

A justification of the
caste system
bhagavad gita
religion essay



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People in Hindu society are born into different castes with different qualities and their responsibility of fulfilling their dharma, which means sacred duties, is inevitable. A passage in the Bhagavad Gita reveals that mankind is created into four classes: "I created mankind in four classes, / different in their qualities and actions;" (The Bhagavad Gita 53). This indicates that born caste are not changeable, since they are set when individuals are created. The text then describes that each caste has its specific dharma and emphasize the restricted dharma on the idea that dharma is fixed by birth, as the text continues: "The actions of priests, warriors, /commoners, and servants/ are appointed by the qualities/ born of their intrinsic being" (The Bhagavad Gita 141). Such restricted social expectations are reflected in the caste system in Hindu society. Furthermore, we can see this restricted expectation when the Lord Krishna convinces Arjuna to perform his duty as a warrior: "Look to your own duty; / do not tremble before it; / nothing is better for a warrior/ than a battle of sacred duty" (The Bhagavad Gita 36). The lord Krishna wants Arjuna to perform his duties even if doing so is against his will. We can see that personal goals and emotions are suppressed when one performs dharma against one's will, and no matter what one is "forced" to perform caste duties. This strictness of caste duty is stated clearly in the text: "No one exists for even an instant / without performing action; / however unwilling, every being is forced / to act by the qualities of nature" (The Bhagavad Gita 43). This describes the absoluteness of the caste system and that caste duties are the highest priority in one's actions. By creating such strict order, the Bhagavad Gita reinforces the hierarchy structure of the caste system.

In addition, the Bhagavad Gita uses fear to further ensure that people follow their caste duties, by stating that failure to act accordingly to one's duties is considered sinful and will create disorder in family and society. Such idea is stated in the text: "When the family is ruined, / the timeless laws of family duty / perish; and when duty is lost, / chaos overwhelms the family" (The Bhagavad Gita 29). This creates a fear that is one does not follow than one will bring chaos to the family. More over the text continues to describe the consequences of misbehavior. The text states:" The sins of men who violate/ the family create disorder in society/ that undermines the constant laws/ of caste and family duty" (The Bhagavad Gita 29). The text attach the word "sin" in order to attach the quilt to the wrong doings. This passage also sets the definition of good and bad by warning not to violate the law of caste and by setting such definition the society is further restricted to confined social classes. Furthermore, since individual disobedience can bring disorder to the society as a whole, social pressure will be stressed on the individual who refuses the follow. This brings mutual responsibility in such a way that everyone needs to make sure everyone else follow the rule, so that the society as a whole can avoid disaster. The Bhagavad Gita creates great psychological pressure that concretes the caste system.

According to the Bhagavad Gita, the ideal way to perform caste duties is by detachment: "Always perform with detachment / any action you must do; performing action with detachment, / one achieves supreme good" (The Bhagavad Gita 45). By detaching from one's emotion, it is easier to endure the suffering of performing caste duties especially in the lay caste since their duties are the most miserable. We see this idea of detachment when the lord

Krishna tells Aryuna to fight and not be influence by his own emotions. Moreover, this idea of detachment creates an indifference to the good and bad, poor and wealth. According to the text, when one views things with detachment, one will not see the materialistic inequality between them. We see this state of detachment in the passages: " Self-reliant, impartial to suffering / and joy, to clay, stone, or gold, / the resolute man is the same / to foe and friend, to blame and praise" (The Bhagavad Gita 24). This reduces the anger of the lower caste people who are not satisfied with the caste system. Therefore, this detachment promoted in the Bhagavad Gita strengthens the caste system by making each castes focus on their caste duties

The idea of equality in all living beings is briefly discussed in the Bhagavad Gita, but one should not take it as indication of that social equality is promoted in Hindu society, since it does not reflects in the structure of Hindu society but only in a spiritual way. One may interprets certain passages in the Bhagavad Gita to argue against the caste system. For instance, the lord Krishna says to Arjuna: " Learned men see with an equal eye / a scholarly and dignified priest, / a cow, an elephant, a dog/ and even an outcaste scavenger" (The Bhagavad Gita 61). The word " equal eye" mentioned in this quote describes one of the key ideas in the Bhagavad Gita that every individual are originally in the brahmin caste and has the same spiritual quality. However, this spiritual equality does not reflects in the societal structure and it even reinforces the caste system by reducing the oppressiveness of the caste system because it makes the people in the lower caste feel that they are equal with the people in the higher caste. This

spiritual equality comes from the idea that every living thing is created from the Lord Brahma. This oneness of all living beings is also mentioned in one of the passages: " Arming himself with discipline, / seeing everything with equal eye, / he sees the self in all creatures/ and all creature / see in the self" (The Bhagavad Gita 69). Therefore, even the Bhagavad Gita mentions equality in some way, it only serves as a reinforcement of the caste system.

In addition, another reinforcement of the caste system mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita is that by focusing on one's sacred duties every individual can achieve the ultimate goal which is escaping from the cycle of rebirth. The state of being free from the cycle of death and rebirth is called moksha and can only be attained through fulfilling one's own caste duties (Bentley and Ziegler 184). This idea is conveyed when the Lord Krishna tells Arjuna to do what he must do in order to attain the everlasting peace. Moreover, the idea of devoting one's self to caste duties to attain moksha not only further defines the differentiation of each caste but also comforts the suffering of the lower caste by telling them that they will be able to achieve the final goal if they devote to their own caste: " Each one achieves success / by focusing on his own action; / hear how one finds success / by focusing on his own action" (The Bhagavad Gita 142). Furthermore, this quote mentions " own actions" which indicates the specific duties in each caste and that every caste has different paths toward attaining moksha. Such indication promotes greater separations of the classes in society.

The idea of reincarnation in the Bhagavad Gita provides a promise for the people in lower caste that if they devote themselves to their caste and endure sufferings from their lower social status, they will be able to attain a better

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next life. This idea of reincarnation rewards people who follow the caste and punish people who do not. According to the text, a person will continue to suffer until he is reborn to a higher caste: " Fallen in discipline, he reaches / worlds made by his virtue, wherein he dwells / for endless years, until he is reborn / in a house of upright and noble men" (The Bhagavad Gita 41). However the only way to be reborn into a higher caste is to accept the sufferings in the current life and devote to one's caste duties. As the text continues, it states that one needs to be purified his sins with effort and it is not a simple task: " The man of discipline, striving / with effort, purified of his sins, / perfected through many births, / finds a higher way" (The Bhagavad Gita 45). Therefore, this idea of reincarnation not only gives the people in the lower caste a purpose to endure their sufferings but also provides them psychological supports that comfort their inferiority in Hindu society. Through this, we can see how the Bhagavad Gita reinforces the caste system by providing spiritual supports that reduce the oppressiveness in the caste system.

All the emphasis on duty, moksha , caste separation, and reincarnation in the Bhagavad Gita show the intension to justify the Hierarchically ordered caste system in Hindu society. Bhagavad Gita creates strict order that solidifies the caste rules, and set out a final goal, moksha to unite the castes but separates each caste's path toward moksha to further differentiate each caste. While the Bhagavad Gita does mention equality, it does not apply in the materialistic sense. However, the equality is applied in a higher sense that does not contradict the caste system but reinforce it instead. The Bhagavad Gita with no doubt plays a key role in the Hindu society, since it is

so closely related to their social structure and caste life. Through those previous discussions, we are able to see that the Bhagavad Gita not only creates strict rules and fears that endure the obedience within the system, but also uses religious goal and philosophy of detachment to further brain wash the people in the Hindu society. It is clear that the ideas and philosophies presented in the Bhagavad Gita reinforces the caste system and justifies the inequality in the hierarchical social structure of the Hindu society.