present duty merely as an external social obligation; through the teaching of Karma-Yoga, the performance of one's duty can become a form of ethical and spiritual discipline. Action performed without attachment to its fruits enables the individual to cultivate detachment, self-discipline, and spiritual development.

Śaṅkara's interpretation further explains *varṇa* in terms of the predominance and combination of the *guṇas* and their corresponding duties and actions. His interpretation of *Gītā* 4.13 therefore strengthens the connection between *guṇa* and *karma* in the understanding of the fourfold order. Sri Aurobindo, by contrast, places particular emphasis on *svabhāva* and *svadharma* and highlights the spiritual significance of performing one's own work. Together, these interpretations illuminate the relationship between human nature, qualities, action, duty, and spiritual development. At the same time, *varṇa* should not be simply equated with the later historical institution of *jāti* or caste. The *Gītā*'s emphasis on *guṇa*, *karma*, and *svabhāva* provides a conceptual framework that differs from an exclusively hereditary interpretation of social identity. However, the absence of an exclusively birth-based formulation in the *Gītā* should not be taken to mean that the text explicitly rejects hereditary social organization. Nor should the *Gītā* be projected uncritically as a modern theory of social equality. The philosophical category of *varṇa* must therefore be distinguished from the historically developed institution of *jāti* and caste.

The central philosophical significance of the Gītā's account of *varṇa* therefore lies not merely in the classification of society but in the transformation of differentiated human capacities into ethically responsible and spiritually oriented action. *Varṇa*, understood through *guṇa*, *karma*, and *svabhāva*, provides a framework for relating human nature to action, while *svadharma* transforms that relationship into an ethical discipline. Through detached and dedicated action, one's duties can become a means of ethical perfection and spiritual realization. Thus, the Gītā's treatment of *varṇa* is philosophically significant not simply as a scheme of social classification, but as part of a broader account of human nature, ethical responsibility, and spiritual development.

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