CHAPTER 2

THE NATURE AND THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY IN THE DAYS OF THE BHAGAVADGITA
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2.1 The Varna-Scheme of Social Structure and its
Exemplifications and Ramifications in some
Principal Characters of the Mahabharata.

From times immemorial the varna-classification
of social community into four different varnas or
classes - Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras -
is prevalent in the Hindu Society. The very first
evidence of this social classification we find in
vedic literature. In the Purusa Sukta of Rigveda¹,
four types of people are described. They are said
to have sprung from the different parts of the body
of the 'creative spirit' or 'Cosmic man', i.e., from
head, arms, thighs and feet. Brahmins are said to
have sprung from the mouth, ksatriyas from the arms,
vaisyas from the thighs, and the Sudras from the feet.
The same classification is accepted by Manu.²

1. Rig Veda : 10th Mandala, 90th hymn, 12th Ruk. P.910.
The Learning and the teaching of the Vedas, sacrificing for his own benefit and for that of others, giving and accepting gifts are said to be the functions of Brahmanas. Protecting people, offering sacrifices and studying the Vedas are said to be the functions of Ksatriyas, Tending cattle, trading, money lending, cultivation of lands, studying of the Vedas are the functions of Vaisybas, and serving without ill feeling the other varnas are the functions of the Sudras.

Right from the vedic times down to the days of the Mahabharata the above vedic classification of the Hindu society into four varnas with its emphasis on the element of birth — although the term 'Varna' literally and originally meant 'Colour' only — prevailed and spread until Sri Krishna put forward a new definition — a new explanation — of the traditional Varna scheme by saying that he has classified human beings into four varnas or classes on the basis of their Gunas (psychological characteristics) and Karmas (deeds or functions).

According to this new (i.e., as compared to the earlier) explanation of Sri Krishna worth or merit — psychological and functional — becomes the criterion which distinguishes one varna or class from the others and not mere birth

or lineage which was the case earlier. Thus Sri Krishna through his teaching in the Bhagavadgita makes a valiant attempt to rationalise - even to scientifically systematise - the traditional vedic varna - scheme which had already in his times became exclusively birth - oriented and degenerate. But now let us return to the traditionally established Varna - scheme as concretely and picturesqually manifested in the lives and careers of some principal characters of the Mahabharata.

Brahmanas: The Varna of the Brahmanas was a class (which in course of time had become a caste) of the intellectuals. The principla function of a Brahmin\(^1\) is to seek knowledge both empirical and spiritual and to communicate it to others. Brahmins are to seek their joy in the practice of religious austerities, quiteness, likes straight-forwardness and set an example of non-attachment to the pursuits of worldly affairs to other Varnas. Brahmins were to give moral guidance and they belonged to the spiritual ministry of the society.

Drone is one of the important personalities, who took part in the Bharata battle. He was one of the teachers of the pandavas and the kauravas. He taught them the

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art of archery. By birth he was a Brahmin. As a teacher he was justified, as brahmins practised that profession. He was one of the Commanders-in-Chief of the Kaurava army in the Bharata war, and died in the battle field like a brave warrior.

Aswathama was the son of Dronacharya. Like Karna, he was also a good friend of the Kauravas. Even though Aswathama was a brahmin by birth, his habits were more like those of the Ksatriyas than like those of the brahmins. This might be, I feel, due to the fact that he was brought up by his father in a Ksatriya-like environment, viz in the environment of the teaching of archery and other military skills to the Pandavas and the Kauravas by his father Dronacharya.

Ksatriyas: They constitute the warrior class of society. Their duty is to bear arms and to use them to protect the weak and the innocent. Their inherent qualities\(^1\) are brilliance, bravery, courage, intentness, not to run away from the battle field, generosity and exercising proper authority over the people.

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1. Gita: Chapter 18, Stanza 43.
While it is the duty of a Brahmin to lay down the moral standards or values, for social solidarity, persuade the people to accept the high ends of life, it is the duty of a Ksatriya to devise the means for gaining those ends.

Bhishma, Duryodhana and his brothers and the Pandavas were the major Ksatriyas who took part in the Bharata war.

Bhishma's parents were King Shantanu, and goddess Ganga.¹ In those days children used to get recognition in the society through the caste of their fathers even though their mothers belonged to a different caste. Like his Guru Parasurama, Bhishma was known for his bravery and courage. He fought two major battles.

(1) In his early days Vichitravirya, his step brother, went to attend the swayamvara of the daughters of the king of Kasi. On behalf of his brother Vichitravirya Bhishma won those girls. On his way back to Hastinapur with the brides, he was forced to fight with

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¹ According to modern thought Ganga is said to be a member of a tribe called Gangamata. If that is so Bhishma cannot be regarded as a pure Ksatriya. His purity of caste can be questioned.
the kings who had assembled at the Swayamvara. He fought them with great bravery and drove them back.

(2) Secondly and more importantly, Bhishma was the first Commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army in the great Bharata battle. He led his side for 10 days. He fought the Pandavas very bravely inspite of his old age.

Bhishma kept up his words to his father that he would remain a bachelor throughout his life. Like a true Ksatriya, he looked after the administration of the Kingdom, and fought battles. Like a guru, he advised and guided the pandavas and the Kauravas at the times of distress.

Duryodhana: The eldest son of King Dhrtarastra of Hastinapur, Duryodhana was a Ksatriya by birth, and fought many battles mainly out of selfishness, and jealousy and ran away from the battle-field of Kuruksetra like a coward finally. In the Bharata battle, after losing all his people in the war, Duryodhana lost confidence in himself and ran away from the battle-field and hid himself in the
waters of a lake. For a Ksatriya running away from the battle-field is regarded, according to the tenents of the Varnashrama dharma, not only as a cowardly act but also as a sinful act. Duryodhana was a sinful person in this and in many other ways.

Pandavas. Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva were the five Pandavas. They were the sons of Pandu, the former king of Hastinapur. As per tradition, they were the first three of the Pandavas born to Kunti, when she chanted a 'Mantra' through which she invited deities: Dharma, Vayu and Indra. With the same mantra Madri, the second wife of Pandu, invited Aswini deities and begot Nakula and Sahadeva. All these five sons were recognised in the society of those days as the sons of pandu - the Pandavas. The Pandavas had inherited the divine qualities (gunas) of the deities to whom they were born.

Vaisyas:

Vaisyas form the third class or varna of the fourfold classification of the Hindu society. They constitute practical minded people, engaged in industry,
commerce and agriculture, keeping cattle, and trade are their inherent duties.¹

It is not their main function to contribute to the spiritual welfare of the society, yet we cannot have these (spiritual welfare) without their co-operation. Agriculture, Commerce and Industry are the main-stay of any society.

Sudras:

Labour is the basis for all the human activities. The activities of the members of this class (Sudras) are not governed by the ideals of knowledge. Their duty² is to serve the people of other higher varnas. They fulfill their duties for the satisfaction of their primary needs. Instinctive obedience, and mechanical discharge of duty are characteristic of the Sudras.³

Karna was Kunti’s son, born when she was a maiden. She left him when he was a small child. The child was

3. I will be discussing this point in detail in the succeeding chapters of my thesis.
brought up by a suta-couple. He was recognised in the society as suta putra, and not as Ksatriya, even though he was a Ksatriya by birth. He could get recognition as a respectable archer-warrior only after he was crowned a prince by Duryodhana to a province called Anga. He was denied the facilities of Ksatriyas in the society even though he was born to a Ksatriya woman. He married as per Sudra-customs. He too took part in the great Bharata battle, fought with pandavas and died like a brave warrior in the battle field. Even though he was a sudra in the eyes of the society, the Ksatriya gunas predominated in him.

Vidura:— Vidura was a brother of the kings Dhrtarastra and Pandu. He was born of Niyoga by Vyasa to a maid-servant of a queen of king Vichitravirya. Vidura was recognised as Vichitravirya's son. He was well versed in politics and ethics, but he was not entitled to succeed the throne. When Pandu gave it up, because he (Vidura) was a son of a servant-maid. Then the blind brother Dhrtarastra became the king of Hastinapur. Physically handicapped persons were not as per the custom, eligible to succeed to the throne, but because, Dhrtarastra was born to a Ksatriya queen of Vichitravirya, he became the king of Hastinapur, and not Vidura who was
born of a Sudra woman. Vidura was in nature more like a brahmin than either like a Ksatriya or like a Sudra. In a way he had inherited the qualities or the character of Sage Vyasa. Vidura was one of the advisers of King Dhrtasarastra along with Bhishma and Drona.

Like Karna, Vidura also was denied the facilities available to the higher varnas or castes in the Society. Although the people did recognise the brahminic qualities in Vidura they did not give him the position or status of a brahmin. In the same way although the people accepted him as one of the sons of King Vichitravirya, they did not recognise him as a pure Ksatriya, because he was born to a dasi.

The four Varnas, namely Brahmana, Ksatriya, Vaisya and Sudra, can be said to be constituting the four pillars of the traditional Hindu Society. As per the proper tradition the Ksatriyas were to rule only as the guardians or the servants of the law which was placed under the control of Brahmins. We cannot have the spiritual welfare of the society merely with the military and political support without the help of industry and commerce - which form the economic main-stay of the society. Vaisyas are engaged in industry and commerce.
Next, labour is the basis for all human relations. Mechanical discharge of duty is the chief character of Sudras. Even if any one of these qualities and functions is missing, the society cannot thrive, nay, not even survive. Hence all the four-varnas are equally important both for the very being and for the proper well-being of the Society.

Besides these four-varnas there were also a number of mixed castes (mishra-varnas) during the days of the Mahabharata.

2.2. Varna-Sankara, (The Inter mixture of Varnas) in the days of the Mahabharata.

In the preceding section we noted that there were, during the days of the Mahabharata, a number of Mishra-Varnas (mixed castes) besides the four regular varnas. As a matter of fact Varna-sankara or inter-mixture of different varnas had started taking place even during the vedic period itself. These are several references in the Vedic literature to the persons of mishra-varna and to the lower status generally accorded to them in the Vedic society. The Upanishadic episode of Satyakama Jabala is one of the most telling illustrations of the existence of and of the social indignities and
disqualifications which generally attached to the members belonging to the mixed-castes during the Vedic and Upanishadic days. In the post-vedic days of the events of the Mahabharata the number of these mixed-castes must have naturally increased many-fold and they actually were. The following were some of the principal mixed castes which were prevailing during the days of the Mahabharata; the Sutas, the Nishadas, the Vaidehas, the Ayogavas, the Sairandhras, and the Chandalas. The Sutas were the off-springs of Ksatriya fathers and Brahmin mothers. Karna's foster-parents were Sutas. Hence he was called Suta-putra Karna. The Nishadas were the off-springs of Brahmin fathers and Sudra mothers. Ekalavya, the great archer was a Nishada, the vaidehas were the off-springs of Vaisya fathers and Ksatriya mothers. The Ayogavas were the off-springs of Sudra fathers and Vaisya mothers. The Sairandharas were the off-springs of Dasyu fathers and Ayogava mothers. As is well-known, Draupadi had during the days of the incognito-stay of the Pandavas in the palace of the King of Viratadesha assumed the role of a Sairandri, i.e., a Sairandhara-woman. Last, and also the least was the mixed-caste of the Chandalas which consisted of the off-springs of Sudra fathers and Brahmin mothers. The Chandalas were looked down upon as the lowest and the worst of the mixed-castes and
were assigned the lowest types of jobs in the Society. This shows that the Society then regarded the sexual and/or marital Union of Sudra men and Brahmin women as the worst and the most ψheinous kind of the union and wanted to prevent or discourage that kind of union by assigning the lowest place in the society to the off-springs of such a union. But this also amounted to punishing the innocent children born of such a union for the Sin committed by their parent! Varna-Sankara, which was thus very much prevalent in the days of the Mahabharata, was nevertheless very much dreaded, lest it should increased and disintegrate the society further. For instance, while enumerating the evil and disastrous consequences of war in the Chapter I of the Bhagavadgita, Arjuna tells Sri Krishna that war which causes social chaos and lawlessness leads invariably to the moral corruption of women in the society which results in Varna-sankara and this Varna-sankara pollutes the purity of the concerned families the members of which will become sinners and will, on their death, go to hell and even their pitrs (ancestors) also meet the same fate due to the moral and religious impurity and sin attached to their progeny.

1. Gita : Chapter I. Stanzas 41, 42, 43 and 44.
After examining the classification of the Indian Society during the days of the Mahabharata into the four vedic varnas or castes and also into a number of mixed castes, as evidenced through the concrete pictures of the then prevailing society in general and of the principal persons in particular, we can not but conclude that the statement of Sri Krishna in the Bhagavadgita in which he says that he as God has created the four varnas on the basis of gunas (qualities) and Karmas (deeds of duties) should be looked upon as the statement of the ideal or the rational principle underlying the vedic varna scheme rather than as a statement indicating the actual facts or conditions prevailing in the society at that time.

2.3 ASRAMA SCHEME OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Asramas are the different stages or stations of one's life. The Human being is, in a spiritual sense, evolbing from childhood to (i) Brahmacharya, the stage of learning, (ii) Garhastya, the stage of the householder, (iii) Vanaprastha, the stage of the hermit, and (iv) the Sanyasa, the stage of the ascetic. Majority of the people undergo only the first two stages. Very rarely do we find a man who has undergone all the four

stages, mentioned above, Every man will be required to perform special specific and distinct duties in each of these four stages of his life. These specific and distinct duties are called Acharadharmas.

**Brahmacharya:**

A person attains Brahmacharya (the stage of Learning) only after a spiritual initiation called the Upasana. According to Manu¹, one should perform the Upasana to a Brahmin in the eighth year, in the eleventh year for a Ksatriya, and in the twelfth year for a Vaisya. This initiation is applicable only to the first three varnas of the society. By this initiation, a person becomes twice-born - a Dwija and only after this initiation he will get the right to recite Gayatri and other Vedic Mantras and to recite the Vedas in general. According to Manu², every man is born a Sudra, and he becomes the member of a particular higher Varna only after the upasana-initiation. After this initiation the person belonging to the first three Varnas will go to a Guru (Teacher) for Education. The education which was imparted to a student during the days of the Mahabharata used to give a general idea.

1. Manu: Chapter II. Stanza 36.
of the conditions of the spiritual life, and also used to prepare him to enter the next Asrama or the stage in life. The education also used to tell him about his role in the society as he happens to be a member of it.

**GARHASTHYA:**

After the completion of his education the Brahmachari will enter the next asrama - the Garhasthya or the Grihasthasrama, by getting married to a suitable maiden, in one of the valid forms of marriage.

The state of householder is the main-stay of the social life. The householder's duties are to look after his dependents and to see that the children get properly educated. Extending hospitality to his guests is one of the principal duties of a grihastha. The wife of a grihastha (the Grahini) has equal responsibilities and religious functions. According to the tenents of the

1. According to the Hindu Dharma Sastras there are eight different forms of marriage namely

   (1) The Brahma, (2) The Daive, (3) The Arsha,
   (4) The Prajapathy, (5) The Asura, (6) the Gandharava, (7) The Rakshasa, and (8) The Paisacha, of which the first six forms were held valid for Brahmins, the last four for Ksatriyas, and the same last four except the Rakshasa form were held valid for Vaisyas and Sudras.
Asrama-scheme a person is required to discharge all his duties pertaining to his current Asrama before he gets entitled to pass on to the next Asrama. Accordingly a grihastha is required to discharge all his duties pertaining to the grihastharsrama before he gets entitled to enter into the next Asrama, namely the Vanaprasthasrama.

**Vanaprasthasrama.**

When a Grihastha has discharged all his responsibilities or when his attention is no longer required for them he retires probably with his wife to a quiet place in the outskirts of forest or vana (hence the name Vanaprastha) to lead the life of a hermit devoted to spiritual and philosophical pursuits and meditation in an atmosphere of freedom from his social bonds.

**Sanyasa:**

One who has renounced all worldly possessions and distinctions of caste, and the routine Garhasthya-practices of religion is called a sanyasin. He does not merely formulate the conception of high living but he lives it and he acts in accordance with the famous maxim 'Ud.aracharitanam the Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' (To those whose character is noble the entire world is but one family).
The Sanyasin is a parivrajaka - a wandering teacher - who influences the spiritual standards of the society, even though he lives apart from it.

The difference between an ordinary brahmin and a Sanyasin is that whereas the former is a full-fledged member of the society, living with his wife and children in a simple home performing religious rites, the latter is a homeless, wanderer who has renounced all rites and ceremonies. He is released from all forms of selfishness and from social bonds.

Human life, which has thus been represented by the Hindu Dharmashastra as being consisted of the four varnas and the four-asramas constituted along with several mixed-varnas - the general structure of society during the days of the Mahabharata.

ILLUSTRATION OF THE FOUR ASRAMAS IN THE CONTEXT OF SOME CHARACTERS OF THE MAHABHARATA.

BRAHMACHARYA:

Devavratha or Bhishma, one of the Principal and the most venerable characters of the Mahabharata, who was a Ksatriya prince, under went the training of the Brahmacharyasrama at the feet of sages Vasista, Parasurama and the Sukracharya. The pandavas and the
Kauravas, the principal ksatriya characters of the Mahabharata, underwent their training of Brahmacharya'srama at the feet of Krpaccharya and Dronacharya, the two famous Brahmin-Teachers of the art of archery at that time. Sri Krishna, the most pivotal and colourful personality of the Mahabharata and the Teacher of the Bhagavadgita to Arjuna and through him to the entire mankind, underwent his training of the Brahmacharyasrama at the feet of Sage Sandeepa, along with his friend Sudhama.

GARHASTHYA OR GRIHASTHASRAMA:

Garhasthya or Grihasthasrama, which is regarded by the Dharmasastras - and very rightly so - as the very back-bone of the entire Aasmaa-scheme because it is the support of all the other Asramas, was almost ubiquitously present in the society during the days of the Mahabharata as it is now in our days also. We might say that except Bhima (who had taken a vow to remain a bachelor throughout his life) and the Balasanyasis like Shukamuni almost all the people during the days of the Mahabharata - even sages like Vasista and Viswamitra - underwent the life of Grihasthasrama. Even the blind Dhrtarastra and the impotent Pandu were Grihasthas in their youth and middle-age.
Vanaprastha.

Among the principal characters of the Mahabharata, Pandu, Kunti and Madri are the first to enter this asrama. Their entry can be regarded as a premature one as they were still in their early middle age and had not yet discharged their duties as Grihasthas. But some peculiar circumstances forced them to take to Vanaprastha prematurely. Sathyavathi, Bhishma's step mother, Vichitravirya's wives - Ambika and Ambalika - entered Vanaprastha, spent some years in that asrama and ended their early careers.

After losing all their hundred and odd children in the great Bharata war Dhrtrarastra and Gandhari stayed for a few days with the Pandavas. After sometime they expressed their desire to retire into the woods i.e., to take to Vanaprastha. But King Yudhisthira did not wish them to go because they were very old. Then Kunti said that if they insisted on going to the forest she too would like to accompany them. Vidhura and Sanjaya also said the same thing and then they all left for the forest to lead the life of Vanaprasthas.
**SANYASA:**

Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata, was a Sanyasin, although he performed Niyoga on the widowed queens of King Vichitravirya, Ambika and Ambalika, on being invited and urged by his mother, Sathyavathi, to do so in the interest of the continuation of the royal family. For Niyoga, which was a well recognised and well-established Apaddharma (the special and exceptional Dharma which held valid at the time of— and only at the time of— distress) in those days, did not render a regular Sanyasin into a non-Sanyasin because of his participation in a legitimate Niyoga-rite.

Vidura, one of the important characters of the Mahabharata, finally entered Sanyagraha after spending some days as a Vanaprastha along with Dhrtarastra, Gandhari and Kunti.