

From the Rigvedic Period to the Later Vedic Period: The Continuity of Vedic Society from Karma (Action) towards Janma (Birth)

A Historical-Sociological Analysis of Continuity and Rupture in the Varna Order

¹Madhurima Priyamvada, ²Prof. (Dr.) Anand Kumar Jha

¹Research Scholar, University Department of History, Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur University, Bihar

mp.del.chess@gmail.com

²University Department of History, Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur University, Bihar

HOW TO CITE:

Madhurima Priyamvada, Anand Kumar Jha (2026). From the Rigvedic Period to the Later Vedic Period: The Continuity of Vedic Society from Karma (Action) towards Janma (Birth)

International Journal of Special Education, 41(22s), 1138 - 1151

ABSTRACT:

This paper offers an expanded historical-sociological examination of one of the most contested questions in the historiography of ancient India: whether the fourfold varna order of the Rigvedic period rested, in its origin, on karma (individual action, conduct, and occupational merit), and whether this principle was progressively displaced, over the course of the Later Vedic period, by janma (birth) as the primary criterion of social placement. The paper argues that this transition should be understood neither as a single rupture located at one textual moment, nor as a linear, uncontested process, but as a centuries-long, unevenly documented, and actively contested reworking of social classification, in which structural continuity in the fourfold frame coexisted with a decisive ideological and practical shift in the mechanism of ascription. The paper integrates historical materialism, Weberian social closure theory, and Dumont's account of hierarchical ideology into an explanatory framework, and extends this framework with a postcolonial-historiographical caveat, following Nicholas Dirks and Thomas Trautmann, that cautions against reading even the concept of a rigid, birth-determined "caste system" as a simple textual given rather than as a category partly shaped by later, including colonial, processes of codification. Methodologically, the paper combines close textual analysis of the Rigveda, Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanishadic corpus, together with early Dharmasutra literature, with a synthesis of archaeological evidence on the Painted Grey Ware culture, iron technology, and agrarian expansion into the Gangetic plain, and a critical engagement with the historiography of R. S. Sharma, D. D. Kosambi, Romila Thapar, Louis Dumont, Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton, Brian K. Smith, Vivekanand Jha, and B. R. Ambedkar. The paper

COPYRIGHT STATEMENT:

Copyright: © 2026 Authors.
Open access publication under the
terms and conditions
of the Creative Commons Attribution
(CC BY)
license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

further incorporates Ambedkar's counter-reading of the Shudra as a fallen Kshatriya lineage rather than an originally servile category, and considers Buddhist and Jaina critiques of birth-based status as contemporaneous internal contestations of the Brahmanical model. It concludes that the shift from karma to janma is best explained as the outcome of a historically specific alignment between the material conditions of an emergent agrarian state, a strategy of social closure pursued by a priestly-warrior elite, and an ideology of ritual purity that rendered that closure legitimate, while also acknowledging that this narrative of gradual closure, though well supported by the Brahmanical corpus, was neither uncontested in its own time nor free from later reconstruction.

Keywords Varna, Karma, Janma, Rigveda, Later Vedic Period, Purusha Sukta, social closure, historical materialism, ascriptive status, Shudra, untouchability, colonial historiography, Vedic social history

1. Introduction

Few questions in the study of ancient Indian society have generated as much sustained scholarly disagreement as the question of how the varna order actually functioned in its earliest phase, and how and why it changed. Two positions recur across more than a century of Indological and historical writing. The first, associated broadly with apologetic and reformist readings of the Vedic corpus from the nineteenth century onward, holds that the earliest varna system was fundamentally a division of labour based on guna (aptitude or quality) and karma (action, conduct, or occupation), open in principle to movement between categories. The second, associated with much of the historiography that emerged from the 1950s onward, and especially with the work of R. S. Sharma and D. D. Kosambi, treats the varna order as from a very early point bound up with control over labour, ritual privilege, and, increasingly, birth. A third, more recent current, represented by Ambedkar's own historical writing and by later postcolonial historiography, questions whether either of the first two positions adequately captures the contested, plural, and politically interested character of the surviving textual record itself.

This paper does not attempt to resolve these disagreements definitively, because the surviving evidence does not permit so clean a resolution. Instead, it develops a wider and more carefully qualified argument: that across the roughly nine to ten centuries spanning the Early or Rigvedic Period (c. 1500–1000 BCE) and the Later Vedic Period (c. 1000–600 BCE), and continuing into the early Dharmasutra corpus that follows it, Vedic society exhibits both continuity and change, and that this change was neither smooth nor universally accepted even within the Brahmanical tradition that produced most of the surviving evidence. The continuity lies in the persistence of a fourfold conceptual frame, first given canonical expression in the Purusha Sukta of the Rigveda. The change lies in the criterion by which individuals were attached to that frame: a criterion that was, in its earliest and least elaborated form, comparatively open to achievement, conduct, and occupational shift, and that became, by the end of the Later Vedic period, substantially closed, hereditary, and justified by an increasingly elaborate ritual and textual apparatus, even as traces of an older, more fluid vocabulary persisted and even as rival traditions, most importantly early Buddhism and Jainism, mounted an explicit internal critique of birth-based ranking during the very period in which it was consolidating.

The significance of this question extends well beyond antiquarian interest. How a society moves from evaluating persons by what they do to evaluating them by what they are born as is a question with obvious relevance to the comparative sociology of stratification, to debates on the origins of caste, and to contemporary Indian social and political life, where the historical status of varna continues to be invoked, often in mutually incompatible ways, in debates over reservation policy, social justice, and religious identity. A historically grounded, theoretically explicit, and historiographically self-aware account of this transition therefore has value both for historical scholarship and for the broader sociology of inequality.

This expanded version of the paper adds four elements largely absent from shorter treatments of the topic: a systematic discussion of the archaeological and material correlates of the transition; a closer, verse-level reading of the primary textual evidence, including the Purusha Sukta, the Taittiriya Samhita, and the Chandogya and Brihadaranyaka Upanishads; an account of the emergence of untouchability as a distinct and more extreme form of ascriptive exclusion beyond the fourfold varna frame; and a section devoted to contestation, incorporating Ambedkar's counter-reading of Shudra origins, the postcolonial critique of the very category of a rigid "caste system," and the Buddhist and Jaina rejection of birth-based ranking. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework. Section 3 details the methodology. Section 4 reviews the literature. Section 5 examines the Rigvedic period. Section 6 examines the archaeological and material correlates of change. Section 7 examines the Later Vedic period in detail, including the emergence of untouchability. Section 8 theorises the transition. Section 9 considers counter-narratives and contestation. Section 10 discusses implications and limitations, and Section 11 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework

A study of this kind requires a framework capable of holding together several things that are often

treated separately in the literature: the material and political conditions of Vedic society, the ideological or ritual justifications through which social position was legitimised, and the historiographical conditions under which the surviving evidence was produced and later interpreted. This paper therefore combines four complementary theoretical strands.

2.1 Historical Materialism

Following the historiographical tradition established by D. D. Kosambi and developed systematically by R. S. Sharma, this paper treats changes in the mode of production, and in particular the transition from a predominantly pastoral, semi-nomadic, tribal economy in the Rigvedic period to a settled, iron-using, surplus-generating agrarian economy in the Later Vedic period, as a necessary part of any explanation of why social ascription hardened. On this reading, the emergence of agricultural surplus enabled the support of specialised, non-productive groups, most importantly a priesthood and a warrior-administrative class, whose continued privilege depended on restricting access to their own ranks. Sharma's argument, developed at length in *Śūdras in Ancient India* and in *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, is that the intensification of production and the extraction of labour from a growing Shudra population were structurally connected to the increasing rigidity of varna boundaries. Romila Thapar's account of the transition from lineage-based to state-based polity provides the political-economic complement to Sharma's argument, showing how tribute extraction and the consolidation of kingship required, and helped to produce, a more differentiated and less mobile social order.

2.2 Weberian Social Closure

Historical materialism alone does not fully explain why the specific idiom of closure that emerged was one of ritual purity and birth rather than, say, wealth or simple political power. For this, the paper draws on Max Weber's concept of social closure, later elaborated systematically by Frank Parkin, whereby a status group facing potential competition for resources and privilege

restricts access to those resources by constructing exclusionary criteria, of which heredity is one of the most durable, because it cannot be acquired through effort and therefore permanently forecloses competition from outsiders. Parkin's distinction between exclusionary closure, practised by a dominant group to keep resources for itself, and usurpationary closure, practised by subordinate groups seeking to claim resources held by others, is useful here: the Later Vedic evidence, on this reading, documents an increasingly successful exclusionary strategy pursued by the Brahmana-Kshatriya alliance, while the Buddhist and Jaina movements discussed in Section 9 can be read as an early instance of usurpationary contestation of that same closure. Read through this lens, the shift from karma to janma in the Later Vedic period is not simply a change of belief but a strategy of closure pursued, consciously or not, by an increasingly self-conscious priesthood whose ritual monopoly, and the material privileges that followed from it, depended on making entry into that status a matter of birth rather than demonstrated competence.

2.3 Dumont's Ideology of Hierarchy

Because the paper is also concerned with how the transition was legitimised rather than merely enforced, it draws selectively on Louis Dumont's argument, in *Homo Hierarchicus*, that Indian social hierarchy rests on an encompassing ideological opposition between the pure and the impure, rather than on stratification by wealth or power alone. Dumont's framework is used here not as a general theory of caste, which has been extensively and fairly criticised, including by Dumont's own critics such as Gerald Berreman, Gloria Raheja, and Declan Quigley, for its idealism and its reliance on a largely Brahmanical textual corpus, but narrowly, to explain why ritual purity, and not wealth or military strength alone, became the specific currency through which birth-based status was expressed in the Later Vedic period. Brian K. Smith's *Classifying the Universe* extends this line of argument usefully by showing how Vedic ritual texts repeatedly reduplicate the fourfold social classification across cosmological, physiological, and sacrificial

domains, so that the social order comes to appear as a special case of a universal, divinely sanctioned order of classification rather than as a contingent human arrangement, a discursive strategy that itself functioned as a powerful form of ideological legitimization for closure.

2.4 A Postcolonial-Historiographical Caveat

Finally, the paper incorporates a methodological caveat drawn from Nicholas Dirks's *Castes of Mind* and Thomas Trautmann's work on the history of Indology, both of which argue that the modern conception of an all-India, rigidly birth-bound "caste system," understood as a totalising and uniform institution, owes a great deal to colonial ethnographic and census categories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, layered onto, and in some respects sharpened, older indigenous categories of varna and jati. This does not mean that ascriptive, birth-based status did not exist or intensify in the Later Vedic and subsequent Dharmasastric periods, for which the textual evidence discussed below is substantial; it means, rather, that the historian must be careful to distinguish what the ancient texts themselves claim from the further systematisation that later, including colonial, scholarship imposed upon them, and must resist projecting the fully elaborated, jati-based caste order of later centuries backward onto the Later Vedic evidence as though it were already fully formed.

Taken together, these four elements, a materialist account of why closure became functional for a priestly and warrior elite, a Weberian account of the mechanism and direction of closure, a Dumont-Smith account of its ideological and cosmological idiom, and a postcolonial caveat about the historiographical construction of the category itself, form the integrated framework used in the analysis that follows.

3. Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical design combining textual-hermeneutic analysis of primary Vedic sources with a comparative-historical synthesis of secondary historiography and a review of relevant archaeological literature. The method is appropriate to the research question because the

evidence available for reconstructing Vedic social organisation is exclusively textual and archaeological rather than statistical, and because the question at issue, whether and how a normative criterion of social placement changed over roughly nine centuries, is inherently one of textual and conceptual change over time, requiring close reading and periodisation rather than quantitative measurement.

3.1 Corpus and Periodisation

The analysis follows the conventional periodisation used in Vedic historiography: the Early or Rigvedic Period, dated approximately 1500 to 1000 BCE and represented primarily by the hymns of the Rigveda, and the Later Vedic Period, dated approximately 1000 to 600 BCE and represented by the Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, the early Upanishads (notably the Chandogya and Brihadaranyaka), and the earliest Dharmasutra literature, the latter of which, following Patrick Olivelle's dating, straddles the end of the Later Vedic period and the beginning of what is conventionally treated as a separate, post-Vedic phase. The paper treats the Rigveda itself as internally stratified, following the scholarly consensus, represented in Michael Witzel's work on Vedic dialectology and text-layering, that its tenth mandala, which contains the Purusha Sukta, is a comparatively late addition to the text and thus stands closer, both linguistically and conceptually, to the threshold of the Later Vedic world than to the bulk of the earlier books.

3.2 Method of Analysis

Four analytical steps are used. First, a close textual reading of references to varna, karma, guna, and janma across the corpus, attentive to shifts in vocabulary and emphasis between the Rigvedic and Later Vedic strata, and specifically attentive to individual verses and passages rather than relying solely on summary characterisations found in secondary literature. Second, a triangulation of this textual evidence against the archaeological and economic historiography of the Painted Grey Ware culture, iron technology, and the eastward agrarian expansion into the

Gangetic plain, drawing on the archaeological synthesis of F. R. Allchin and Bridget Allchin and on George Erdosy's work on early urbanisation in the Ganga valley, which situates the ideological material within a material context. Third, a critical synthesis of the secondary historiography, in which the positions of functionalist, materialist, idealist-ideological, and postcolonial-critical schools are compared and, where they conflict, evaluated against the primary textual evidence rather than accepted uncritically. Fourth, a deliberate inclusion of counter-hegemonic readings, principally Ambedkar's, alongside the mainstream Indological and historical-materialist literature, on the grounds that a corpus produced almost entirely by and for a Brahmanical elite cannot be adequately interpreted using only frameworks developed from within that same tradition.

3.3 Source Criticism

Because the Vedic corpus survives only through a long, largely Brahmanical process of oral transmission and later written redaction, the paper treats every textual claim about social organisation as a normative or ideological statement first, and only cautiously, and with explicit archaeological or comparative corroboration where possible, as a description of actual social practice. Where a claim rests only on a single, late, or ambiguous passage, this is noted explicitly rather than presented with unwarranted confidence.

3.4 Limitations of the Method

The method has several acknowledged limitations. The dating of Vedic texts remains approximate and contested, and any periodisation risks imposing a sharper boundary than the evidence supports. The surviving corpus is overwhelmingly the product of a Brahmanical priestly milieu, so it reflects the perspective of those with the greatest interest in justifying ritual privilege, and the perspectives of women, of the Shudra population, and of communities outside the varna frame altogether are largely inaudible in it, a problem only partially mitigated by drawing on later counter-traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism, and, much later, Ambedkar's historical

reconstruction, all of which carry their own interpretive commitments. Textual analysis of this kind can describe normative claims about how society was said to be organised with more confidence than it can establish how far those norms were realised in practice; the paper is therefore careful throughout to distinguish prescriptive claims in the texts from what can be inferred about actual social behaviour. Finally, as Section 2.4 notes, the very category of a systematic, birth-bound "caste system" carries a layered historiographical inheritance that the paper attempts to acknowledge rather than reproduce uncritically.

4. Literature Review

The historiography on this question can be grouped into four broad schools. The functionalist-idealist school, represented in different ways by early Indological scholarship, by A. L. Basham's influential synthesis in *The Wonder That Was India*, and by later apologetic readings, emphasises the Purusha Sukta's description of the four varnas as parts of a single cosmic body and reads this as evidence of an originally harmonious, occupation-based division of labour, in which guna and karma, not birth, determined status, and social mobility between varnas was, at least in principle, possible. Contemporary Vedic philology lends this reading some qualified support: Jamison and Brereton, in their authoritative translation and study of the Rigveda, note that there is no evidence in the Rigveda of an elaborate, subdivided caste system, and characterise the varna scheme in the hymn as embryonic and, then as later, as much a social ideal as a description of social reality.

The materialist school, led by Kosambi and developed most fully by R. S. Sharma, is more sceptical of the functionalist reading. Sharma argues explicitly that Rigvedic society was organised primarily on the basis of kinship, tribe, and lineage rather than on an elaborated social division of labour, and that unambiguous evidence of the Shudra as a distinct, hereditarily degraded labouring category, subject to restrictions on commensality and marriage, appears not in the earliest Rigveda but

progressively across the Later Vedic corpus, developing in step with agrarian expansion, the growth of a tribute-extracting state apparatus, and the consolidation of Brahmanical ritual authority. Romila Thapar's *From Lineage to State* extends this argument by tracing how lineage-based, relatively egalitarian tribal polities of the Early Vedic period gave way, over the Later Vedic period, to more stratified, territorially defined chiefdoms in which differential access to resources and ritual status became structurally embedded. Vivekanand Jha's long series of studies, collected posthumously in *Caṇḍāla: Untouchability and Caste in Early India*, refines this materialist account further by tracing the specific textual emergence of the Chandala and other groups eventually classed as untouchable, showing that these categories appear for the first time in the Later Vedic corpus, notably in connection with the symbolic Purushamedha, and undergo a marked deterioration in status between the Later Vedic and early Upanishadic texts and the subsequent Dharmasutra literature.

The third, ideological-structuralist school is associated above all with Louis Dumont, whose *Homo Hierarchicus* treats the varna order less as an economic division of labour than as an expression of an encompassing hierarchical ideology organised around the opposition of purity and pollution, articulated above all through the Brahmana-Kshatriya relationship. Brian K. Smith's *Classifying the Universe*, though written independently of Dumont and more attentive to the specific ritual texts of the Later Vedic corpus, arrives at a complementary conclusion, arguing that varna functioned as a totalising cosmological classification that gave the social hierarchy the appearance of a natural, universal order. Dumont's work, while indispensable for understanding how hierarchy was legitimised, has been criticised, notably by Gerald Berreman, Nicholas Dirks, and Gloria Raheja, for privileging a Brahmanical, textual self-representation of caste as a consensual hierarchy, and for underplaying the roles of power, domination, and material interest that the materialist school foregrounds.

A fourth school, which this expanded review treats as analytically distinct from the preceding three, consists of counter-hegemonic and postcolonial readings. B. R. Ambedkar's *Who Were the Shudras?* offers perhaps the most sustained internal critique of the standard varna narrative available from within the Indian intellectual tradition itself. Ambedkar argued, on the basis of close reading of the Rigveda, the Mahabharata, and later Puranic material, that the Shudras were not an originally servile or degraded population at all, but were themselves a Kshatriya, that is, warrior-lineage, group who lost caste status as a consequence of prolonged conflict with the Brahmana priesthood, and specifically as a consequence of Brahmana refusal to perform the upanayana, or sacred-thread investiture, for them; on this reading, the Purusha Sukta itself is best understood not as an early, innocent description of a functional social order but as a comparatively late, self-interested Brahmanical interpolation designed to retroactively sanctify a hierarchy that was, in fact, the outcome of a specific, contested, and coercive historical struggle. Ambedkar's reading has been contested by later historians, including Jha, on textual and chronological grounds, but it remains an indispensable corrective to any account that takes Brahmanical self-description at face value. Complementing Ambedkar's textual critique, Nicholas Dirks and Thomas Trautmann have argued, from a quite different disciplinary vantage point, that the modern conception of caste as an all-India, rigidly birth-determined system of social closure owes much to the ethnographic and administrative categories developed by colonial officials and census operations, a point that does not deny the reality of ascriptive closure in ancient texts but does caution against treating that closure as already fully and uniformly realised by the end of the Later Vedic period.

A further body of work, represented by G. S. Ghurye's early sociological study *Caste and Race in India* and by Suvira Jaiswal's *Caste: Origin, Function and Dimensions of Change*, occupies something of a middle position between the materialist and ideological schools, treating varna as originally functional and gradually rigidified

through a combination of endogamous closure, ritual sanction, and, in Ghurye's account, cultural distance between Aryan and non-Aryan populations. Uma Chakravarti's work on gender adds a further and often neglected dimension, arguing that the control of women's sexuality and reproduction through rules of endogamy became, in the Later Vedic and subsequent periods, a central mechanism through which hereditary status was actually enforced, since it was through regulating who could legitimately bear whose children that birth could function as a reliable marker of status at all. Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund's *Synthetic History of India* and Upinder Singh's *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India* provide the broader chronological and archaeological scaffolding within which these more specialised arguments can be situated.

This paper's contribution is to bring these four schools into a single explanatory framework rather than treating them as simple competing alternatives: it argues that the functionalist reading captures something real about the earliest, least elaborated stratum of the Rigveda, that the materialist account correctly identifies the underlying economic and political drivers of change, that the Dumont-Smith account correctly identifies the specific ideological idiom through which that change was expressed and legitimised, and that the counter-hegemonic and postcolonial readings correctly insist that this whole account be read as a history of Brahmanical self-justification and later scholarly reconstruction, not as a neutral chronicle, and that it was actively contested by rival Indian religious traditions even as it was being consolidated.

5. The Rigvedic Period: Karma as the Organising Principle

5.1 The Purusha Sukta and the Embryonic Varna Order

The single most cited textual basis for the varna order is the Purusha Sukta, Rigveda 10.90, in which the cosmic being Purusha is dismembered by the gods and the four varnas are said to originate from different parts of his body: the

Brahmana from the mouth, the Rajanya or Kshatriya from the arms, the Vaishya from the thighs, and the Shudra from the feet. Two features of this hymn are important for the present argument. First, its position in the tenth and latest mandala of the Rigveda means that it represents the varna scheme at the very end of the Rigvedic period, closer in time to the Later Vedic corpus than to the bulk of the collection, so that its appearance should not be taken as evidence that a developed fourfold hierarchy existed throughout the Rigvedic age; several scholars, including Ambedkar and, on linguistic grounds, some later Indologists, have gone further and treated the hymn as a still later interpolation into the received text, though this stronger claim remains contested. Second, and more importantly for the karma-versus-birth question, the hymn itself is silent on how individuals are actually allocated to each category; it establishes an organic, functional relationship between the categories and the social body as a whole, but does not yet articulate birth as the mechanism of allocation in the explicit, legally elaborated way that later Dharmasastra literature would.

5.2 Kinship, Tribe, and Jana as Primary Units of Rigvedic Society

Outside the Purusha Sukta, the bulk of the Rigveda reflects a society organised, as Sharma argues, primarily along lines of kinship, clan (jana), and tribe rather than along an elaborated occupational hierarchy. The vocabulary of varna in the earlier books of the Rigveda is used more often to distinguish the Aryan-speaking population from the Dasa or Dasyu populations they encountered than to stratify the Aryan population internally, a usage that has generated a long and separate historiographical debate, extending from colonial-era racial theories of an Aryan invasion to later, more cautious accounts of gradual cultural and linguistic assimilation, over whether early varna distinctions were primarily about status within Aryan society or about the boundary between Aryan and non-Aryan populations. Where internal social differentiation is visible within the Rigveda, it appears to correlate more closely with function,

chieftainship, priestly service, pastoral wealth in cattle, than with a rigid, hereditarily transmitted status.

5.3 Evidence of Fluidity and Achievement

There are well-known instances, admittedly from strata close to or after the Rigvedic period proper, that preserve a memory of this fluidity. The Chandogya Upanishad's account of Satyakama Jabala, a boy of unknown paternity accepted as a Brahmana pupil on the strength of his truthful conduct, is frequently read by historians as evidence that lineage was not, even by the early Upanishadic period, an absolute bar to ritual status, though it is equally read by sceptical historians as an exceptional, didactic story precisely because it departs from the increasingly normal rule of hereditary transmission, and its very inclusion in the text may indicate anxiety about a norm that was by then already hardening rather than straightforward evidence of continued openness. It is important not to overstate this fluidity. The evidence for extensive social mobility in the Rigvedic period is thin and largely inferential, resting more on the absence of explicit prohibitions than on positive evidence of frequent movement between varnas. What can be said with more confidence is that the vocabulary and apparatus of hereditary restriction, rules on marriage, commensality, and occupational inheritance enforced by religious and, later, legal sanction, are essentially absent from the earlier Rigveda and become progressively more visible only toward its end and into the Later Vedic corpus.

5.4 Gender in the Early Vedic Corpus

Women's status in the Early Vedic period, while still subordinate within a patrilineal, patrilocal kinship structure, appears in several respects less circumscribed than in the Later Vedic and subsequent periods; the Rigveda preserves the names of women composers of hymns, and later Vedic ritual literature itself records, sometimes disapprovingly, women's participation in sacrificial recitation and philosophical debate, a participation that Chakravarti and other historians of gender argue narrows progressively as Later Vedic ritual and legal texts tie female

status ever more closely to the reproductive transmission of an increasingly fixed paternal varna identity.

6. Archaeological and Material Correlates of the Transition

6.1 The Painted Grey Ware Culture and Iron Technology

The Later Vedic period is associated archaeologically with the Painted Grey Ware cultural horizon, distributed across the upper Ganga-Yamuna doab and adjoining regions, and with the spread of iron metallurgy from around the early first millennium BCE. F. R. Allchin and Bridget Allchin's archaeological synthesis situates this material horizon as broadly contemporaneous with the Later Vedic textual corpus and with the eastward movement of Vedic culture from the Punjab into the Gangetic plain. Iron tools, particularly the iron axe and ploughshare, are conventionally associated by economic historians with the clearance of the heavier, more densely forested soils of the middle Ganga valley, a process that would have been considerably more difficult using the bronze and stone tool kit of the earlier Rigvedic period.

6.2 Settlement, Surplus, and Early State Formation

George Erdosy's work on the archaeology of early historic settlement in the Ganga valley documents a discernible trend, over the Later Vedic and immediately succeeding period, toward larger, more differentiated settlements, increasing evidence of craft specialisation, and the eventual emergence of fortified proto-urban centres, developments that provide independent, non-textual corroboration of the textual evidence for growing social and political differentiation discussed in Section 7. Taken together with the textual evidence, this archaeological record supports the materialist claim that the Later Vedic shift toward a more rigid, birth-based social order coincided with, and was plausibly enabled by, a genuine transformation in the material basis of Vedic society, from mobile pastoralism toward settled, surplus-generating agriculture capable of supporting specialised,

non-cultivating elites on a more permanent and heritable basis.

6.3 The Limits of Archaeological Correlation

A caution is necessary here. Archaeology can document changes in settlement pattern, technology, and material culture, but it cannot directly demonstrate a shift in the ideological criteria of social ascription; the correlation between the Painted Grey Ware and iron-technology horizon and the textual evidence for increasing varna rigidity is temporal and plausible rather than directly causal in any way that the archaeological record alone could establish. The paper therefore treats the archaeological material as corroborative context for, rather than independent proof of, the textual argument developed in the sections that follow.

7. The Later Vedic Period: The Turn towards Janma

7.1 Material and Political Change: Agriculture, Surplus, and the State

The Later Vedic period, conventionally dated from around 1000 to 600 BCE, is associated, as Section 6 has shown, with the eastward movement of Vedic culture into the Gangetic plain, the spread of iron tools, and the Painted Grey Ware cultural horizon. This shift from a predominantly pastoral to a settled agrarian economy is central to the materialist explanation of increasing social rigidity. Settled agriculture generated a storable surplus and required more stable, hierarchically organised labour arrangements than pastoral transhumance had done. Politically, this period saw the consolidation of larger territorial polities, the janapadas, and the strengthening of kingship, ritually reinforced through elaborate sacrifices such as the rajasuya and, in a later phase, the ashvamedha, which required the participation of a specialised priesthood whose ritual competence was increasingly treated as a hereditary possession rather than an individually acquired skill.

7.2 Ritual Codification and Textual Evidence of Closure

It is in this period that the Shudra emerges, in Sharma's phrase, as an unambiguously degraded and hereditary labouring category, and that textual evidence of restrictions on marriage and commensality between varnas becomes explicit for the first time. The Taittiriya Samhita, among the earliest of the Yajurveda texts, contains passages that explicitly rank the Shudra below the other three varnas in ritual eligibility, denying the Shudra the right to participate in the principal Vedic sacrifices, a restriction with no clear parallel in the earlier Rigveda. The Brahmana texts elaborate an increasingly detailed sacrificial apparatus in which correct performance depends on inherited ritual knowledge transmitted within Brahmana lineages, converting what had been, in principle, a matter of learned competence into something approaching an inherited technical monopoly. The later Dharmasutra literature, building directly on this Later Vedic foundation and edited and translated authoritatively by Patrick Olivelle, would go on to state explicitly that varna is determined by birth and to prescribe punitive consequences for violations of varna-appropriate marriage and occupation, a degree of legal specificity almost entirely absent from the earlier corpus. Read through the lens of Weberian social closure, this codification is best understood as the construction of an exclusionary rule, heredity, by a status group, the Brahmana priesthood together with the Kshatriya warrior-aristocracy with which it formed a durable alliance, whose privileges depended on preventing open competition for ritual and political office.

7.3 The Emergence of Untouchability beyond the Fourfold Frame

A distinct and, in some respects, even more consequential development of the Later Vedic period, documented in detail by Vivekanand Jha, is the emergence of categories of persons placed altogether outside the fourfold varna frame and subject to a more extreme form of ritual exclusion than that applied even to the Shudra. Jha traces the earliest textual appearances of the Chandala to the Later Vedic corpus, notably in connection with the symbolic Purushamedha, or human sacrifice ritual, dedicated to the deity

Vayu, in which representative figures from marginal or peripheral communities, including the Chandala and the Nishada, are listed among the human victims offered, a listing Jha reads as evidence that these groups were, at this stage, understood as distinct, probably non-Aryan or only partially assimilated populations living at the margins of Vedic settlement, rather than as a fully theorised, ritually polluting category in the later sense. Jha's research further shows that the position of the Chandala deteriorates markedly between this Later Vedic evidence and the early Upanishadic and subsequent Dharmasutra material, where explicit rules on residential segregation, commensal avoidance, and occupational restriction begin to appear, indicating that the process of ascriptive closure documented for the Shudra in Section 7.2 was accompanied by, and arguably sharpened by, a parallel and even more severe process of exclusion directed at populations positioned outside the varna system altogether.

7.4 Gender and the Mechanics of Ascriptive Enforcement

As Chakravarti's work emphasises, a hereditary system of status can only function if paternity, and therefore the legitimate transmission of status, can be reliably controlled, which in practice means controlling women's marriage and sexuality. The Later Vedic and immediately post-Vedic periods show a marked tightening of norms governing marriage within and across varna boundaries, together with an increasing textual preoccupation with the legitimacy of offspring and, in the Dharmasutra literature, an elaborate taxonomy of mixed or pratiloma unions held responsible for the theoretical origin of degraded intermediate categories such as the Chandala. This gendered dimension is easily overlooked in accounts that focus only on the Brahmana-Kshatriya-Vaishya-Shudra hierarchy as an abstract scheme, but it is arguably the concrete social mechanism, endogamy enforced through the regulation of women, that made a shift from karma to janma practically enforceable at all, rather than merely asserted in texts.

8. Continuity amid Change: Theorising the Transition

8.1 Structural Continuity: The Persistence of the Fourfold Frame

The most striking continuity across the two periods is conceptual rather than social: the fourfold frame first articulated in the Purusha Sukta, Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, is never abandoned or replaced across the Later Vedic period, and indeed becomes only more deeply entrenched in the Dharmasastra tradition that follows it. What changes is not the categories themselves but the principle of recruitment into them, and the proliferation, alongside this fourfold frame, of a further, more severe category of exclusion, discussed in Section 7.3, that lies formally outside it altogether. This is an important corrective to any account that treats the Rigvedic and Later Vedic periods as representing two entirely different social systems; rather, they represent two phases in the life of a single, continuously developing classificatory scheme, one that was also, simultaneously, generating new and harsher forms of exclusion at its margins.

8.2 Ideological Shift: From Guna-Karma to Janma

Within that continuity, the paper identifies a clear directional shift in the normative language used to justify social position, from an idiom centred on guna, the qualities or aptitudes of the individual, and karma, individual action and occupational conduct, toward an idiom centred on janma, birth into a lineage already possessing a fixed ritual status. This shift is not sudden but cumulative, becoming visible first in the increasing textual attention to lineage and purity in the middle and later Brahmana literature and in texts such as the Taittiriya Samhita, and reaching a comparatively settled, legally explicit form only in the Dharmasutra and subsequent Dharmasastra corpus, which lies formally beyond the Later Vedic period proper but represents its logical continuation.

8.3 An Integrated Explanation

Combining the theoretical strands introduced in Section 2, the paper offers the following integrated account. The material conditions of the Later Vedic period, settled agriculture, generated surplus, and territorial state formation, corroborated archaeologically in Section 6, created the possibility and the incentive for a priestly and warrior elite to convert its functional, service-based status into a permanent, inherited privilege. Weberian social closure theory explains the specific strategic logic of this conversion: heredity is a uniquely effective closure device because, unlike wealth or skill, it cannot be acquired by outsiders through effort. Dumont and Smith's account of hierarchy as an ideology of purity and cosmological classification explains the specific cultural idiom in which this closure was expressed and rendered legitimate rather than merely coercive. And the postcolonial caveat of Section 2.4, together with Ambedkar's counter-reading discussed further in Section 9, reminds us that this entire process was recorded, and to some extent shaped in the telling, by the very priesthood whose interests it served, and that it did not proceed without internal resistance from rival religious and social movements. On this integrated reading, the transition from karma to janma was neither a purely ideational development internal to religious thought, nor a purely material development mechanically determined by economic change, but the outcome of a historically specific, actively pursued, and actively contested alignment between material interest, strategic closure, and ideological legitimation.

9. Counter-Narratives and Contestation

9.1 Ambedkar's Counter-Reading of Shudra Origins

B. R. Ambedkar's *Who Were the Shudras?*, first published in 1946, remains the single most sustained challenge to the standard narrative of a gradually hardening, largely uncontested varna order sketched in Sections 5 through 8. Ambedkar argued, on the basis of internal textual evidence from the Rigveda, the Mahabharata, and Puranic literature, that the Shudras were

originally a Kshatriya, that is, a warrior and ruling lineage, and that their reduction to a degraded fourth varna resulted from a specific, historically locatable conflict with the Brahmana priesthood, in the course of which Brahmanas withheld the upanayana, the sacred-thread ceremony marking full ritual and social membership, from a particular Kshatriya lineage as an act of punitive exclusion that was only later generalised and retroactively naturalised through texts such as the Purusha Sukta. On this reading, the Purusha Sukta is not an early, disinterested description of an organic social order but a comparatively late piece of Brahmanical political theology, composed or substantially reworked to sanctify, after the fact, a hierarchy that had actually arisen through contingent political struggle. Ambedkar's specific chronological and textual claims have been questioned by later historians, including Vivekanand Jha, on the grounds of insufficiently secure dating and selective use of Puranic material composed many centuries after the events it purports to describe. Nonetheless, Ambedkar's central methodological insight, that the Brahmanical textual corpus cannot be read as a neutral witness to its own origins, since it was produced by, and largely serves the interests of, the very group placed at the top of the hierarchy it describes, remains an important corrective that this paper has attempted to incorporate throughout, rather than treating Ambedkar's work as a discrete, separable objection to be addressed only in a single section.

9.2 The Colonial Construction Critique

A second, methodologically distinct line of contestation, associated with Nicholas Dirks and Thomas Trautmann, does not dispute the textual evidence for increasing ascriptive closure in the Later Vedic and Dharmasastric periods so much as it disputes the assumption, common in older Indological and even in some nationalist historiography, that this ancient evidence already describes a single, uniform, all-India caste system comparable in scale and rigidity to the institution described by nineteenth-century colonial ethnographers and census officials. Dirks argues that colonial administrative practice, particularly the decennial census from 1871 onward,

converted a regionally variable, often locally negotiated set of jati identities and Brahmanical textual ideals into a single, reified, pan-Indian system, partly by treating Brahmanical Dharmasastra texts as though they were straightforwardly descriptive law codes applicable uniformly across the subcontinent. Applied to the present study, this critique suggests that while the Later Vedic evidence for growing ascriptive closure within the Brahmanical textual tradition is well documented and should not be minimised, the historian should resist the temptation to read this evidence as proof that a fully realised, socially universal caste system, in the modern sense, already existed by the end of the Later Vedic period; what the evidence more securely supports is the consolidation, within an influential priestly and courtly milieu, of an ideology and a textual programme of ascriptive closure whose full social realisation across the wider population remains considerably harder to establish and was itself an uneven, protracted, and regionally variable process extending over many subsequent centuries.

9.3 Buddhist and Jaina Contestation

A third form of contestation is internal to the religious landscape of early India itself, and is chronologically proximate to, and arguably a direct response to, the very developments traced in Section 7. The rise of Buddhism and Jainism in the sixth century BCE, at the very close of the Later Vedic period and its immediate aftermath, is widely read by historians, including Thapar, as a movement that explicitly rejected the Brahmanical claim that ritual status was determined by birth, proposing instead that spiritual worth, and by extension a person's true standing, was determined by conduct, that is, by something considerably closer to the older Rigvedic idiom of karma than to the Later Vedic and Dharmasastric idiom of janma, though transposed here into a soteriological rather than a purely social register. The early Buddhist textual tradition's polemical engagement with Brahmanical varna claims, and its acceptance of members of all varnas, including Shudras, into the monastic community on the basis of conduct

rather than birth, provides independent, near-contemporary evidence that the birth-based model consolidating within Brahmanical circles during the Later Vedic period was neither universally accepted nor uncontested even within its own historical moment, a point that further supports Weberian social closure theory's expectation that exclusionary strategies typically provoke usurpatory counter-strategies from those they exclude.

10. Discussion

This expanded analysis has several implications for the broader historiography of caste. First, it cautions against treating the varna-to-jati transition as a single event locatable at one textual moment, such as the composition of the Purusha Sukta; the evidence instead supports a gradual, centuries-long, and unevenly documented process spanning the end of the Rigvedic period and the whole of the Later Vedic period, continuing into the Dharmasastra tradition beyond it, and never fully uncontested even within that tradition. Second, it suggests that debates that pit a purely functionalist reading of varna against a purely materialist, purely ideological, or purely postcolonial-critical one are, to an extent, arguing past each other, since each captures a genuine dimension of a multi-causal process operating simultaneously at the level of material interest, social strategy, ideological legitimation, and later historiographical reconstruction. Third, the analysis underscores how easily the perspectives of those most affected by increasing ascriptive closure, the Shudra population, the Chandala and other groups positioned outside the varna frame altogether, and women in particular, are lost from a historical record produced almost entirely by and for the Brahmanical elite whose interests that closure served; any account built primarily on this textual corpus should therefore be read as a history of elite self-justification as much as a history of social practice, a point brought into particularly sharp relief by Ambedkar's counter-reading and by the archaeological and comparative evidence discussed in Sections 6 and 9.

The paper's limitations, already noted in Section 3.4, bear repeating here. Textual evidence of this kind is better suited to reconstructing normative claims than social practice, dating remains approximate, the archaeological correlation offered in Section 6 is corroborative rather than strictly causal, and the framework offered here, while integrative, cannot be definitively tested against quantitative evidence of actual social mobility, which does not survive for this period. Future research combining this textual-historical approach with further archaeological evidence on settlement patterns, burial practices, and material culture, and with more systematic comparison to the early Buddhist and Jaina textual corpus, would strengthen both the materialist and the contestation strands of the argument developed here.

11. Conclusion

The transition from the Rigvedic to the Later Vedic period did not replace one social order with another; it transformed the mechanism by which a single, continuously recognisable fourfold order allocated status to individuals, while simultaneously generating harsher new categories of exclusion at its margins. Where the earliest textual layer of Vedic society, read cautiously, admits at least the possibility of a comparatively open, achievement-oriented conception of social position organised around karma and guna, the Later Vedic period saw this possibility progressively foreclosed by the consolidation of a birth-based, ritually codified hierarchy underwritten by the material interests of an emergent priestly and warrior elite in a settled agrarian, state-forming society, corroborated by archaeological evidence of agrarian expansion and iron technology, and documented with particular clarity in the deteriorating status of the Shudra and of groups such as the Chandala positioned outside the varna frame entirely. This process, however, was neither smooth, uncontested, nor, as Dirks and Trautmann remind us, already equivalent to the fully realised caste order of later centuries; it was actively resisted from within the Vedic tradition's own margins, and it was subject, many centuries later, to a powerful internal historical critique

from Ambedkar that continues to shape how the evidence discussed in this paper should be read. Understanding this transition therefore requires holding together the material, strategic, ideological, and historiographical dimensions of social closure rather than privileging any one of

them in isolation, and it requires reading the surviving Vedic corpus with a constant awareness of whose interests that corpus was, in the end, written to serve, and of whose voices it does not, and by its nature cannot, record.

References

- Allchin, F. R., & Allchin, B. (1982). *The rise of civilization in India and Pakistan*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ambedkar, B. R. (1946). *Who were the Shudras? How they came to be the fourth varna in the Indo-Aryan society*. Thacker & Company.
- Basham, A. L. (1954). *The wonder that was India: A survey of the culture of the Indian sub-continent before the coming of the Muslims*. Sidgwick & Jackson.
- Chakravarti, U. (2003). *Gendering caste: Through a feminist lens*. Stree.
- Dirks, N. B. (2001). *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton University Press.
- Dumont, L. (1980). *Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications* (M. Sainsbury, L. Dumont, & B. Gulati, Trans., Rev. ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Erdosy, G. (1995). City states of North India and Pakistan at the time of the Buddha. In F. R. Allchin (Ed.), *The archaeology of early historic South Asia: The emergence of cities and states* (pp. 99–122). Cambridge University Press.
- Ghurye, G. S. (1932). *Caste and race in India*. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner.
- Jaiswal, S. (1998). *Caste: Origin, function and dimensions of change*. Manohar Publishers.
- Jamison, S. W., & Brereton, J. P. (Trans.). (2014). *The Rigveda: The earliest religious poetry of India*. Oxford University Press.
- Jha, V. (2018). *Caṇḍāla: Untouchability and caste in early India*. Primus Books.
- Kosambi, D. D. (1956). *An introduction to the study of Indian history*. Popular Book Depot.
- Kulke, H., & Rothermund, D. (2004). *A history of India* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Olivelle, P. (Trans.). (1999). *Dharmasūtras: The law codes of ancient India*. Oxford University Press.
- Parkin, F. (1979). *Marxism and class theory: A bourgeois critique*. Columbia University Press.
- Sharma, R. S. (1983). *Material culture and social formations in ancient India*. Macmillan India.
- Sharma, R. S. (1990). *Śūdras in ancient India: A social history of the lower order down to circa A.D. 600* (3rd ed.). Motilal Banarsidass.
- Singh, U. (2008). *A history of ancient and early medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th century*. Pearson Education.
- Smith, B. K. (1994). *Classifying the universe: The ancient Indian varna system and the origins of caste*. Oxford University Press.
- Srinivas, M. N. (1966). *Social change in modern India*. University of California Press.
- Thapar, R. (1984). *From lineage to state: Social formations in the mid-first millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley*. Oxford University Press.
- Thapar, R. (2002). *Early India: From the origins to AD 1300*. University of California Press.
- Trautmann, T. R. (1997). *Aryans and British India*. University of California Press.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press. (Original work published 1922)
- Witzel, M. (1995). Early Sanskritization: Origin and development of the Kuru state. *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 1(4), 1–26.