

CASTE AND DEVOTION: A CASTELESS FRAMEWORK FOR (SOME) FORMS OF HINDU DEVOTIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

The caste system has caused widespread oppression within Hinduism. In this paper, I analyze the *Bhagavad Gītā* (c. 500 BCE–200 CE) and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (c. 9th century CE), two highly influential Hindu sacred texts, to understand how they conceptualize the relationship between caste and devotion (*bhakti*). I argue that there is a societal framework that does not maintain the caste system but which is consistent with these texts' soteriological vision and can be implemented in lieu of such a system. This framework demonstrates that for certain forms of Hindu religiosity, caste is not essential to uphold from a scriptural perspective. Given this framework, the caste system can be challenged and interrogated to a significant extent and alternative societal frameworks can be proposed. I also consider and respond to objections to the framework I put forth.

KEYWORDS: *caste*, *bhakti*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*

1. Introduction

The caste system is one of the most well-known features of Hinduism today and can be characterized as “one human mode of social differentiation, a mode of power, mode of action, mode of caring; sense of self in relations to others” (Mines 2009, 3). The importance of caste within Hindu societal contexts is reflected by the statements of scholars such as Arjun Appadurai, who argues that “any study of Indian and Hindu societies implies the existence of caste” (1986, 357).¹ Unfortunately, the contemporary caste system has been responsible for widespread forms of systemic oppression (see Teltumbe 2007; Kunnath 2009; and Mohan 2015 for documented violence against the lower castes). As recently as 2016, an Indian Ph.D. student named Rohith Vemula committed suicide due to the discrimination he had experienced because of his lower caste status (Vaid and Datta 2019, 216).

More recently, Yashica Dutt has recounted the various struggles she has had to experience due to her lower caste status (2019). Also in recent times, there have been many documented cases of Dalits (or Scheduled Castes—individuals that

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¹ Nevertheless, there are certain scholars who argue that caste was not a feature of South Asian life prior to the arrival of the British (Dirks 2001). This thesis is controversial, however, and it is challenged by long-term studies of caste that show caste to be prevalent in South Asia prior to the arrival of the British (Guha 2013; O'Hanlon et al. 2015).

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were once labeled “untouchables” and considered outside the caste system) being refused entry into temples due to their low caste status (Bhatia 2019; The News Minute 2019). Discrimination against lower caste individuals is allegedly found even within America. For instance, the Hindu organization known as Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) was recently accused of employing Dalits from India in inhumane conditions during the construction of a temple in New Jersey (Mogul 2021). This point is particularly surprising given that BAPS officially promotes the equality of individuals regardless of caste and given that BAPS’s teachings are based on those of Swaminarayan (c. 18th century CE), who rejected caste consciousness (Mangalnidhidas 2016). Caste discrimination can also occur in subtle ways. As Renny Thomas (2020, 2021) has highlighted, at prominent scientific research institutes in India, exclusionary in-group cultural practices that are closely tied to one’s caste—particularly those that pertain to dietary and musical preferences—are widespread and create an atmosphere that alienates lower caste individuals and Dalits. Furthermore, caste-based discrimination causes difficulties even for those of a higher caste status. For instance, Isabel Wilkerson recounts the story of an upper caste individual who experienced heavy guilt and shame due to the strict rules of the caste system and the illusion of superiority that it creates for higher caste individuals (Wilkerson 2020, 361–69).

There are two Indic terms that have often been translated as “caste”—*varṇa* and *jāti*. *Varṇa*, literally meaning “color,” “order,” or “syllable,” refers to a division of four social groups that is first mentioned in the hymn to the Cosmic Person (*puruṣa-sūkta*) in the *R̥g Veda* (10.90.12). This hymn maps the various *varṇas* onto a human body of cosmic proportions by explaining that the *brāhmaṇas* (priests and teachers) emerge from the mouth, the *rājanyas* (later the *kṣatriyas*: rulers and warriors) from the arms, the *vaiśyas* (merchants and farmers) from the thighs, and the *sūdras* (workers) from the feet (Sharma 1978, 294). By the time of the *Manu Saṃhitā* (c. 200 BCE–200 CE), the distinction of the *varṇas* had developed into a ritually enacted and established hierarchy, which, in descending order, invested the *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas*, and *sūdras*, with diminishing degrees of socio-institutional power.

However, as scholars such as Joyce Flueckiger mention, the fourfold system of *varṇas* is an idealistic textual model that is not commonly adopted or implemented in actual social practice (2015, 13). Within the domain of socio-ritual praxis, the term *jāti* (literally meaning “birth” or “species”) is more commonly employed. As Julius Lipner (2012) explains, “*jāti* and its equivalents in the vernaculars (for example *jāt* in Hindi and Bengali) is the social stratum, the birth group, to which someone belongs.” Lipner adds that “one’s *jāti* is generally fixed by birth, and has traditionally been associated with an interrelated, socio-religious hierarchy in which the various strata must live their lives within allocated boundaries” (136). Hence, members of the same *jāti* would eat together, marry endogamously, adopt similar occupations, etc. (136). In a similar light, as McKim Marriott explains, *jāti* can also be viewed as a “community” or the styles of life adopted by its members (2005, 357).

In this paper, I construct a theological ethical framework that addresses caste-based oppressive practices, such as those that led to the abovementioned forms of suffering. Before doing so, I will briefly indicate who my intended audience is and describe my methodology. The primary audience for this paper is Hindus whose beliefs are heavily shaped by the *Bhagavad Gītā* (henceforth *BhG*, c. 500 BCE–200 CE) and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (henceforth *BhP*, c. 9th century CE), which are two highly influential Hindu sacred texts that emphasize the cultivation of devotion (*bhakti*) to the deity Kṛṣṇa. This audience will include Vaiṣṇavas, or those who are devoted to the deity Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. However, this audience also includes Hindus who may not identify as Vaiṣṇavas per se but who nevertheless look to these two texts as a source of divine guidance.²

My focus is on the *BhG* and the *BhP*, because they are highly influential texts that are held as epistemically authoritative by many Hindus³ and have also recently received significant scholarly attention (Edelmann 2012; Gupta and Valpey 2013, 2016; Ram-Prasad 2013; Gupta 2020; and Theodor 2020). So, any insights from these texts can be impactful for numerous individuals. Moreover, my attention is focused primarily on Hindus, and not, say, secular humanists, although non-Hindu ethicists may also find this paper relevant to them. Before explaining why, it will be helpful to highlight the various theories of the sociological operations of the caste system.

One highly prominent view is that of Louis Dumont (1970), who argued that the social stratification underpinning the caste system has a religious basis—the caste system is a division of society in which castes are hierarchically ordered according to their degree of ritual purity and ritual pollution. From this point of view, society is structured so that the lower castes perform types of menial work that are considered polluting so that the higher castes, such as the *brāhmaṇas*, can retain their ritual purity to perform their social duties such as performing sacrifices. Another point of view is developed based on Marxist perspectives, according to which the hierarchical ordering of the castes is generated and sustained by economic and political factors. Hira Singh (2014), defending a Marxist view, argues that the inequalities of the caste system arise due to unequal access to material conditions, especially land. A third point of view is associated with the Subaltern Studies group, whose proponents have argued that caste is a “form of consciousness that enables the subaltern to resist domination” (Chatterjee 1989, 174).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to extensively defend or critique any of these viewpoints, there are a few crucial points to note. First, social, economic, and political factors play a major role in sustaining the caste system, and so it is

² I have personally met several of such Hindus.

³ For instance, the Hindu religious traditions that are based on the life and the teachings of Madhva (c. 13th century CE), Vallabha (1473–1531 CE), and Caitanya (1486–1534 CE) each uphold the epistemic authority of the *BhG* and the *BhP*.

important to pay attention to them. However, it is worth pointing out that even scholars who defend a Marxist viewpoint, such as Singh, nevertheless recognize that religion plays an important role in legitimating the caste system (Singh 2014, 156).

So, the religious aspects of caste cannot be ignored either, even if it is not always held to be the root cause of caste. For this reason, the religious aspects of caste are emphasized in this paper. Specifically, this paper combats caste oppression through constructing a theological ethical framework that can remove the religious justifications for caste. Through constructing such a framework, I aim to shift the attitudes toward caste that religiously minded Hindus may hold. While such a challenge in and of itself may not eliminate the socioeconomic asymmetries associated with the caste system, it can nevertheless contribute toward a more careful interrogation of caste and can lead individuals to be more reflective on caste-based practices and their perceived importance in their everyday lives. So, offering a theological critique of caste is, at the least, a step forward—and an important step at that, given the widespread religiosity in India.

I will also employ an emic or “insider” approach to analyzing the *BhG* and the *BhP*. So, when interpreting these texts, questions of, say, the political motivations of authorial intent will be set aside, and these texts will instead be viewed as epistemically authoritative, although not exempt from scholarly scrutiny.⁴ While such questions are important, they are not this paper’s primary focus, which is to produce scripture-rooted insights that can be relevant to individuals whose lives are impacted and shaped by these texts due to their acceptance of the texts’ epistemic authority. In pursuing this aim, it is important to start with the same scripture-rooted presuppositions as these individuals; otherwise, my insights could be of limited value to them. Nevertheless, etc or “outsider” scholars of the *BhG*, the *BhP*, or both may find that the subsequent discussion illuminates certain aspects of these texts that have not yet received significant scholarly attention.

Moreover, scholars of religious ethics who are not specialists in Hinduism may find the discussion relevant for two reasons. First, at least at a popular level, caste has been closely tied to race (Wilkerson 2020). Wilkerson makes the provocative claim that a type of caste system exists even in America. She argues that caste (as an infrastructure by which individuals are assigned a place in a graded hierarchy that devalues individuals at the bottom of this hierarchy) underpins racism in America and is at the heart of racial discrimination in the United States. For this reason, a greater awareness of the connection between caste and race can be illuminating and equip scholars of religious ethics to speak to a broader audience outside the academy. Second, this paper highlights the problems with hierarchies

⁴ Whether an “insider” or an “outsider” approach should be taken in the study of religion is a question of much debate. For a discussion of the merits and demerits of either approach, see Flood 2006 and Gupta 2016.

in general, and the strategies proposed to eliminate hierarchies in a Hindu context can also be applied to eliminate or interrogate hierarchies in other religious contexts.

I will also focus my attention on both *varṇa* and *jāti*—but primarily on *varṇa*, even though *jāti* is more pervasive than *varṇa* in on-the-ground contexts. I do so because the arguments against the continuation of *jāti* practices are relatively straightforward—the *BhG* and the *BhP* do not promote *jāti*, so, scripturally speaking, these texts provide no imperative to uphold *jāti* practices. In contrast, *varṇa* receives much more scriptural support for *varṇa* and so deserves the most attention.

Yet, one might wonder: if *jāti* practices are more common than *varṇa* practices, why focus on *varṇa* at all? *Varṇa* is emphasized here, because it is the textual ideal of the caste system and—insofar as the concept of *varṇa* (with its hierarchical connotations) is given a theological importance—there is a basis for the type of hierarchy that supports and forms the basis of *jāti* practices. Granted, *jāti* practices do not neatly align with *varṇa* practices. However, *jāti* practices involve hierarchy, and this hierarchy finds justification through the justification of the *varṇa* system. So, if the justification for the *varṇa* system is removed, then there is a reason to eschew any type of hierarchy altogether, including the type that is involved in *jāti* practices.

My central claims are that (1) *jāti* practices find no theological support from the *BhG* or the *BhP* and that (2) there is a societal framework that can be constructed from a reading of these texts that is consistent with these texts' soteriological visions and can be implemented in lieu of a *varṇa* system. The first is significant because it would remove theological justifications for *jāti*. The second is significant for the following reasons: First, it demonstrates that for certain forms of Hindu religiosity that are influenced by the *BhG* and the *BhP*, *varṇa* is not essential to uphold, at least from a scriptural perspective. Second, given the preceding reason, the caste system can be challenged and interrogated to a significant extent, and alternative societal frameworks can be proposed. Moreover, given the relatively close tie between *jāti* and *varṇa* and the fact that the hierarchical attitudes at play in the *varṇa* system can legitimize *jāti* practices, an interrogation of the *varṇa* system can have a significant impact on Hindus' attitudes toward *jāti* practices.

2. Caste and Bhakti within the *BhG* and the *BhP*

I now turn my attention to caste and *bhakti* in the *BhG* and the *BhP*. As indicated earlier, these texts do not mention *jāti*—they mention only *varṇa*. So from a scriptural perspective, there is no imperative to uphold *jāti per se*. Any attempt to support *jāti* practices through a reading of the *BhG* or the *BhP* would have to do so in an indirect way—one would have to argue that (i) the *BhG* and the *BhP* legitimize *varṇa* and that (ii) the legitimization of *varṇa* also licenses the legitimization of *jāti*. From a scriptural perspective, there is nothing that explicitly justifies the

second in the *BhG* and in the *BhP* however. This point alone should deter individuals who accept the teachings of the *BhG* and the *BhP* from supporting *jāti*. Nevertheless, as indicated earlier, the *varṇa* system does describe a system of social stratification, and this system could, in turn, justify the hierarchical attitudes that underpin *jāti* attitudes. So, it is worth paying close attention to *varṇa* in the *BhG* and in the *BhP*.

To assess the significance of *varṇa* within the *BhG* and the *BhP*, it is helpful to understand its role in these texts. Within the *BhG* and *BhP*, there are continual references to *varṇa* and the performance of one's prescribed *varṇa*-based duties (see *BhG* 2.31, 2.33, 3.8–9, 3.19, 3.35, 4.13, 4.15, 5.10, 8.7, 16.24, 18.6–9, and 18.41–18.48; *BhP* 7.11, 7.15, 11.17, and 11.18; Schweig 2007; and Tagare and Shastri 1950). Some particularly notable verses are *BhG* 4.13 and 18.45. *BhG* 4.13⁵ states, “The fourfold system of *varṇa*, divided by qualities and work, was made by [Kṛṣṇa]. Though [Kṛṣṇa] made this system, know [Kṛṣṇa] to be the changeless non-doer.” This illustrates that Kṛṣṇa, whom both the *BhG* and the *BhP* identify as God, generated the *varṇa* system, although Kṛṣṇa is not under its worldly jurisdiction. This point also indicates that the *varṇa* system is given a divine significance, because God personally made it. So, it is easy to see why religion is the legitimating factor for caste—central Hindu texts advocate the *varṇa* system, and so there is a theological basis to sustain this system or (as one might argue) systems that are closely aligned with the *varṇa* system, such as the caste system.

The word translated as “work” in my translation of *BhG* 4.13 above is *karma*, which can be understood in at least two ways. It can either refer to work that is performed as part of one's occupation, or it can refer to *karmic* merits and demerits, on account of which a person takes their birth in a certain caste due to their past actions.⁶ According to this latter interpretation, one's *varṇa* could be decided by one's birth. I opt for the first interpretation, since it is consistent with *BhP* 7.1.35,⁷ which states that an individual's *varṇa* should be designated according to their characteristics (*lakṣaṇam*) and not their *karmic* merits or demerits or birth. Another notable verse is *BhG* 18.45,⁸ which states, “Performing their own work, one attains perfection. Hear how one engaged in such activity achieves this perfection.” Here, the performance of one's duties is considered important for the attainment of perfection.

The *BhP* also emphasizes the importance of performing one's *varṇa*-shaped duties. For instance, four chapters (7.11, 7.15, 11.17, and 11.18) describe the

⁵ *cātur-varṇyaṃ mayā sṛṣṭaṃ guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ / tasya kartāram api mām viddhy akartāram avyayam* // (Schweig 2007, 292).

⁶ Later in this paper, I elaborate on the nature of *karmic* mechanisms.

⁷ *yasya yal lakṣaṇam proktaṃ puṃso varṇābhivyañjakam / yad anyatrāpi dṛṣyeta tat tenaiva vinirdīṣet* // (Śāstrī 1965, Book 7, 435).

⁸ *sve sve karmaṇy abhirataḥ saṃsiddhiṃ labhate naraḥ / sva-karma-nirataḥ siddhiṃ yathā vindati tac chṛṇu* // (Schweig 2007, 319).

performance of such duties in detail. There are various other verses, too numerous to list, that pertain to *varṇa*. An example of a verse found within these chapters is 7.11.2⁹: “O great one, I desire to hear of those eternal duties, which are based on the regulations of *varṇa* and *āśrama* [one’s stage of life], through which a person obtains the highest goal.”

Yet, despite the importance placed on the performance of one’s *varṇa*-based duties, both the *BhG* and the *BhP* subordinate the importance of these duties to the cultivation of *bhakti*. For instance, in a famous verse, *BhG* 18.66,¹⁰ Kṛṣṇa tells his devotee, Arjuna, “Abandon all duties and come to me as your refuge. I will free you from all the consequences of your misdeeds. Do not worry.” Despite telling Arjuna about the importance of performing one’s *varṇa*-based duties in previous chapters, Kṛṣṇa here implies that taking refuge in him is more important than the performance of such duties merely for duty’s sake. Notably, certain Vaiṣṇava traditions have interpreted this verse to indicate that God will free individuals from the consequences of not performing their social and religious duties as well. For instance, Sanātana Gosvāmin (c. 16th century CE), a prominent theologian in the Caitanya Vaiṣṇava tradition,¹¹ writes that the duties (*dharma*) spoken of in *BhG* 18.66 include various rituals and prescriptive rules that are associated with the larger Brahmanical and Vedic tradition, including occasional duties, social duties, and so on (*naimittikādi-karma-lakṣaṇa*) (Edelmann 2022, 6).¹²

This point that *bhakti* is given greater importance than the performance of *varṇa* duties is reinforced when Kṛṣṇa states, at *BhG* 9.32¹³: “O Arjuna, those who have resorted to me can reach the highest destination, even if they are from wicked families, women, *vaiśyas*, or *sūdras*.” Here, Kṛṣṇa indicates that through devotion to him, certain individuals—who are regarded as being on the lower rungs of the hierarchy of the *varṇas*—can attain him on account of their devotion. Granted, this verse has been interpreted by the prominent Hindu exegete Śaṅkara (c. 9th century CE) to mean that such individuals can attain an eminent but not the highest destination (and must therefore wait until they are reborn in a higher *varṇa*) (*BhGBh* 9.32).¹⁴ However, a literal reading of this text suggests that such individuals can indeed attain the *highest* goal (*parām gatim*). Given the *BhG*’s continual emphasis on the importance of *bhakti* and the subordination (from a theocentric

⁹ *śrī-yudhiṣṭhira uvāca bhagavan śrotum icchāmi nṛṇāṃ dharmāṃ sanātanam / varṇāśramācāra-yutaṃ yat pumān vindate param //* (Śāstrī 1965, Book 7, 409).

¹⁰ *sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṃ śaraṇaṃ vraja / ahaṃ tvāṃ sarva-pāpebhyo mokṣayisyāmi mā śucaḥ //* (Schweig 2007, 322).

¹¹ A religious tradition that is based on the life and the teachings of Caitanya (c. 1486–1534 CE).

¹² Sanātana’s comments are found in his commentary on his *Haribhaktivilāsa* 10.63. For the full commentary, see Haridāsaśāstrī 1986, 469, cited in Edelmann 2022, 7.

¹³ *māṃ hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye ‘pi syuḥ pāpa-yonayaḥ / striyo vaiśyās tathā sūdrās te ‘pi yānti parām gatim //* (Schweig 2007, 303).

¹⁴ *ke te ityāha-striyo vaiśyās tathā sūdrās te ‘pi yānti gacchanti parām gatim prakṛtām gatim //* (Tilak and Sadhale 1935, 124).

perspective) of *varṇa* to *bhakti*,¹⁵ the literal interpretation seems more reasonable to accept here.

BhG 6.46¹⁶–47¹⁷ also declare the path of the devotee to be the highest among various spiritual paths. In these verses, Kṛṣṇa states, “The *yogī* is greater than the ascetic, the one who pursues knowledge, and the one performs action. Therefore, O Arjuna, become a *yogī*. Of all *yogīs*, one who is full of faith, shares their love with me, and has gone to me with their inner self, is considered by me to be the one most intimately connected with me.” Here, the *yogī* (one who is connected to God) who becomes linked to God through devotion is viewed as superior to the followers of other spiritual paths, including notably the one who performs works. Here, in commenting on *BhG* 6.46, the commentator Śrīdhara Svāmin (c. 15th century) writes that the works mentioned in this verse include sacrificial performance (*iṣṭā*) and meritorious works (*pūrta*).¹⁸ So, importantly this verse can be understood to indicate that the *yogī* is superior to the worker who performs even meritorious deeds in accordance with religious principles. Based on this point, it is plausible that this verse can also be interpreted to mean that the *yogī* is superior to one who merely performs their *varṇa* duties.

The *BhP* contains verses that make similar points. *BhP* 1.2.8¹⁹ states that “a person’s well-performed duties are merely useless labor if they do not produce attraction for the narrations of God.” Similarly, at *BhP* 11.20.9,²⁰ Kṛṣṇa states that “one may perform work as long as it does not disgust them or as long as they have not awakened faith in hearing, chanting, remembering narrations about me.” There are additional verses that could be supplied to illustrate the *BhP*’s emphasis on devotion, but the verses cited thus far should suffice to defend the thesis that the *BhP* gives greater importance to awakening one’s love for Kṛṣṇa than the performance of one’s *varṇa*-based duties.

3. Addressing the Tension between *Varṇa* and *Bhakti*

Despite the *BhG*’s and *BhP*’s clear emphasis on the cultivation of unalloyed *bhakti* to God, there is nevertheless a tension between *varṇa* and *bhakti*, for both are given importance. Now the question is: how can this tension be addressed? If one insists that importance be placed only on the performance and cultivation of *bhakti*, then they are guilty of ignoring the various scriptural verses within the

¹⁵ Such subordination will be discussed shortly.

¹⁶ *tapasvibhyo dhiko yogi jñānibhyo pi mato dhikah / karmibhyaś cādhiko yogi tasmād yogi bhavārjuna* // (Schweig 2007, 298).

¹⁷ *yoginām api sarveṣāṃ mad-gatenāntar-ātmanā / śraddhāvān bhajate yo māṃ sa me yukta-tamo mataḥ* // (Schweig 2007, 298).

¹⁸ *karmibhyaḥ iṣṭā-pūrtādi karmakāribhyaḥ pi* / (Lallurama et al. 1912, 541).

¹⁹ *dharmāḥ svanuṣṭhitaḥ puṃsām viśvaksena-kathāsu yaḥ / notpādayed yadi ratim śrama eva hi kevalam* // (Śāstrī 1965, Book 1, 122).

²⁰ *tāvāt karmāṇi kurvīta na nirvidyeta yāvātā / mat-kathā-śravaṇādau vā śraddhā yāvan na jāyate* // (Śāstrī 1965, Book 11, 866).

BhG and the *BhP* that emphasize the importance of *varṇa*-based duties or even ascribe to such duties a divine significance (insofar as such duties are ordained by Kṛṣṇa). Likewise, if one insists that importance be given only to the performance of *varṇa*-based duties, then they are guilty of ignoring the various scriptural verses that emphasize the importance of *bhakti*.

The following responses can address this exegetical tension. First, it is important to understand the soteriological framework of the *BhG* and *BhP*. At *BhG* 8.16,²¹ Kṛṣṇa states, “The planets up to the planet of Brahmā [the creator god] are places of constant return. However, after coming to me, O Arjuna, one is not born again.” Hence, physical existence (*saṃsāra*) is a cycle of birth and death that is repeated until one reaches Kṛṣṇa. However, when one attains to Kṛṣṇa, one can escape this cycle of repeated rebirth. One crucial dimension of the process of attaining Kṛṣṇa is stated in *BhG* 8.5²²–6²³: “At the time of death, one who remembers [Kṛṣṇa] after leaving their body attains [Kṛṣṇa’s] nature. There is no doubt about this. One attains whatever state of being they remember at the time of death, for being is always caused by being.” Hence, to attain Kṛṣṇa, one must consciously think of Kṛṣṇa at the time of death. However, one’s state of mind at death is itself caused by one’s state of being throughout their life. Thus, the meditative cultivation of a certain mindset is required to attain Kṛṣṇa—one requires freedom from worldly attachments so that they can contemplate Kṛṣṇa throughout their life with sufficient focus so that they can remember him also at the time of death.

Furthermore, according to the *BhG* and *BhP*, the physical world is structured by *karmic* mechanisms, on account of which actions lead to *karmic* consequences that are proportional to the moral quality of these actions. *BhP* 6.1.45²⁴ states, “indeed, a person who undertakes righteousness or unrighteousness experiences the fruit of that [action] in the same degree and in the same manner as it was performed, in the life to come.” *BhG* 13.20 and 14.14–18 also imply the existence of *karmic* mechanisms (Schweig 2007, 181, 188–89).

Having contextualized the social dynamics of the *varṇa* system and the soteriological framework of the *BhG* and the *BhP*, I now turn my attention to outlining six reasons why the *varṇa* system is given importance in these texts, even though they subordinate the performance of *varṇa* duties to *bhakti*. First, the *varṇa* system provides individuals with the opportunity to work. Moreover, through acquiring an opportunity to work, individuals also acquire an opportunity to perform such work without attachment to its results. Through dispassionate work

²¹ *ā-brahma-bhuvanāl lokāḥ punar āvartino ‘rjuna / mām upetya tu kaunteya punar janma na vidyate //* (Schweig 2007, 300).

²² *anta-kāle ca mām eva smaran muktva kalevaram / yaḥ prayāti sa mad-bhāvaṃ yāti nāsty atra saṃśayaḥ //* (Schweig 2007, 300).

²³ *yaṃ yaṃ vāpi smaran bhāvaṃ tyajaty ante kalevaram / taṃ tam evaiti kaunteya sadā tad-bhāva-bhāvitaḥ //* (Schweig 2007, 300).

²⁴ *yena yāvān yathādharmo dharmo veva saṃhitaḥ / sa eva tat-phalaṃ bhūṅkte tathā tāvad amutra vai //* (Śāstrī 1965, Book 6, 35).

(*niṣkāma-karma*), individuals can gradually cultivate a dispassionate attitude toward the world by acting for action's sake and not for the sake of enjoying the rewards of their work. By relinquishing the desire to enjoy the rewards of their labor, individuals can come to gradually abandon the reward-seeking mentality that serves as a binding force to the physical world. In turn, such dispassion, within the soteriological framework of the *BhG* and the *BhP*, is conducive for the cultivating of *bhakti*, since it enables one to focus their mind more intently on God and without interference from worldly attachments.

Thus, at *BhG* 2.47²⁵ Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna, "You are eligible to work but you are never entitled to the fruits of work. Do not be the cause of the fruits of work and do not be attached to inaction." In *BhG* 2.48,²⁶ Kṛṣṇa adds, "O Arjuna, abandon attachment and become equal in success and failure. Such equanimity is called yoga. Perform your duties in such yoga." Here, Kṛṣṇa stresses the performance of duties so that Arjuna can work in a state of non-attachment to the fruits of his activities. Finally, at *BhG* 3.19,²⁷ Kṛṣṇa states, "a person attains the highest goal by working without attachment."

In a similar light, a second reason why *varṇa* is given importance is that the performance of one's *varṇa*-based duties is a means by which one can be engaged in activities that are meditatively dedicated to Kṛṣṇa. *BhG* 8.7²⁸ exhorts, "Therefore, always, remember me and fight. With mind and discernment offered to me, you will surely attain me." *BhG* 18.46²⁹ also states that an individual can attain perfection by worshipping (*abhyarcya*) God through one's work.

Third, there are practical reasons why the performance of one's duty is emphasized. *BhG* 3.8³⁰ states, "one cannot maintain the body without work." *BhG* 3.33³¹ states, "Even one possessing knowledge works according to their own nature. Living beings follow their nature. What will repression do?" A similar point is made in *BhG* 18.60³²: "being conditioned by your own work, which is born of your nature, you will, without control, do that action which, due to illusion, you wish

²⁵ *karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana / mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi //* (Schweig 2007, 288).

²⁶ *yoga-sthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṅgaṃ tyaktvā dhanāñ-jaya / siddhy-asiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvaṃ yoga ucyate //* (Schweig 2007, 288).

²⁷ *asakto hy ācāraṇ karma param āpnoti pūruṣaḥ //* (Schweig 2007, 290).

²⁸ *tasmāt sarveṣu kāleṣu mām anusmara yudhya ca / mayy arpita-mano-buddhir mām evaiśyasy asaṃśayaḥ //* (Schweig 2007, 300).

²⁹ *yataḥ pravṛttir bhūtānāṃ yena sarvam idaṃ tatam / sva-karmaṇā tam abhyarcya siddhiṃ vindati mānavaḥ //* (Schweig 2007, 321).

³⁰ *śarīra-yātrāpi ca te na prasidhyed akarmanah /* (Schweig 2007, 291).

³¹ *sadrśaṃ ceṣṭate svasyāḥ prakṛter jñānavān api / prakṛtiṃ yānti bhūtāni nigrahaḥ kiṃ kariṣyati //* (Schweig 2007, 291).

³² *svabhāva-jena kaunteya nibaddhaḥ svena karmaṇā / kartuṃ necchasi yan mohāt kariṣyasi avaśo 'pi tat //* (Schweig 2007, 321).

not to do.” Thus, work is unavoidable—it is necessary to maintain the body, and one is helpless to act against their own nature. Fourth, according to *BhG* 9.27³³–28³⁴, if an individual dedicates their actions as an offering (*arpaṇa*) to Kṛṣṇa, they can be freed from *karmic* bondage and the auspicious and inauspicious results of their activities.

Fifth, according to the *BhP*, the performance of one’s duties enables individuals to develop a suitable disposition for the cultivation of *bhakti* for the following reason. *BhP* 7.11.34³⁵ states that “the mind, the repository of desires, may become dispassionate through excessive enjoyment, just as a fire with drops of butter.” If one continues to pour small drops of butter on a fire, the fire will not be extinguished. However, a fire will go out when one pours a large quantity of butter on it. This analogy implies that desires will not become extinguished through small amounts of gradual enjoyment—rather, an overindulgence of one’s desires is what can cause the flame of desire to blow out. While this motif differs from the motif that one should work in a state of non-attachment, it does highlight the fact that individuals who do not work in a state of non-attachment can nevertheless develop a disposition that is conducive for the cultivation of *bhakti*—through the performance of one’s duties, one can amass the resources needed to overindulge in sensual pleasures. Through such overindulgence, individuals can, presumably, become frustrated with their attempts at finding satisfaction through sensual enjoyment and develop a dispassionate outlook toward the physical world. Sixth, another reason for work is that it “holds the world together” (*loka-saṅgraha*). In other words, by working, one can set an example for the public at large and maintain social cohesion.³⁶

Thus, there are six reasons why a *varṇa* system is given importance. However, here it is important to distinguish the spirit of the law from the letter of the law. In this context, the spirit of the law is the function of the *varṇa* system within the soteriological framework of the *BhG* and the *BhP*. This purpose is indicated by the above six reasons. In contrast, the letter of the law in this context is a rigid adherence to the traditional, hierarchical *varṇa* system. Distinguishing between the spirit of the law and the letter of the law is important, because it enables one to preserve the essence and soteriological benefits of the *varṇa* system while eliminating the undesirable aspects can come from a rigid adherence to the *varṇa* system.

4. Proposing an Alternative Societal Framework

In this section, I propose my own theological ethical framework that eschews *varṇa* and is based on the *BhG* and *BhP*. However, for Hindus who adhere to the

³³ *yat karoṣi yad aśnāsi yaj juhoṣi dadāsi yat / yat tapasyasi kaunteya tat kuruṣva mad-arpaṇam //* (Schweige 2007, 302).

³⁴ *śubhāśubha-phalair evaṃ mokṣyase karma-bandhanaiḥ /sannyāsa-yoga-yuktātmā vimukto mām upaiśyasi //* (Schweige 2007, 303).

³⁵ *evaṃ kāmāśayaṃ cittaṃ kāmānām atisevayā / virajyeta yathā rājann agnivat kāma-bindubhiḥ //* (Śāstrī 1965, Book 7, 435).

³⁶ For a further elaboration on this point, see Edelmann 2022, 9–10.

teachings of the *BhG* and *BhP*, the complete abandonment of *varṇa* may challenge their beliefs, as these texts place importance on *varṇa* and the performance of one's *varṇa*-based duties. So, a crucial tension arises between text and context. On the one hand, Hindus may seek to maintain theological fidelity to these texts. On the other hand, there are humanitarian concerns over the widespread oppression caused by the caste system, such as the forms of oppression that were indicated earlier, that should be considered.

My framework addresses this tension by recognizing why the caste system is socially detrimental, the concept of *varṇa* may contribute toward caste-based oppression, and the *varṇa* system is even advocated at all. As Wilkerson has argued, a system of castes relies on "stigmatizing those deemed inferior to justify the dehumanization necessary to keep the lowest-ranked people at the bottom and to rationalize the protocols of enforcement" (2020, 17). Or in other words, a caste system produces a hierarchy in which those with elevated social status are invested with the power by which they can exploit or subjugate those with a lower social standing. Hence, the fundamental problem with caste is its hierarchical nature and, more specifically, its *dehumanizing* hierarchical nature. And because of this nature, higher castes perceive themselves to be greater than lower castes or Dalits to such an extent that these lower castes and Dalits are viewed as subhuman and thus not deserving of proper respect.

This dehumanizing hierarchical nature of the caste system can be exacerbated by the concept of *varṇa*, which establishes a hierarchical social model in which the *brāhmaṇas* occupy the highest social role. Now, there are important questions to be addressed in this context, such as (a) is the *varṇa* system intended to be a *dehumanizing* hierarchy or a social model in which the different *varṇas* cooperate as interdependent parts of a unified social body? Also, (b) does the dehumanizing hierarchical nature of the caste system, which in on-the-ground contexts manifests through *jāti* exclusionary practices, have its origin in religion? And (c) does caste-based oppression exist primarily due to its perceived soteriological importance within Hinduism, or does it exist primarily due to socioeconomic factors and is merely reinforced through Hinduism?

With regards to (a), it is worth pointing out that there have been Hindu thinkers such as Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883 CE) and Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948 CE), who conceptualized the four *varṇas* as interdependent components of the social body, and such a model, in theory, is free of any notions of caste-based superiority or inferiority (Barua 2019, 26). So, it is not necessarily the case that the system of *varṇa* implies a *dehumanizing* hierarchy. However, as it has worked out, the idealized version of *varṇa* that Saraswati and Gandhi advocated for did not exist on the ground.

An answer to (b) is not straightforward. Arguably, the exclusionary practices of *jāti* and its dehumanizing hierarchy do not have a theological basis per se, and *jāti*, as it exists on the ground, is a phenomenon that is at odds with what the system of *varṇa* was intended to be. Yet, as the case now happens to be, the hierarchical notions present in *jāti* exclusionary practices can be given a justification through religion and more specifically by the stratification present within

the *varṇa* system. So, there is a sense in which Hinduism (and more specifically its support of *varṇa*) serves to legitimize *jāti*, even if somewhat indirectly, by supporting this stratification.

Turning to (c), as I have previously argued, socioeconomic factors are closely tied to caste, a point that has also been brought out by Rupa Viswanath (2014) and Juned Shaikh (2021). Now, regardless of how one answers (c), the important takeaway from this question is that *varṇa*, in some sense, serves to legitimize the hierarchy that underpins contemporary caste oppression. Thus, removing the religious justification for castes can help address caste discrimination, even if one holds to an interpretation of caste that does not maintain that religion is the *root* cause of caste.

So given the above points, one explanation for why *varṇa* supports caste-based oppression is because it promotes a type of social stratification that can be interpreted to support the type of dehumanizing hierarchy that underpins *jāti* practices. Now, one might argue, as Saraswati and Gandhi have, that the solution to addressing caste-based oppression is to adopt the idealized version of *varṇa* that they promote. However, in our current times, this response is problematic. As B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956 CE) pointed out, even in an idealized *varṇa* framework, the labeling of individuals as *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas*, and *śūdras* would present significant problems, because these terms would continue to carry the historically inherited memories of certain hierarchical and socially oppressive designations, systems, and attitudes. Hence, an adoption of an idealized *varṇa* system may not resolve the issues of caste-based oppression (Barua 2019, 26).

Bearing all these points in mind, I now put forth my theological ethical framework. In my framework, the concept of *jāti* would be eliminated altogether, as this term is not given importance within the *BhG* or the *BhP*. There would also be no other hierarchical designations, nor would the terms *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, or *śūdra* be applied. Moreover, a greater emphasis would be placed on the cultivation of *bhakti* rather than the performance of occupational duties within a fourfold *varṇa* system. Yet, the abovementioned benefits of working could still be acknowledged and given importance. For instance, within this framework, all individuals could be encouraged to perform occupational duties according to their nature, tendencies, and interests, and not merely because of their birth or their designation as a particular *varṇa* or *jāti*. This motif is consistent with the *BhG*'s message at 3.33 and 18.60, that individuals will be pressured to act according to their nature regardless.

Furthermore, this framework would value the performance of one's duties without attachment. While one may not perform duties under the description of a *brāhmaṇa* or a *kṣatriya*, they would perform a wide range of other duties associated with their specific profession. Within these professions, the same principles of action described in the *BhG*—namely working with non-attachment and working for God—would still be applied, even in the absence of a rigidly defined fourfold *varṇa* system or *jāti* practices. In the context of offering one's actions to Kṛṣṇa, the important principle, given the soteriological context of the *BhG* and the *BhP*, is the very intention of offering such actions. Whether these actions are performed

as one's occupational duties within a traditional fourfold *varṇa* system or not does not seem to be the relevant factor that decides whether such actions can advance one's soteriological progress, especially in the light of scriptural verses such as *BhG* 18.66. Hence, even in the absence of such a fourfold *varṇa* system, such offerings of action can be made.

Now, the question could be raised: how can dispassionate action (*niṣkāma-karma*) and devotion (*bhakti*), which seem to oppose each other, be reconciled? Here it is worth highlighting that through dispassionate action, one does not become dispassionate toward Kṛṣṇa but to the physical world. Moreover, when an individual becomes freed from their attachment to the physical world, such attachment no longer interferes with or obstructs this individual's ability to devote themselves to God, and so they can devote themselves to God with more intensity. So in short, as one's attachments to the physical world decrease, they can increase their attachment to God.

Additionally, the principle mentioned at *BhP* 7.11.34—namely that the performance of one's occupational duties can provide one with the resources needed to indulge their desires, and consequently extinguish them—can also be upheld within my proposed framework, for such indulgence does not require rigid adherence to a fourfold *varṇa* template. Furthermore, even if they do not adhere to such a template, individuals can nevertheless perform their work as an offering to God and in doing so become freed from *karmic* bondage. Finally, in my framework, through working individuals would set a positive example for others and thus fulfill the aim of maintaining social cohesion.

In this way, the notion that the performance of one's occupational duties is a preliminary stage in one's soteriological journey that makes individuals' dispositions suitable for *bhakti* can still be upheld, even without any *varṇa* system.³⁷ The notion that actions can be dedicated to God is also maintained. Once the reasons for the *BhG*'s and *BhP*'s emphasis on the performance of *varṇa*-based duties are recognized, then the tensions mentioned above can be addressed more easily by maintaining the spirit of the law (the spirit of the *varṇa* system), while forgoing the letter of the law (a rigid adherence to the traditional, hierarchical *varṇa* system).

Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that this framework would apply equally to both women and men. In this framework, the benefits of work are not exclusive to men, and so women can also reap these benefits by holding an occupation. Moreover, as I have argued, narratives within the *BhP* indicate that *strī-dharma* (the *dharma* of women, according to which women hold traditional roles as wives and mothers and perform domestic duties), is not essential to uphold (Gupta 2021). For instance, within the *BhP*, there is a narrative that discusses the wives of ritually minded *brāhmaṇas*. These wives violated their

³⁷ Granted, here one may argue that I am conflating soteriology with ethics. The relationship between soteriology and ethics is complex and cannot be elaborated on here. However, for an illuminating account of this relationship, see Edelmann 2022.

strī-dharma by going to see Kṛṣṇa with food to feed them, despite being told by their husbands not to go. Yet, instead of being censured for their failure to uphold *strī-dharma*, these women were glorified for their devotion to Kṛṣṇa and their willingness to serve Kṛṣṇa despite opposition from their husbands. Moreover, the wives' husbands later praised the devotion of their wives and acknowledged that their wives were spiritually superior to them. One interpretation of this narrative is thus that *strī-dharma* is not always essential to uphold and can even be neglected when it is not conducive to one's service to Kṛṣṇa (Gupta 2021; see also *BhP* 10.23).

A concrete example of how my framework can be applied to work that lies outside the tradition fourfold *varṇa* system is as follows. Suppose that one is a computer programmer who writes computer software. This profession does not fit neatly into one of the four *varṇas* as they are described within the *BhG* or the *BhP*. Nevertheless, the principles of my framework can apply to this profession. For instance, this computer programmer can work without attachment to the fruits of their labor—they can work as a matter of duty and use their salary to support their family, while cultivating a non-attachment to the rewards of their work (in this case, their salary). The computer programmer can also devote this work to God—they can perform their work as an offering to God by working to use the fruits of the labor (their salary) for God's service (supporting their family or donating money to a temple, for example). Through such work, the computer programmer also maintains their body. Moreover, by performing their work as an offering to God, this programmer can become freed from their *karmic* bondage.

Furthermore, my framework applies to various real-life situations. The first situation is the case of the exclusion of Dalits from temples. In this situation, the case can be made that Dalits are discriminated against (despite such discrimination being illegal) because of a dehumanizing hierarchy, on account of which the higher castes come to view Dalits as subhuman. However, in my framework, in which caste distinctions are nonexistent, such a dehumanizing hierarchy would not exist, and this discrimination would thus be more difficult to sustain.

A second situation that my framework applies to is the case of human trafficking. Here, too, the case can be made that such trafficking is reinforced through a dehumanizing hierarchy, and so my framework would remove this reinforcement. It is worth re-emphasizing that such human trafficking allegedly occurs even in the context of BAPS, which stands against caste discrimination. This point indicates that there is evidence that attempts to reform *varṇa* into an egalitarian system do not (in practice) eliminate caste discrimination. (Here Ambedkar's abovementioned critiques of caste offer one explanation as to why such discrimination persists even when the idealized *varṇa* system is promoted). Yet, if the hierarchy implicit within the *varṇa* system is removed altogether, then such discrimination would be difficult to sustain.

A third situation is the caste discrimination that occurs at scientific research institutes in India. Here, as Thomas (2020, 2021) has shown, there is a distinct

culture associated with *brāhmaṇas* (involving a preference for vegetarianism and for classical Indian music), and this culture alienates non-*brāhmaṇas* and presents an additional barrier to employment for non-*brāhmaṇas*. Scientists who are from *brāhmaṇa* castes also perceive that there are few Dalits in the workplace, because these individuals are not meritorious scientific researchers. Thomas interprets this perception as indicating that these *brāhmaṇa* scientists are unaware of the specific barriers that prevent Dalits from being able to occupy positions at these research institutes (2021, 165–67). Admittedly, this type of caste discrimination is not always obvious—Dalits are not explicitly denied access to jobs at these institutes, but certain cultural practices specific to *brāhmaṇas* are so widespread that non-*brāhmaṇas* face additional cultural barriers to employment. In this case, as long as there are individuals who possess their own cultural practices, such exclusionary in-group cultural practices might still exist and act as a cultural barrier to individuals who are outside of this cultural group. My framework might have limited utility here. However, combating caste oppression is a long-term project, and removing the hierarchical distinctions between castes, as my framework advocates, is one step toward promoting an egalitarian society. Moreover, in a casteless society other barriers apart from exclusionary cultural practices would be removed, allowing greater numbers of Dalits to occupy jobs at scientific research institutes, where they could diversify the cultural practices prevalent at these institutes.

Thus, I argue that from a scriptural perspective adherence to a *varṇa* system is not essential for the religious traditions that adhere to the *BhG* and *BhP*. As the above examples illustrate, the essential principles underlying *varṇa*, which were discussed in Section 3, can still be upheld even if individuals work outside the context of a fourfold *varṇa* template. Consequently, once this point is acknowledged, the caste system can be challenged and critically interrogated.

5. Addressing Objections

I now will consider some objections to my view. One may argue against my reasoning by arguing for an interpretation of the caste system in which the lower castes perform ritually polluting work so that the *brāhmaṇas* can retain their purity. According to such an interpretation, caste is necessary to preserve the ritual purity of the *brāhmaṇas*. Based on my reading of the *BhP*, I argue that this interpretation cannot be maintained, at least if one accepts the epistemic authority of the *BhP*. *BhP* 3.33.6³⁸–7³⁹ state:

O Lord! Due to hearing and glorifying the name of Kṛṣṇa, offering respects to him, or remembering him but once, even a dog-eater immediately becomes eligible for

³⁸ *yan-nāmadheya-śravaṇānukīrtanād yat-prahvaṇād yat-smaraṇād api kvacit / śvādo 'pi sadyaḥ savanāya kalpate kutaḥ punas te bhagavan nu darśanāt //* (Śāstrī 1965, 1220).

³⁹ *aho bata śva-paco 'to gaṛiṃyān yaj-jihvāgre vartate nāma tubhyam / tepus tapas te juhuvuḥ sasnur āryā brahmānūcur nāma grṇanti ye //* (Śāstrī 1965, 1220).

sacrificial performance. What to say of someone who has seen you directly? Oh how glorious is it that a dog-eater becomes venerable by keeping your name on the tip of his tongue? Those noble ones who call your name did penance, performed sacrifices, bathed in the sacred rivers, and studied the Vedas.

Several points from these verses are important to highlight. First, one's performance of *bhakti*, through the means described above, even if performed but once (*api kvacit*), is sufficient for one to *immediately* (*sadyah*) acquire the purity needed to perform sacrifices (*savana*), and this point is true even if one is a dog-eater (*svāda*). Notably, dog-eaters (socio-ritual outcastes) are not even recognized within the fourfold *varṇa* system. Hence, the notion that the *varṇa* system requires a hierarchical ordering according to ritual purity is challenged—by performing even the tiniest amount of *bhakti*, a lower *varṇa* or an outcaste can develop the same level of purity as a *brāhmaṇa*. Thus, since the purity required to perform sacrifices can be attained through *bhakti* and by any *varṇa*, there seems to be no reason why only *brāhmaṇas* would occupy a privileged position or why *brāhmaṇas* would require the lower castes to do polluting work to retain their own purity.

Another important point is that those who call on Kṛṣṇa's name are said to have already undertaken a variety of spiritual practices, such as the performance of sacrifices (*juhuvuḥ*). Here, the *BhP* indicates that the stage in one's soteriological journey where they chant Kṛṣṇa's name is a higher stage than the stage where they perform such sacrifices, for those sacrifices help them amass the piety needed to chant Kṛṣṇa's name. In this case, the importance of maintaining ritual purity is removed. What is important in the soteriological framework of the *BhG* and *BhP* is to perform *bhakti*, and the performance of sacrifice (which, according to the interpretation of the caste system in question, requires *brāhmaṇas* that embody ritual purity) is primarily helpful insofar as it may lead one to acquire the piety needed to cultivate *bhakti*, but it is not an end in itself. For these reasons, the interpretation of the caste system in question is untenable if one adheres to the teachings of the *BhP*.

An additional objection to my view, which a Hindu who accepts the teachings of the *BhG* and *BhP* could put forth, is that the *varṇa* system is ordained by Kṛṣṇa, and thus it cannot be challenged. Here, a distinction between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law is helpful. Going by the letter of the law, a *varṇa* system is important to uphold, because this system has been made by Kṛṣṇa and so is a law-like principle that one must adhere to. However, going by the spirit of the law, a *varṇa* system is important to uphold, because it assists the performance of *bhakti*. Hence, Kṛṣṇa generates the *varṇa* system as an effective framework within a certain context for assisting the performance of *bhakti*.

Now, it may have been the case at some point in time that an idealized *varṇa* framework—such as the one that Gandhi and Saraswati claimed existed within Hindu thought and that one could argue is the *varṇa* framework that the *BhG* and *BhP* put forth—could have indeed been an effective framework. However, as indicated previously, it is now problematic to adopt even an idealized *varṇa* framework—the very labels of “*brāhmaṇa*,” “*kṣatriya*,” “*vaiśya*,” and “*śūdra*” are associated with such caste-based oppression, and hence they have different

connotations than they would have had in an ideal world where such oppression never occurred.

So, if in the present context, the *varṇa* system is no longer effective due to contingent historical factors, then the primary reason for upholding it is no longer applicable, at least according to the spirit of the law. The question is: should adherents of the *BhG* and *BhP* follow the letter of the law and uphold the *varṇa* system no matter what? Or should they follow the spirit of the law, understanding the principles that make the *varṇa* soteriologically beneficial within a certain socio-cultural context, and apply these principles to a more suitable societal framework within present-day sociocultural contexts? Given my reasoning thus far, I argue that the spirit of the law is more important to follow, since the cultivation of *bhakti* is given greater soteriological weight than the performance of *varṇa*-based duties merely for duty's sake.

One final objection is that proposing an ethical framework aimed at social equality, such as the one outlined in this paper, does not always translate into concrete social change—the framework may not address the underlying sources of social unrest, or individuals may not be convinced by such a proposal. As indicated earlier, there have been attempts by Hindu reformers such as Gandhi to reform the caste system, but these attempts have not been able to prevent caste-based discrimination. My response to this objection is that there are various dimensions of caste, including socioeconomic, political, and theological ones. While the first two dimensions are important to address, the theological dimensions cannot be neglected either, and these theological dimensions are what I have aimed to address. Eliminating caste-based discrimination is a complex task; however, if various factors that contribute toward it (such as perceptions that hierarchy is essential to Hindu religiosity) can be eliminated one by one, progress can be made nonetheless.

Moreover, one reason why Hindu notions of equality have not led to social progress is because the voices that emphasize and promote the vision of social equality are underrepresented within the arena of Hindu discourse. Although there are scriptural verses that give greater weight to *bhakti* than *varṇa*, there are other Hindu scriptural and exegetical writings that do emphasize hierarchical attitudes. When emphasis is put on these latter types of writings, then one would expect hierarchical attitudes to persist within Hindu universes. However, if scriptural verses that de-emphasize such hierarchical attitudes are given greater attention, then it is reasonable to think that the prevalence of hierarchical attitudes would decrease. Thus, by highlighting scriptural verses and passages that de-emphasize hierarchical attitudes, progress, however slight, is nonetheless being made, because it amplifies visions of social equality within the arena of Hindu discourse.

6. Conclusion

The topic of caste is complex, and here I have primarily focused on an emic approach that evaluates the caste system through the lens of two influential Hindu

sacred texts. There are other dimensions that have been briefly noted as well, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to touch on all of them. Nevertheless, although the conclusions of this paper are centered on the scriptural foundations of caste, their economic and political dimensions are still significant, given the its social ramifications.

The caste system has led to widespread oppression. I have argued that while *varṇa* and caste are given importance within the *BhG* and *BhP*, they are not essential to uphold. I also put forth my own societal framework, which illustrates how the principles underlying *varṇa* can be applied without a traditional fourfold *varṇa* system and yet without sacrificing theological fidelity to the *BhG* and *BhP*. I also addressed various objections to this framework. If my reasoning is correct, and caste or *varṇa* is not essential to at least some forms of Hindu religiosity, then this fact could have major implications for Hindu societies and contribute toward a more careful interrogation of caste and its perceived importance.

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