

THE POWER OF SURNAMES: ROOTS OF DISCRIMINATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

Caste-based discrimination and social inequality arising from surnames have long existed in Indian society. The story of Ekalavya in the Mahabharata illustrates how a talented individual was marginalized due to his caste identity. In society, a surname is not just a means of identification but also a tool to sustain social hierarchy. While the Bhagavad Gita describes the caste system as based on qualities and actions, it later became birth-based, hindering social progress. The consolidation of power and political interests further strengthened this system. To eliminate such discrimination, it is essential to reduce surname-based identity and emphasize work-based recognition, fostering true social equality.

Do you remember the story of Ekalavya from the Mahabharata? He possessed an abundance of intellect, skill, work capacity, or excellence, devotion, humility, and respect for his guru. His brief story has overshadowed one of the most important characters of the Mahabharata, Guru Dronacharya. People still compare him to Arjuna, the hero of the Mahabharata, questioning his greatness and achievements as a warrior. Ekalavya had no shortage of ability, and in terms of family status (although skill has no relation to family lineage), he was a prince. Yet, he had to suffer discrimination. As a result, he was deprived of the rare skill of archery that he had acquired with great difficulty, sacrificing his right-hand thumb as guru dakshina. In fact, the guru dakshina was just an excuse, a clever tactic. The real intention was to prevent a boy from the Nishada tribe from becoming one of the greatest archers in the world—a possibility that could not be allowed. Therefore, he was sidelined.

In his career and education, Ekalavya is one of the prime examples of caste discrimination. Countless people in this country have been victims of such discrimination for ages. Every person is biologically just a sexual product. Out of greed for social privilege and power, some people have created caste distinctions or distinctions between high and low in society. The strategies for such distinctions have changed with time, but the divisions among people have not disappeared. Some people believe that this discrimination is natural. The truth is that competence should be determined by skill. Among three friends, one is a doctor, one is

a professor, and one is a farmer. Now, if the children of the doctor and professor claim to be doctors or professors simply because of their parent's professions, without the necessary qualifications, would you consider that reasonable? Meanwhile, the farmer's child, after passing the medical entrance exam or qualifying as a professor, would be questioned by many, asking how the farmer's child could become a doctor or professor. The belief is that a farmer's child must remain a farmer by birth; we don't accept them as doctors or professors. This is how caste or racial discrimination still persists in our society, sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly. The concept of 'Surname' is one glaring example of this.

In our country, a 'Surname' is not just a marker of identity. It is deeply connected with the centuries-old caste and racial discrimination—blood and pus that have persisted for millennia. In ancient times, surnames were not used. There is no mention of surnames in the Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Upanishads, Puranas, or Jatakas. There are instances where two parts of a name are mentioned, such as Satykama Jabali, Uddalaka Aruni. The mother's name was Jabali, so the son's name became Satykama Jabali. The father's name was Arun, and therefore the son's name was Uddalaka Aruni. This naming system still exists in South India¹. In those days, there was no need for indirect caste distinctions like surnames because there were strict, direct caste-based divisions. In modern times, the remnants of that caste discrimination have become the 'surnames' that are now attached to everyone's name.

Consider this scenario: you go for an interview. After the interviewers ask your name and other basic details, they will inquire about your education, degrees, etc. This is the norm in our country. Here, your surname can influence the interviewer! If the surname has an equal social standing, the interviewer may be pleased; otherwise, they may become frustrated, and this can inevitably affect the interview outcome. Do you recall the recent case of an IAS officer? A low-ranking employee, a peon, refused to serve a high-ranking IAS officer, simply because the peon held a caste considered higher, even though his job was to serve everyone in the office.

In any educational institution in our country, students' surnames instantly reveal their caste, lineage, and social status, i.e., the details of their perceived high or low standing. Some individuals, based on their surnames, boast about their superiority, while others use these same surnames to degrade others. In some rural areas, the social interaction with people of certain surnames is considered unacceptable, even to the extent that sharing a table or eating together is seen as taboo. Negative stereotypes have developed about certain surnames, and such stereotypes judge people not based on their abilities or behavior but solely on their surnames.

Not only does this foster bias, but it also creates barriers to opportunities in the workplace, education, and society at large.

As I mentioned earlier, in this country, a surname is a significant social marker. For a long time, it has created divisions based on identity, class, community, and profession. The purpose of a surname was not only to indicate an individual's profession or community but also to deliberately associate these surnames with specific professions. As a result, the descendants of those families had no way of changing their professions. This kind of antisocial system created a social structure where professional work was linked to inheritance, making it incredibly difficult for individuals to rise socially. For example, even if the child of a cobbler (muchhi) had all the qualifications, they could not become a teacher; they would have to remain a cobbler. In many cases, people were deliberately denied the right to education and kept from acquiring knowledge. In some places, they were even denied the right to attend classes with their peers. The discrimination faced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of our Constitution, is a glaring example of such inequities in his life.

This system, by forcibly fixing people to a profession and obstructing the natural flow of society, created a crippled social structure that maintained the distinctions between high and low. The belief in these distinctions in people's minds is the root of the internal weakness of this country's social fabric. At the core of this is the caste-based system. The root of discrimination in Indian society is the caste system, and the surnames are the fruits and flowers that grow from it. Therefore, to address the core issue, we must return to the caste system.

The origin of the caste system in our country can be traced back to the pre-Vedic era. It had historical, social, and economic causes. The primary concept behind this system was to maintain the functionality of society by dividing it into specific classes and assigning different tasks to each. In the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* (4:13), Lord Krishna states, *chaturvarnyam moya sristom guna karma vibhagasha*², meaning the four varnas (social divisions) were created based on qualities (guna) and actions (karma). The duties of these varnas, determined by their qualities and actions, are as follow

1. Brahmin – peace, self-discipline, meditation, purity, knowledge, and truth.
2. Kshatriya – courage, strength, valor, leadership, and fighting against injustice.
3. Vaishya – agriculture, cattle breeding, and trade.
4. Shudra – service.

Although this division was not originally based on birth, family, or hereditary succession, it was meant to reflect the qualities and actions of individuals. In the *Shanti Parva* of the
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Mahabharata (182:8), it is stated that a Shudra can become a Brahmin through his actions and qualities, and similarly, a Brahmin can become a Shudra. One who is born into a Shudra lineage but adheres to righteous conduct (sadachar) is not considered a Shudra. Likewise, an individual born into a Brahmin lineage who does not practice righteous conduct is not regarded as a Brahmin:

*Shudra chaitad bhavellakshyam dwije tachcha na vidyate,
Na vai shudro bhavecchudro Brahmano Brahmano na cha.*³

The word 'varna' comes from the root 'vri', meaning 'to choose' or 'to select.' Essentially, an individual is recognized as belonging to a particular varna based on their qualities, actions, or skills. There is no inherent connection to social superiority or inferiority. For example, the *Rigveda* mentions that a Brahmin, who writes hymns or recites them during sacrifices, may have a son who becomes a physician, and a daughter who makes flour from barley.⁴ The son becoming a doctor or the daughter making flour was not seen as problematic. Similarly, the *Chandogya Upanishad* mentions the story of the Brahmin Satyakama Jabali whose mother was a prostitute, and yet he became a Brahmin, demonstrating that one's birth did not define their caste.

In the *Bhavishya Purana* (Brahma Parva 41, 45), it is said that all people belong to the same varna because all human beings are children of the same God. Since all humans share the same creator, they cannot belong to different castes.⁵

The *Rigveda* also states that Brahmins were created from the mouth of Brahma, Kshatriyas from his arms, Vaishyas from his thighs, and Shudras from his feet.⁶ This verse is symbolic, suggesting that each class of society is a part of the whole, and that society itself is an integrated system. It points to a division based on qualities and actions, not by birth. The interpretation is that Brahma was in a reclining position when this happened, implying there is no question of high or low. Just as every part of a human body is necessary for survival, in the same way, every individual in society is essential for a healthy and functioning community. Without any one part, the system would be incomplete, just like a disabled or crippled body. Thus, a society, like a body, needs all its components to work together harmoniously.

The problem lies in the hereditary caste system, where a Brahmin's son is automatically considered a Brahmin, and a Kshatriya's son is considered a Kshatriya, based on birth. This system is tied to the concept of social hierarchy, which reinforces the idea of high and low castes. However, in the modern age, where information, technology, and science have broken

down the notion of birth-based distinctions, the idea of inherent superiority or inferiority by birth is increasingly obsolete.

In reality, every human being is biologically a product of sexual reproduction, and no one can be superior to another simply because of their birth. The idea of diminishing others to present oneself as superior does not reflect humanity but rather distorts it. This is why scriptures mention that everyone is born as a Shudra (common person) – “*Janmna Jayate Shudra.*” The term “Shudra” here simply means a common person. It further states that through initiation and rituals, anyone can become a *Dwija* (twice-born), a person who has undergone the *Upanayana* (sacred thread ceremony) – “*Samskaraat Bhavati Dwija.*” The term *Dwija* signifies a second birth, not necessarily a Brahmin.

After initiation, one may study the Vedas and become a *Bipra* – “*Veda Patat Bhavet Bipra.*” However, it’s important to note that being *Dwija* or *Bipra* does not equate to being a Brahmin. To become a true Brahmin is a difficult path. One becomes a Brahmin only when they attain the ultimate knowledge of Brahman (the absolute truth) – “*Brahma Jnaati Ithi Brahman.*” To truly become a Brahmin, one must possess six essential qualities:

1. Yajna – Performing worship for oneself.
2. Yajana – Performing worship for others, not just for oneself.
3. Adhyayana – Studying for one’s own self.
4. Adhyapana – Teaching others, not just for oneself.
5. Dana – Giving away everything for the service of others.
6. Pratigraha – Accepting alms only for survival, not for accumulation.

Additionally, the ultimate goal of a Brahmin is to work for the welfare and happiness of many – “*Bahujana Hitaya, Bahujana Sukhaaya.*”

Thus, the concept of Brahmin in our country is a high ideal, but it is not easily attainable. It remains a lofty notion, and apart from a few individuals, it is doubtful whether many have truly reached this ideal.

After independence, some political leaders, who dreamed of socialism, established their rule for several decades. However, there was not even a trace of the proletariat class in their habits, demeanor, or lifestyle. Instead, they seemed more like petty bourgeoisie. In this case, the primary goal was not the dream of socialism but rather the battle for power and the throne. Similarly, the concept of Brahmanism was used by a certain class to maintain their power and privileges. This is why there was such a commotion in society, causing disorder. The reason was simple: to retain power and control.

The concept of Brahmanism and the associated idea of caste helped a certain class secure their power and privileges. The division in society became more entrenched when the ruling class, which was predominantly of the so-called upper caste or Brahmin by birth, allied themselves with the power. These self-proclaimed Brahmins and Kshatriyas saw that becoming a "Dwija" (twice-born) could be easily achieved through the Upanayan (sacred thread ceremony), and memorizing the Vedas could make one a "Bipra" (learned Brahmin). However, the next step was the difficult path of self-sacrifice, where personal or familial gain had no role. Hence, the concepts of "Dwija," "Bipra," and "Brahmin" were confused and merged. As a result, Brahminism lost its connection to the pursuit of Brahmanic knowledge or ideals. Brahmins became reduced to mere family inheritance, while Kshatriyas established a hereditary monarchy.

The concept of hereditary monarchy emerged, where kings, born into royal families, assumed leadership without regard for merit. For example, even though King Shakuntala had multiple sons, he appointed Bhardwaj, a person of uncertain lineage, to the throne based on his abilities. This was in stark contrast to the later practice of hereditary kingship where a royal lineage was considered fixed and unquestioned. The political system reinforced this caste-based framework by creating rigid laws, prohibiting others from acquiring education or learning the Vedas.

An example of this rigid caste system can be seen in the story of Shambuka, a Shudra (lower caste) who, despite his birth, pursued learning and became wise. As punishment for this, Lord Rama beheaded him, which was a symbolic way of demonstrating that learning and knowledge were forbidden for the lower castes. However, this story was a distortion. The original Ramayana by Valmiki did not have this part, and the seventh Kanda (book) in the Ramayana was added later to propagate the idea that it was a sin for a Shudra to learn. The story was crafted to create a narrative that a lower-caste person should not be allowed to study, with Rama himself delivering the punishment.

Thus, the concept of high and low caste, entrenched in this narrative, formed the foundation for a rigid societal system where power and privilege were controlled by those born into certain castes. This structure has created deep-rooted inequalities that continue to affect society today.

During the rule of the Gupta Empire, the system of Varna and Ashrama was adopted as the basis for social structure. The social rights of the Brahmins were enhanced, and they occupied the top positions in society. The Shudras and so-called 'untouchable' communities

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were strictly kept at the lower levels. During the Rajput rule, the influence of caste division deepened further. Rajput rulers sought the help of Brahmins to establish themselves as a high caste. They encouraged land grants to Brahmins and promoted religious rituals of the upper classes. At the same time, the religious and social rights of lower-caste people were restricted. The Sen rulers of Bengal were patrons of Brahmanism. Ballal Sen introduced the 'Kouliniya' system, which further complicated the caste division and Varna system in society.

Under Muslim rule, caste division mainly persisted within Hindu society. Muslim rulers formed alliances with the established upper-caste Hindu zamindars, which strengthened the caste system further. The influence of Brahmanism continued during the Mughal era. By then, caste divisions in Hindu society had become even more complex due to increasing religious rigidity. As a result, the condition of lower-caste people worsened. During the Maratha Empire, caste divisions were strictly enforced. The Peshwa rulers, who were Brahmins themselves, spread their caste pride, and the Brahmanical influence extended throughout society. Strict controls were imposed on lower-caste people, and their rights were limited.

During British rule in India, especially in the 19th century, various initiatives were taken to collect caste-based information. Notably, the 1871-1872 census gathered data related to caste, religion, and social status. The British rulers viewed the social inequality and caste system in Indian society as a fixed and unchangeable structure, and for administrative convenience, they further formalized it. They created caste-based lists and implemented separate policies for different castes in government jobs and education, which deepened and complicated the social divisions in India.

At different times, many thinkers, social reformers, and religious leaders worked towards eliminating caste and racial discrimination in India. They aimed to establish the concept of equality in society through ideals and actions. Gautama Buddha opposed the caste system and gave all people equal rights to attain Nirvana. Mahavir tried to eradicate caste discrimination through non-violence and equality, emphasizing a simple way of life. Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu promoted equality in society through devotion and preached the elimination of caste, race, and religious divisions through Sankirtan and devotion to Krishna. Kabir opposed caste distinctions, religious rituals, and idol worship, as these created discrimination in society. He said that a person becomes great through their actions. Guru Nanak spread the message of equality and brotherhood. Through the Langar system, he arranged for everyone to eat together, which helped in the eradication of caste divisions.

In Indian society, the use of surnames is not just a means of personal identification, but it is deeply connected to society and culture. Historically, surnames have created a structure of class division based on caste, religion, profession, and region. This structure has resulted in social inequality, which has had long-lasting impacts not only on personal relationships but also in political and economic spheres.

However, in the changing modern society, there has been some change in the traditional use of surnames. With the spread of education, legal protections, and the adoption of egalitarian policies, surnames have become less influential in many areas compared to the past. In determining a person's identity, more importance is now given to their qualities, education, ethics, and contributions in the workplace, rather than their name or surname.

However, it should not be forgotten that while the use of surnames is a carrier of our heritage, it also serves as a vessel for superstitions and divisions. In order to establish complete equality in society, it is crucial to change our perspective on surnames. Education is a powerful tool that can help raise social awareness and change attitudes against division and discrimination. The younger generation in our country should be raised with a mindset that prioritizes equality, humanity, and individual qualities above all else.

In truth, it is reason, education, and human connections that can eliminate this division. The best approach would be to refrain from using surnames. If the government passes specific laws to ban the use of surnames, at least on the surface, the chapter of division in society could be closed. If we follow this path, Indian society can truly be built on the foundation of equality and egalitarian values.

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