

# Misconceptions in Sanatana Hindu Dharma: misconstrued, concocted and flung irreligious practices

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## Abstract

**Background and Aims:** Sanatana Hindu Dharma is considered as one of the oldest religions in the world. Unfortunately, there are many misconceptions, misconstrued information, and inappropriate practices, beliefs and propaganda surrounding this Sanatana religion and philosophy. The main objectives of this paper are to explore: (1) pitfalls of the Varna and caste systems, (2) the status and discrimination of women, (3) the non-Vedic and flung irreligious activities in Hinduism, and (4) Vedic examples of equality in Hinduism.

**Methodology:** In order to identify various constructs related to the above objectives, an extensive literature review was undertaken based on the main scriptures of Hinduism. Various information from scriptures have been systematically collated and presented in this paper.

**Findings and conclusions:** The converging evidence from various scriptures suggests that Hinduism was not invented and does not support divisive varna and caste systems, which are inhuman by all standards and against basic human principles. It is unfortunate that caste-related discrimination exists in some traditional societies in many countries including India. It is praiseworthy that in our Vedic literature women are highly regarded in all walks of life which is unparallel to any systems around the globe. Unfortunately, it was found that some sectarian people have been deliberately attempting to introduce flung irreligious practices which have created misconceptions amongst Hindus. These research findings help to enhance understanding of the purity of Vedic knowledge and build awareness to alleviate misconceptions in the everlasting spiritual knowledge and practices of Hinduism.

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## 1. Introduction

Sanatana Dharma is the oldest surviving religion popularly known as Hindu Dharma (Hinduism). The principles and practices are based on original scripture, the *Vedas*, hence the name Vedic religion was also coined (1, 2). Vedic scriptures dictate that Sanatana dharma (henceforth Hinduism) is *anadi* (without beginning), *ananta* (endless), and *a-purusheya* (without a human founder) (3, 4). Thus, unlike other faiths, there is no historical beginning, nor does it has a historical founder. This indicates that Hinduism was

originally created by Supreme God which has eventually evolved as a way of life of humankind, a quest for cosmic truth known as divine consciousness. Hinduism contains codes of ethics and guiding principles for all human beings for preservation, maintenance, and transformation of the God's creation.

Despite purity of Vedic knowledge, over thousands of years many misconceptions have erupted in Hinduism. For example, the caste system is one of the most ill-conceived and hugely criticized issue in Hinduism. However, there are compelling evidences from scriptures that Hinduism does not support divisive and discriminatory caste system. Similarly, there are misunderstandings about women rights, while women are accorded the greatest respect in Vedic era. They used to live very respectful lives and excelled in all walks of life including education, business, religious practices, social and political life, marriage and so on.

Humans are innately discriminatory by race, religion, color, creed, wealth, education, social positions and so on. It is not limited to women only, there are victimization, extremism, and violation of human rights in all societies. Slavery is one such classic example. The legacy of well-known slavery and apartheid are still very raw in many societies as racial discriminations. For example, as a continuum, a young black unarmed man was gunned down with 60 bullets in USA by white police force personnel (July 4, 2022). Like other types of atrocities, this is a classic case of black-white diasporic brutality that is still haunting the USA administration. Sadguru, an enlightened Indian Hindu yogi emphatically counters this type of discrimination by saying: 'we all need to find a common denominator - 'humanity', an undivided and gracious human attribute that can help to rise above all these man-made limitations. Until this is achieved, we will see some form of discrimination everywhere'.

In addition to various misconceptions, there are also documented evidence of adulteration attempts by introducing fictitious concepts to denigrate Hinduism. The classic examples are the introduction of *Allahponishad*, *Ankahi mantra*, adulteration of *Puranas* (eg. Matsya Puranam, Manusmriti), and misconstrued propaganda such as sixteen thousand wives of Lord Krishna, and *Siva-Linagam* as a phallic emblem and so on.

The specific objectives of this research paper are to present scripture-based evidence and understanding exploring: (a) the real explanation of caste system, (b) the status of women in Vedic era, and (c) rumours and introduction of flung irreligious activities in Hinduism. Finally, some examples of the genuine equality in Hinduism are mentioned based on Vedic scriptures.

## 2. Literature Review

Hinduism has a vast treasure of religious (Vedic) scriptures. The religion is based on original scripture, the *Vedas* (vis-à-vis, knowledge) with the text dated between 1500 and 600 BC (1, 2). Vedas are *Shruti* ('what is heard') revelations and *apuruseya* ('not of a human or superhuman') origin. In other words, it includes verses of sacred sounds and texts heard by Vedic sages (enlightened yogis) after intense meditation directly from the Supreme Godhead. Thus, Vedic knowledge is the paradigm, the source of eternal and timeless wisdom (2).

As Vedas are difficult to understand by the average intellect, there are 108 Upanishads that have been evolved as the philosophical explanation of Vedas by ancient *rishis* (sages) (5). Because of the vastness of Upanishads, Lord Sri Krishna summarized the huge voluminous text of spiritual knowledge into a summary of all Vedic knowledge known as Shrimad-Bhagavad Gita (BG). It contains only 700 verses within 18 chapters (6). According to Shankaracharya, a renowned Vedic scholar, BG is the quintessence of all Vedic literatures, and became the principal scripture of Hinduism (7). As a concise philosophical discourse BG can be described with three R's: *Revelation* (a divine disclosure by the Supreme Godhead, Lord Krishna), *Revolution* (paradigm shift from certain Vedic aspects into contemporary practices suitable

for modern life and beyond), and *Renunciation* (a formal announcement that humans are divine beings) (details not given).

Shrimad-Bhagavatam (SB) is another vast collection of scripted spiritual wisdom in Hinduism covering a wide range of topics from the nature of the Self to astrology, music, Vedic culture, devotion and yoga (8). It has 18,000 verses in 18 volumes, mainly focused on teachings of the life history of Lord Krishna for devotion and transcendental nature of human beings.

### 3. Methodology

A review of main archival scriptures such as the Vedas, Upanishads, SB, and BG was undertaken as part of a qualitative research design. Literatures were reviewed, and critically analysed related to the objectives, and the findings were presented in this paper using theoretical and historical citations.

### 4. Findings of the research

#### 4.1 *Varna* and Caste system in Sanatana Hindu religion

At the very outset, it is essential to define and differentiate between *varna* and caste systems. While *varna* and caste are two distinct concepts, unfortunately, they became synonymous in the past. This creates the confusion that Hinduism has a discriminatory caste system. Let us discuss briefly what *varna* is and how it is different from the caste system.

The Sanskrit term *varna* (*sreni*) refers to a framework of professional moral behaviors and duties of a person. It is a theoretical construct based on profession, while caste (*jati* or *samproday*) refers to the thousands of intergenerational groups prevalent across the Indian subcontinent (e.g., indigenous tribes) (9). A nation can be divided into exotic groups (*inter-jati*) that can be defined as a caste while the *varna* system originates from Lord Krishna's dictum to classify people based on the profession in which they belong. The *Varna* system did not originally mean a class by birth though it was misused by a special class of people over a long period. Over time, Indian classical writers and historians have confused these two distinct ideas and unfortunately, these two ideas became synonymous. As a result, the caste system has emerged as a controversial issue in Hinduism since it has been used to denote both *varna* and caste systems from the medieval age. This becomes the root cause of all misunderstandings in Hinduism.

#### 4.2 Origin of *varna* - Bhagavad Gita (BG): basics of *varna*

Based on BG, we may gain basic understanding about *varna*, its' types, and characteristics. In BG, Lord Krishna said, 'I have created the four *varnas*' (*Chaturvarnyang moya srishtang*) (BG: 4.13). These four *varnas* are *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *Shudra*. But did He separate one person from another? Lord Krishna said 'No - the characteristics of these four *varnas* are determined by the three qualities or *gunas* (Satvik- mode of goodness, Rajahsik- mode of passion and Tamahsik- mode of ignorance) of nature and actions (*Karma*), not by birth'. This indicates that by the effect of variables and three distinct qualities, people are divided into four *varnas* as we see everywhere in society (eg. home, office, court etc).

It is important to know what these three qualities (of nature) are, and how people are bound by these three qualities in order to classify people in our day-to-day lives by the effect of these qualities. First, Lord Krishna defined three qualities of nature in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of BG, followed by next three verses where He briefly explained the significance of these three qualities (Table 1). Later, in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter, Lord Krishna explained the characteristics of four *varnas* related to these three qualities (Table 2).

Table 1. Three qualities of nature and the root cause of *varna* system according to BG

Items	English Transliteration	Reference
	Satva, Rajah, and Tamah qualities are manifested from the inanimate nature ( <i>prakriti</i> ), and when a living being meets nature, it is bound by these three qualities	14.5
<i>Sattova guna</i>	The <i>Sattova guna</i> is relatively pure, revealing, and sinless	14.6
<i>Rajah guna</i>	The ' <i>Rajah guna</i> originates from endless lust	14.7
<i>Tamah guna</i>	The <i>Tamah guna</i> produces delusions and ignorance in the living being	14.8

Table 2. Characteristics of four *varnas* according to BG

<i>Varna</i>	Characteristics and attributes	References- 18.41
Brahmin	Simplicity, knowledge, science and <i>astikya</i>	18.44
Kshatriyas	Valor, vigor, perseverance, skill, generosity, and governing power	18.43
Vaishyas	Business	18.44
Shudra	Natural services	18.39

The above descriptions indicate that *varna* is based on three qualities of nature. Individuals are naturally divided into various classes by these qualities. It is important to note that one person can have a mixture of these three qualities and may represent all these four classes or *varnas* depending on their profession and underlying circumstances, responsibilities, and the duties they perform.

#### 4.3 Origin of *varna*- Veda

To understand what *varna* really is, one must look at the issue a little deeper. The question is, why is there a re-classification of human beings when everyone is created by five gross elements based on the same four -dimensional, indestructible Soul? At first, we need to know how and why this *varna* system was originally conceived, for example, what are Brahmins, the so-called highest clan.

Rigveda (*Purushasukta*: 10.90.11-12) states that at the time of creation, *Brahmin* (priestly person), *Kshatriya* (aristocratic/ruler), *Vaishya* (business person) and *Shudra* (general people) were created from the mouth, arms, thighs, and legs of The Supreme Being (*Purusha*) respectively (1). It seems that the four characteristics come from different parts of the Supreme Being. Now we need to know who is this *purusha*? According to the Vedic interpretation, *Purusha* is the 'cosmic divine energy, force and intelligence', who is the eternal source of energy and the creative force of the universe. Our universe has been created as a result of the interaction of essential nature (*Prakriti*) and the Supreme Being (*Purusha*). The next set of questions is, if *Purusha* is an abstract or unmanifested reality, where is its head, arms, waist, or legs? It is used in a metaphorical (symbolic) sense to classify actions. For example, to be born from the mouth means one who is wise and prudent, who imparts knowledge. As the thighs and legs carry the whole body, so the Vaishya and Shudra classes carry all the responsibilities. It does not mean hierarchy (lower of higher), it is simply based on the nature of functions that one performs.

#### 4.4 Acquisition of *varna* through a three-tiered religious process

According to Vedic culture, every human being is born as a *Shudra* ('*janmana jayote Shudra*'), and then through a three-tiered religious process can become a Brahmin - first *Dwij*, then *Bipra* and finally *Brahmin* (Table 3).

Table 3. Three-tier stages of becoming a Brahmin regardless of birth.

Stages (attribute)	English transliteration of Sanskrit inscript	English transcript
Dwij (wear Paita)	Sanskar Dwij Bhabe	second birth', the 1 <sup>st</sup> time physically, then the 2 <sup>nd</sup> time spiritually
Bipra (scholar)	Vedpathi Bhavet Bipra	acquisition of knowledge and study of scriptures to become Bipra
Brahmin (Brahma guna)	Brahma Janati Yash Brahmin	acquires 9 virtues to transform into a Brahmin (see below)

Table 3 shows the asceticism to a *Brahmin* by the traditional ritual (*initiation*). At a young age (10-12 years) in the process of initiation called '*Upanayana*', a person becomes 'Dwij' by holding 'Paita', a sacred thread. Dwij is a Sanskrit word meaning second birth; the first time physically, then the second time spiritually. In the second stage, the person becomes '*Bipra*' (meaning 'scholar') through the acquisition of spiritual knowledge and study of scriptures. Eventually, when a person acquires '*Brahma gnana*' (transcendental knowledge) on the basis of nine rules, he/she is transformed into a '*Brahmin*'.

In Manusmriti (1) these nine rules introduced by Gautam Rishi are: (1) always truthful, (2) studied the scriptures, (3) follow good manners (eat clean food, no intoxication, gamble or illicit sex), (4) knowledge is given only to righteous (virtuous) persons, (5) do not harm living creatures, (6) humble but steadfast, (7) Self-regulated, (8) kind and generous to everyone, and (9) refrain from anger and never be arrogant.

This clearly indicates that brahmin is an acquired position and must hold the above mentioned nine virtues in order to become a brahmin. Further definition of brahmin can be drawn from Vedic literature, as shown below.

#### 4.5 Classical definition of a Brahmin according to Vedic literature

According to Hindu scriptures mainly Vedas, Upanishads and BG, anyone who is pious, virtuous, or endowed with virtues is defined as Brahmin regardless of birth.

1. Rigveda says, 'He/she who is deeply attached to supreme divinity, non-violent, honest, devoted, disciplined, preacher of Vedas, engaged in regular meditation sacrifices, is a Brahmin' (RV: 10.7, 8).
2. Satpat Brahmana says, '*Brahman hi Brahmin*', that is, one who has the knowledge of Brahman (Supreme Godhead) and performs good deeds, is a Brahmin (5.1.11).
3. Bhagavatam says, 'those who do teaching, donation, yagna sacrifice, the priest of the populace for the sake of their elevation are Brahmins (SB: 6.7.35).
4. The Vajrasuchi Upanishad says: 'Body does not make anyone a Brahmin, because every human body consists of the same five elements. Not by birth, the religious performer is also not a Brahmin, the Brahmin is determined by the behavior, it is the knowledge of Brahman that makes a Brahmin '(verse 4).
5. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu says: '*Sadachari* Shudra is superior to *Kadachari* Brahmin' meaning that a pious Shudra is better than a non-pious Brahmin.
6. In the Mahabharata, Yudhisthira (1<sup>st</sup> Pandava) was asked: what determines a Brahmin? He replied, 'not by lineage, or clan, or even by regular Vedic recitation, a Brahmin is defined by the virtue of divinity and character'.

These definitions together with above discussions conclude that Brahmin is defined by virtues not by birth.

#### 4.6 Any human being may represent four classes.

As stated earlier, all human beings are basically (congenitally) *Shudra* but later divided into four classes due to profession-specific responsibilities. For example, we see four classes of people in any office, such as office assistant (official work), accountant (for accounts), director (administrator) and manager (for management). It does not matter whether they are born as Brahmin or Shudra. Anyone in his/her personal life also represents these four classes, such as a house-head doing all general duties is a *Shudra*, while he/she becomes a Vaishya by looking after economic affairs and may represent Kshatriya for family discipline and protection. He/she may play the role of a Brahmin acquiring and imparting knowledge through education and training. However, these are outwardly classified practices. The real virtue is being able to possess the Sattva-guna by transcending from Tamah and Rajah-gunah described in BG. As mentioned in table 1, when a person behaves in every situation following religion, truth, and justice, he/she is sattvic. The Rajah-guni person has knowledge of religion or truth, but the body and mind are bound by desires and full of pride and arrogance. On the other hand, when one spends his/her life just to satisfy physical needs with a mean-minded attitude (eg. hunger, sex), he/she is *Tamahsic*.

#### 4.7 Outcast *varna* group in India

Now, we know that there are four *varnas*. However, like any other country, India has many marginalized groups, one such group is '*Dalit*'. Dalits are members of the so-called lowest social structure of the Hindu *varna* system, called the fifth *varna*. They traditionally perform services such as drainage cleaning works, disposal of dead animals, leather work and so on. In the past they were also called 'untouchables' because they did not belong to the above four *varnas*. In the changing world, Dalits have advanced in education and established themselves in society to occupy respectable positions. Many of them have been transformed into 'Brahmin' today. The best example is the present Hon'ble President of India (Ms Draupadi Murmu) who belongs to the Dalit clan. This conforms with scriptures that Karma is the real identity of a *varna/class*, not by birth.

There may be a question that if caste system is not supported by scriptures, then, how is it in Hinduism?

Today's discriminatory *inter-jati* (caste) system is largely of medieval origin. It is understood that Sanatana dharma holds one of the oldest cultures on this planet. It is likely that multiple forms of adulteration, misinterpretation, and misuse by special privileged class of people could have contributed over the centuries this unfortunate caste and *varna* systems in our Hindu society which undoubtedly is not supported by our Vedic scriptures.

Historical, theological, and linguistic records show that together with foreign rulers, various Hindu rulers also misused this *varna* system. For example, King Ballal Sen (AD 1180-1169) declared the Brahmins to be 'innate' (by birth) and be regarded as 'aristocratic'. He, then divided people into four classes by *title* (10) - the child of a *Brahmin* parent would be a *Brahmin*, the child of a *Shudra* parent would be a *Shudra* and so on. To an extreme case, King Travancore of Kerala imposed a 'Breast tax' (locally called *Mulakkaram*) on Shudra female for covering breasts other than Brahmin ladies (details later). Thus, various rulers misused this *varna* system for dividing people into upper or lower *varna* and making it a tool for exploitation (so-called 'divide and rule' system). It is to be remembered that there was a period of history when kings were considered as second to God. Therefore, it was generally an accepted notion that *varna* was innate and thus became the norm. This was transformed into the discriminatory 'caste' system in the course of time.

#### 4.8 Shockwaves of the then *varna* system

It turns out that there is an amalgamation of two very important concepts about the *varna* system. Firstly, it is assumed that the *varna* system determined by virtue and action is 'innately created', and secondly, *varna* and caste are merged into one. The far-reaching effects on this ill-conceived concoction at the individual as well as social level have been catastrophic. From generation-to-generation, these malpractices and distorted belief and irreligion philosophies became deep-rooted among people resulting in inequality and violence in so-called upper and lower caste and *varna* people in Hindu society. Therefore, it is not surprising that a large number of lower caste and *varna* people got converted to other religions and continuing that self-destructing trend even now-a-days as well.

#### 4.9 How has this *jati/varna* system perpetuated for so long and why?

Malhotra and Neelakandan (2011) in their famous book '*Breaking India*' explained how various medieval rulers of India (including foreigners) have kept this inter-*jati/varna* system alive in India and spearheaded it for exploitative purposes for years (9). This ground-breaking research found that even in recent years western countries invested significant time and capital in perpetuating this misguided caste system in Hinduism so as to break India into pieces. Financed and operated by western countries, there were numerous endeavors that projected black-white diaspora (Dalits as 'black', and non-Dalits as 'white') into the already exhausted caste system to divide India. The historical fact is that Muslim and English rulers during their 865 years of reign, took full advantage of this ill-conceived caste system and other irreligious practices (eg., *sati*, *Mulakkaram*) for proselytizing lower *varna*/caste people in India. For example, in respect of Breast Tax (*Mulakkaram*, see details later), an English bureaucrat, Colonel Munro proposed a solution to the oppressive Breast Tax by ordering that 'if they convert to Christianity their women would be spared with that oppressive tax'. There is a historical fact that not only foreign rulers, but many indigenous Hindu kings were also equally oppressive and instigated this very process of proselytizing.

Researchers have found that this *inter-jati* system was institutionalized during the British colonial period. It is found that Sir Herbert Hope Risley (1851-1911), a powerful colonial bureaucrat propagated an organised caste system in India by introducing 'race science' by the 'Nasal Index' (details not given) (11). Although there were resentments against that oppressive Nasal index among general people but were ignored, and unfortunately this system remained even after many years of India's independence.

#### Examples of equality according to Vedic literature

There is a body of evidence from Vedanta philosophy (eg., *Chhandogya* Upanishad, *Vajrasuchi* Upanishad) that there was no discriminatory caste system in the Vedic era. For example, there is a story in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (Chapter 5) related to *Samaveda* as follows (12).

'A boy named *Satyakam* once approached *Gautama rishi* to study spirituality. When *Gautama* asked his lineage, *Satyakam* enquired to his mother, *Jabala*. She said, 'I am a fallen maid. I have served many people in my life, and I got you from one of them. I don't know who your father was, but my name is *Jabala*, and you are *Satyakam*'. *Satyakam* went back to *Gautam* and said exactly what his mother had said and introduced himself as *Satyakam Jabala*. The wise sage affectionately accepted him and asserted, '*Satyakam*, you must be a Brahmin, because a true Brahmin would tell the truth without any reservation like you! Bring firewood for the 'initiation' ceremony'. *Satyakam* became an exceptional student and a well-known Vedic sage. He composed the *Jabala Upanishad*, related to *Shukla Yajurveda*.

There is numerous other Vedic evidence that individuals with virtues used to attain the highest position in society regardless of their birth, creed, or clan. Table 4 shows that even many incarnations,

Vedic sages were not born as higher descent, while many Brahmins or people of higher descent became demoniac (asura) by bad *Karma*.

**Table 4. Vedic example of equality in Hinduism lower varna to asceticism (Brahmin etc.) and vice-versa**

Name of ascetics	Credential	Varna, birth history	Activities
<i>(a) Born in lower clan but ascetics later by virtues</i>			
Lord Sri Krishna	<i>Purna-Avatar, Dwapar Yuga</i>	Shudra, born in Yadava dynasty which is a backward caste	Bhagwan - genesis of Bhagavad-Gita, the principal scripture of Hinduism
Lord Sri Rama	Avatar, Treta Yuga	Khatriya	Supreme personality of Ramayana
Bedavyas (Krishna-Daipayyan)	Maha Rishi	Shudra, born of unmarried girl, sage dancer of heaven	Chief compiler of Vedas, provide guidance to other 4 Rishis for compilation of 4 Vedas; written Mahabharata; Srimad-Bhagvatam and compiler of Gita.
Bishwamitra	Rishi	Khatriya, was a king before asceticism	Compiler of <i>Gayatri Mantra</i> required to be a Brahmin, heard from Brahman during meditation
Valmiki	Rishi	Shudra, born from ant hill	Compiler of Ramayana who was a Asura in his early life
Agastha	Rishi	Shudra, born from the earthen jar	Savior of South India
Koulush Koroy	Rishi	Shudra	A compiler of part of Veda
Satykam	Rishi	Shudra, son of a prostitute	A compiler of <i>Javala Upanishad</i>
Swami Vivekananda	Acharya	Shudra, born in a Dutta family	Founder of Ramakrishna Ashram, to preach Vedic religion worldwide
Swami Prabhupada	Acharya	Shudra, born in a Suvarna Banik family	Founder of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) to preach Vedic religion worldwide
<i>(b) Born in higher clan/brahmin family but later became demons</i>			
<b>Ravana</b>	Demon	Born in Brahmin family	Who presided Durga puja for Lord Rama but later fallen and became Asura by his Karma
<b>Nakasura</b>	Demon	Brahmin, child of Mahavishnu and the goddess Bhudevi	He captured and tortured 16,000 girls. Lord Krishna killed him and free all of the girls

Besides these, there is evidence in Indian history that many dynasties such as Nanada, Mourya, Gupta, and Sen were all from so-called lower clans. They became very famous and were great rulers by their virtues. Another interesting fact is that the same lineage (called *Gotre*, originated from one ancient Rishi) can be found in Brahmins, Vaisya or Shudra families indicating equality regardless of birth.



#### 4.10 Interpretation of *varna* in the light of Bhagavad Gita

BG is the quintessence (summary) of all Vedic scriptures. It is difficult to know the mysticism of the words of Lord Krishna described in this scripture. Reviewing the BG, it can be seen that Lord Krishna repeatedly asked Arjuna to perform the rituals of his own dharma (religion) and also advised him to go to war as part of his dharma. Because Arjuna was a person of Kshatriya class, who had no other greater welfare work except war, this is what is called self-religious practice (*svadharmacharana*). In common sense it may seem like a war of arms, but it has a deeper spiritual meaning. Aren't we constantly struggling in life, be it in family life, work, or pursuits? We can use this battle of *svadharmacharana* described in BG in the metaphorical sense as a battle for the attainment of human goals called *Siddhi* in the case of four *varnas*.

At the initial stage of practicing religiosity (*sadhana*), everyone is manifested as Shudra. That is to say, in the initial stage of *sadhana*, true devotion does not arise, neither yoga nor knowledge. Without knowledge-based devotion there is no long-lasting devotion. That is, a person who has little knowledge (uneducated, unintelligent, and ignorant) belongs to the Shudra class. Thus, all human beings belong to the category of Shudra after birth. However, sitting in *sadhana*, the devotee relentlessly tries for days, but the influence of 'nature' is difficult to overcome. The mental anguish begins. Gradually, there is progress in the pursuit. The soul is enlightened by the light of devotion. The status of the devotee can be classified as Vaishya. That is, even in a short range, the spiritual state is created. However, the power to overcome nature (lust, anger, material bondage) through sense control is still not fully acquired. The battle starts from here. This battle is the battle of the mind, the battle of knowing *Brahman*. With gradual improvement, the power of destroying disorders of nature is acquired in the mind of the devotee. This level can be classified as Kshatriya. At this stage, the devotee acquires the power to refute materialistic sense gratifications through constant spiritual warfare. Then divine qualities like keeping the mind calm, subduing senses, simplicity, honesty, truthfulness, charity, and feeling of God, etc. develop due to determinate intellect that controls the mind of the devotee. Gradually the devotee attains Brahminism by improving his/her inner strength through the power of the Soul. At this stage the devotee attains spiritual status. This spiritual state is then transformed into a fixed property. This level is called Brahminism, and the person becomes a Brahmin.

In the *Brihadaranyak* Upanishads, it is mentioned that in a competitive debate (organized by the king Janak), Rishi Yajnavalka, resolved questions of Vedic scholars such as Rishi Chakrayan, Ushasi, Aruni, Uddhalak and Gargi, and said, 'He who is self-aware, and has seen the fullness of his Soul, is a Brahmin' (13).

Therefore, it appears that through the evolution of *sadhana*, from *tamah* to *rajah* quality, and from *rajah* to *sattvic* quality, all the qualities of divinity begin to manifest in the mind of a practitioner. This *Trigunattika* (three-tier quality) battle - that is, the mental transition of action and quality is the real division of human beings, called *varna*. This is the main teaching of BG. In fact, Lord Krishna has spoken of this battle of the mind in various chapters of BG, especially in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup> chapters, and has prepared the answer to this question up to the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter (to Arjuna, 3<sup>rd</sup> Panadava).

#### 4.11 How to dissipate harmful caste system and restore the truth of equality?

Presently, there is awareness against this discriminatory system among Hindus worldwide. Major religious organizations such as ISKCON and Ramakrishna mission have incorporated religious practices regardless of *varna*, caste, colour and creed with their respective philosophical stands. Our rishis, saints and gurus reiterated the divine message to Sanatana Hindu Dharma followers that:

‘Hinduism is an eternal dharma, regardless of what your last name is, where you were born, what you do, who you pray to as your Godhead; and thus have no restrictions on your spiritual and social journey in life to attain God-realization or salvation’.

Fortunately, our new generations do not care about *varna* or caste systems, rather accept quality as the basis of human life. However, it is unfortunate that a small percentage of Hindus still believe and follow caste system in India and abroad. Our enlightened gurus, religious authorities (*Swamiji's* and priests), young generation with modern outlook and government administration are relentlessly trying to eradicate this social vice of discrimination. It is hoped that soon this misguided and utterly unacceptable caste and *varna* system will disappear from our Hindu society for ever.

### 5. Women's rights in Santana dharma according to Vedic scriptures

Women's rights are one of the most debatable issues in all cultures. However, there is substantial evidence in Vedic scriptures that women are accorded the greatest respect in Hinduism since the Vedic era. No religion, philosophy or even modern feminism can match the same. In Vedic era, women lived respectful lives and contributed to all walks of life including education, business, religious practices, social and political life, marriage and so on (Table 5). The following are a few examples:

(1) There is substantial evidence in the Vedas that women had equal rights to parent's property, religious rituals (*Yagna*), marriage (including widow marriage) while many contributed as educators, lawmakers, protectors, and rulers.

(2) There were 17 Rishikas (female Rishi; 39 altogether) who contributed to compile the Vedas particularly in Rig Veda (RV). They were not only highly educated and respected but acquired the highest spiritual intelligence of cosmic truth through God-realization. For example, Lopamudra (RV: 1.179), the wife of Agastha Rishi, Bishwabara, daughter of Atri Rishi (RV: 5.28), and Sabitri Surya (RV: 10.85) just to name a few of the exalted Rishikas who contributed many chapters in the Vedas.

(3) Hinduism is the only religion that women are always regarded as a sacred lady and worshiped as Devi (eg. *Durga, Kali, Gayatri, Lakshmi, Sarashwati*), Balika (sacred maiden), mother of the world and so on. For example, During *Durga puja*, which is the worship of power, a young girl (*Balika*) is worshiped in front of the deity. The Lord's name is pronounced after their consort's name such as *Lakshmi-Narayan, Sita-Ram, Radha-Krishna (or Radhey-Shyam), Gauri-Shankar* indicating the respectful position of women against their male counterparts. Our special *Navaratri puja* as nine forms of Ma Durga is performed for nine days in all over India and abroad.

Despite these extolled teachings of Vedic scriptures (Table 5) that women had the highest accolade in all spheres of life, a great deal of time and energy is being wasted purposely by some sects and so-called intellectuals globally to find verses from various minor Hindu scriptures like Puranas, Manu Smriti denigrating women. We need to realize that none of these texts form the foundation of Hinduism. They are trivial in nature and carries no spiritual significance. There is credible evidence that many texts of these scriptures have gone through various adulterations later from the time of their creation by our reverend Rishis. This is nothing but international conspiracy against our great Sanatana Hindu Dharma knowing that this is the only eternal dharma that works for peace and harmony for humankind irrespective of gender, colour and faiths.

**Table 5. Direct quotations from Vedas describing respectable position of women in Vedic era**

<i>Item</i>	<i>Rig Veda</i>	<i>Yajur Veda</i>	<i>Atharva Veda</i>
<i>Property right</i>	<i>The right is equal in father's property for both son &amp; daughter (3.31.1, 2.17.7)</i>		
<i>Education</i>	<i>Vedas along with Ayurved, Dhanurved, Gandharved &amp; arthved should be taught to women (1.164.41). The government should ensure that all boys &amp; girls get good education, follow Brahmacharya &amp; strengthen society (6.44.18). An educated women can make her society a world power. She can change the course of history. She is Saraswati (7.40.7). O Scholarly women, you purify our character, you have noble characteristics, actions, and habits. We bow to your greatness that provides bliss to all (6.49.7)</i>	<i>The government should put special efforts to make all women into scholars (10.7); Parents should ensure the good education of children- boys &amp; girls- so that they can enlighten the families &amp; nation like the Sun (11.36)</i>	<i>Parents should gift their daughter intellectuality &amp; power of knowledge when she leaves for their husband's home. (14.1.6)</i>
<i>Ruler</i>	<i>Women have been given the lead role in social work, in governmental organizations, and for ruling the nation (10.85.46)</i>	<i>There are equal rights for men &amp; women to get appointed as ruler (20.9). There should be a women army (16.44). O Brave women, obtain training in martial arts &amp; warfare. Unleash your potential and destroy enemies (17.45)</i>	<i>Women should take part in the legislative chambers &amp; put their views on the forefront (7.38.4 &amp; 12.3.52)</i>
<i>Rituals, Yagna</i>	<i>Husband &amp; wife perform yajna and achieve bliss (1.72.5; 2.6.5, 1.13.3, 5.43.115, 1173.2)</i>	<i>O women, destroy the enemies of ignorance, immaturity, negativity and savagery for the welfare, purity &amp; happiness of all (5.10)</i>	
<i>Hallmark of valor</i>	<i>I am the flag of the Nation. I am the head of the society. I am brilliant. I am loved by my husband. But in the Battlefield, I demonstrate exemplary bravery that destroys the enemies (10.159.2)</i>	<i>O women, we resolve to do everything for your respect &amp; glory. you are a lioness that leads to the birth of great legends in society, that nurtures intelligence &amp; bravery, who provides bliss &amp; prosperity (5.12); You don't deserve to be defeated by challenges &amp; obstacles. on the contrary, you possess the power to defeat the stiffest challenges. defeat enemies, you have valor to realize your true potential &amp; demonstrate it (13.26)</i>	<i>These women are pure, sacred, worth being worshipped, worth being served, of great character and scholar (11.1.17). O wife! Become the queen and manager of everyone in the family of your husband (14.1.20)</i>
<i>Marriage</i>	<i>Equal rights in marriage, can have multiple husbands as male (if), may marry multiple times (9.119.5, 8.29.8), widow marriage is permitted (10.18.3)</i>		

## 6. Medieval era was the darkest era for women worldwide

Unfortunately, history was never in favour of women; the medieval era was the darkest era for women worldwide. To name a few, *sati*, and *Mulakkaram* in India, wife-selling, witch hunt, slavery in European and American countries are well-known discriminations against women.

### *Sati Dah Pratha*

Initially, *Sati dah pratha* was a voluntary practice that at the death of a husband the widow (if wishes) can sacrifice life in the pyre (Fig 1). However, unfortunately, In India, by the name of *Sati dah pratha* about 8,000 widow Hindu women died (mostly against their wish) in the pyre of dead husbands for a period of a century In India (14). Although it was completely out of religious dicta, no rulers stopped this barbaric act. Mindful that this orchestrated barbarism happened in the colonial period of India and there were vested interests to denigrate Indian culture for proselytizing. However, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a social revolution pioneered by Ishwar Chandra Bidyasagar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and so on for abolishing *Sati dah prata*. In 1829, the practice was banned through legislation. Even in China, women were buried along with their dead husband's body for thousands of years.



Fig 1. *Sati* burning (graphic source); Fig 2. Witch hunt and burning (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Witch-hunt>) in 1585 by JJ Wick.  
Fig 3. A *Mulakkaram* (censored) lower cast lady, India (Edgar Thurston)

### Witch hunt:

A witch-hunt is a search for people (mainly women) to label as 'witch' which was punishable by death. While witch hunt was widespread in European countries, about 7,000 women were put to death in the name of witch in Germany alone between 1300 and 1850 (15) (Fig 2).

### *Mulakkaram*

In Kerala, India, there was a tyrant king named Travancore who introduced a so-called 'breast tax' (*Mulakarram* in local language) for ladies except in Brahmins if they cover their breasts in public (16) (Fig 3). It was introduced in the 1800s and continued for a long period of time. History witnessed that when a young lady (Nangle) who was repeatedly harassed by tax agents cut her two breasts and presented to tax agents as the tax. Following this pathetic incident, the breast tax system was abolished.

### Wife selling

The procedure of wife-selling was another gross violation of women rights most closely resembled the sale of livestock that defies human morale. The first recorded case of *wife-selling* was in 1553 AD in European countries. Wife auctions were most visible in England between 1750 to 1850, although the custom did make its way to North America as well. However, some historians have maintained that the practice was much older and of Anglo-Saxon origin, starting in the 11th or 12th centuries. Wife-selling emerged as the best alternative for those who were unable to afford the costs of divorce because divorce was only permitted if the husband or wife could prove life-threatening cruelty or adultery.

These examples are just the tip of vitriol – the legacy of different discriminations against women is still deeply entrenched in most societies in different forms.

## 7. Misconstrued and flung irreligious issues in Hinduism.

Despite timeless wisdom and purity of Vedic knowledge in Hinduism, there is documented evidence of adulteration (attempted by some sectarian people), such as introducing fictitious concepts with deliberate preposterous smears against Hinduism. Classic examples are the introduction of *Allahponishad*, *Ankahi mantra*, adulteration of Puranas (eg. Matsya Puranam, Manusmriti), and misconstrued propaganda against religious facts, such as the 16 thousand wives of Lord Krishna, and Siva-Lingam. We should debunk these issues with Vedic facts and figures through historical perspectives.

### 7.1 Flung irreligious issues in Hinduism.

**What is an Allahponishad? is there any existence of it in Vedic dharma?**

**Fictional existence:** There is no Vedic Upanishad like this. It is a classic case of adulteration/religious invasion from a sect (faith) to denigrate Sanatana Hindu dharma. During the reign of Mughal emperor, Akbar (1575 AD) this so-called *Allahponishad* came into existence to flourish Islam in India (18). Akbar ordered two of his followers to translate *Atharva Veda* into Persian. Initially, due to lack of knowledge they failed to do so. Later, with the help of a Sanskrit scholar who was a converted Muslim (neo-Muslim) translated the Veda into Persian. As it is a fact that a converted fellow always stands against his/her own original religion to justify the conversion. However, with an ill motive, this neo-Muslim found some Vedic words similar to Arabic in the Veda and wrote a malicious book using an admixture of Arabic and Sanskrit words. He named it as *Allahponishad* as if it was a Hindu Vedanta scripture.

**Facts:** Famous Indian historian Durgadash Lahiri in his book '*Bharatbarsha*' provided a vivid description of these fictitious smears. Lahiri (1926) wrote that Sanskrit came long before the Arabic language and there was absolutely no reason to believe that these two languages could be mixed to produce any scripture in the Vedic era, specially before the birth of Prophet Mohammad who initiated Islam (18) (page 36). It has been a crude characterization and ludicrously improbable production of an Upanishad, therefore, has no value whatsoever in Vedic dharma.

### 7.2 Are there any Ankahi mantra (used after death of a Hindu person) that exists in Vedic literature?

**Fictional existence:** The introduction of *Ankhahi* mantra is another case of false propaganda against Sanatana Hindu dharma. According to some sectarian people (particularly from Islam) when a Hindu person dies, a priest confides a verse for removing sins in the name of Prophet Mohammad (*La Ilaha haroti papam il ilaha param padam, Janmo Baikuntha opp inuti ta jopi nam Muhammad*). Literally, it means that 'after death you recite Mohammad's name so that he can save you from all sins. This concocted verse, similar to *Allahpanishad* is an admixture of Arabic and Sanskrit words which has absolutely no value or significance in Sanatan Hindu Dharma.

**Fact:** This so-called mantra is farcical and a non-existent verse in Vedic literature. The Hindu ritual after death/funeral is of Vedic origin which is a distinct and elaborated purificatory process. The first and foremost mantra that is recited after death is, '*Om Dibyan locan Sa Gacchatu*'. This is to pray for the person's soul for eternal abode. It is important to mention here that the prayer is equally applicable to all human beings regardless of religious beliefs since Sanatan Hinduism is a universal religion of humankind. The immediate funeral process includes chanting of 'Hare Krishna' *Mahamantra*, ritualistic bathing, and cremation followed by other step by step purificatory processes of the departed soul, such as *Pinda-daan*, *Sraddha* etc (details are not given here).

## 8. Misconstrued issues in Hinduism

### Why worship Lord Shiva as 'Linga' that looks like a phallic emblem?

This is an oft-quoted misinterpretation of divine *Siva-Lingam*. Some sects describe this as a phallic emblem with a yoni which is ludicrous and irreligious. Shiva is worshipped both as a deity and a form called *Lingam*. The Sanskrit term *Linga* means 'form', 'symbol' or sign. The first use of the word 'linga' (with Siva) is found in the *Shvetasvara Upanishad*. It was narrated by *Suta Muni* when other sages asked him about the origin of Linga-Shiva. It states that there was no sign or symbol (*linga*) of the Absolute Being of Shiva, although He is portrayed as a male primordial form of transformer and annihilator. Swami Vivekananda, a great mystic, and Vedic scholar narrates that, 'the worship of Shiva-lingam originated from famous lingam in the Atharva Veda Samhita sung in praise of the *Yupastambha*, the sacrificial post'.

In conclusion, as it is impossible to define Shiva being the unmanifested Supreme God, the Linga symbol is an attempt to form the formless as a Supreme divine entity. In other words, the Absolute being of Shiva is formless, infinite, and not perceptible. The symbol alone should be termed pre-eminently as the emblem of the 'great unknown'. The entire structure of Shiva Linga can be manifested as Prakriti and Purusha, meaning the Supreme Godhead, who pervades in all living and non-living entities and is the creator of the universes.

### 9. Did Lord Krishna have 16,000 wives? Why did young Krishna steal the clothes of bathing ladies?

The popular misunderstanding about 16,000 wives of Lord Krishna dates back to the story of a demon king, Narakasura (SB: 10.25). The story unfolds as a 'tale of dharma asserting over adharma' in *Dwapar Yuga* (3<sup>rd</sup> in the Hindu era). In brief, Narakasura was born as a heavenly offspring of *MahaVishnu* and the goddess *Bhudevi*. However, he turned into an evil tyrant of Pragjyotisha (Modern Assam, India). In order to achieve immortality for his sacrificial austerity he captured 16,000 women from the heavenly planet of *Indra*. Indra sought the aid of Lord Krishna, the Supreme Godhead. Following a fierce fight, Lord Krishna killed Narakasura and freed the women from his formidable fort. While the freed women were of royal birth and thus dignified, their ordeal did not end with the death of the demon. Following a resentment to accept them by the then society, Lord Krishna protected their honour and modesty by declaring that they were all His wives to allow them to have a dignified life going forward. Their relationship with Krishna was spiritual in nature. This way the Lord preserved the sanctity of the innocent ladies as well as dharma (BG: 9.22).

Lord Krishna was a minor boy when He completed His transcendental activities called '*lila*' in Vrindavan (a sacred place in India) when He used to steal cloths of ladies who were bathing in rivers and ponds without clothes. Although crude, it was a teaching that ladies should not bathe without clothes in public in order to protect their modesty and dignity. It was Lord Krishna's *lila* or a funny way of teaching her followers what should be done and what should not be done for a peaceful society.

## 10. Conclusions

From the above review of our main Vedic scriptures, the following conclusions are made. First, the *varna* system for the classification of human beings is determined by virtue and action and not by birth. The upper or the lower class is just a misguided belief and practice. The one who is the best in terms of virtue - the scholar, the *sattvic* having truthful and righteous attributes is in the upper class. He can be a person born in a Shudra, Dalit or from a Brahmin family. Thus, *varna* division is not a division of human beings. It is the first of many steps of how to rise above the three-tier virtues with the power of the Soul

(consciousness) and elevate life to the Brahmin level. This is the teachings of Sanatana dharma. The most important thing is that the *varna* of a person is not determined by birth.

Secondly, women rights are preserved and protected in Vedic literature. There is substantial evidence from Vedic literature that women are accorded the greatest respect in Hinduism since the Vedic era. In the Vedic era women lived respectful lives and contributed to all walks of life. Women were allowed to participate in higher education; many of whom reached the highest position to be able to contribute and formulate the Vedas and other literatures, and some even became rulers, educators and so on. Hinduism is the only religion that women are always regarded as sacred lady, and worshiped as Devi such as *Lakshmi*, *Saraswati* and so on. This indicates that women are regarded as the respected backbone of Hindu society whether it is sincerely followed or not. Modern society has been derailed with various forms of discrimination against women irrespective of religion; some of which are women's rights violations, abuses in family, and sexual harassments including rapes in all religions all over the world.

While it may be a dream to erase discrimination completely, we can hopefully alleviate it further. In the Indian perspective, we can see political and social revolution counteract *varna* and caste based and other discriminations such as race and women rights violation etc. For example, presently in India, there are many 'Dalits' (once 'untouchables') and so-called other low-caste Hindus who are occupying many senior professional positions. At present a Dalit lady is the Honourable President of India, which is not only unprecedented for India, but also for the whole world which justifies that a reverberance of equality in gender is present in Hinduism across India since the ancient Vedic era.

In respect of introducing fictitious concepts such as *Allahpanishad* and *Ankahi* mantra as well as other misconstrued issues, followers of Hinduism utterly and decisively rejected these preposterous smears against Hinduism. The Vedic dictum is that the truth always prevails.

It is the time to pursue further research on Sanatana Hindu religion and philosophy; implement the findings of the research to eliminate the propagandas and misconceptions; nurture, observe and bring back the 'golden era' of Hinduism as directed by the Vedic scriptures, and apply it at every level of our modern Sanatana Hindu society. Hindu society can no longer bear these miseries. Fortunately, there are groundbreaking works in progress by different Hindu spiritual missions and government departments. Whether this is good enough or needs a complete overhaul by a social revolution is yet to be seen. Based on our research findings we hope that we would be able to move beyond the medieval mentality and gain spirituality through the pursuit of truth, honesty, and righteous work based on Vedic scriptures free from all misconceptions, religious prejudices and discrimination.

## 11. Limitations

There are a few caveats in this research. First, to increase readability, Sanskrit mantras and hymns from different scriptures are not cited in most situations. Instead, only the English meaning is given. Secondly, because of the time and space constraints, reviewing of vast Vedic scriptures and all relevant citations were not possible to present in this paper. Thirdly, biases cannot be excluded from various sectorial interpretations of theoretical and historical records, including differences in philosophical narratives, and record translations underpinning complex transcripts. Finally, any errors in citations are inadvertent.

## Future research and motivations

More research is needed in order to enrich present findings from the vast treasure of Vedic scriptures.

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