Radhakrishnan as advocate of the class/ caste system
as a universal religio-socia system

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On January 4, 1943, Indian philosopher and statesman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) in an address to the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute told his listeners: 'While the spirit of India can never die, the social institutions which do not embody it must be scrapped' (1943: 6). One of these social institutions, one might expect, would be the caste system.

In his latter writings and speeches he would appear to speak as if there were no place for the caste system in India. In the introduction to The Brahma Sūtra, written in 1959, he wrote:

The system of caste whatever its historical significance has no contemporary value. Today it injures the spirit of humanity and violates human dignity....If democracy is to be seriously implemented, then caste and untouchability should go (Radhakrishnan 1960a: 162–63).

In Recovery of faith of 1955, he called caste and untouchability 'an offence and a scandal' (Radhakrishnan 1967: 27). By definition they were antithetical to his stated 1958 goal of 'a casteless and classless society' (Radhakrishnan 1959: 266). In the inaugural address to the Seminar on Casteism and the Removal of Untouchability on September 26, 1955, he reminded the participants that they should not 'confuse religious principles with social institutions. Religious principles are fundamental and enduring, while social institutions change from time to time.' He called for reform and told the seminar that: 'From the seers of the Upaniṣads and the Buddha to Tagore and Gandhi, leaders of religion have been advocates of radical social changes' (Radhakrishnan 1956b: 357–59). These were clearly his most negative statements about the caste system and its future in Indian society.

Had Radhakrishnan been repudiating class/ caste completely in his later life,
this would have been a significant change from his earlier position. Had he seen class/caste as merely a social institution, it might have been consistent to call for its elimination. Though such negative statements near the end of his life and during his career as vice president and president of India are the strongest anywhere in his speeches and written works, what he criticized was the caste system based solely on heredity, privilege, and theories of purity and pollution, as it existed in India in the modern period.

Instead, Radhakrishnan, as a part of his position as apologist and advocate for 'Hinduism,' became one of the foremost apologists for the system of class which is often cited to defend the caste system in India. In the process he both defined and defended an ideal system which is not represented in the numerous castes (often jāti) found in India in the past and the present and their accompanying strictures, but in the four classes (varṇa) which are affirmed by Indian religious texts from as early as the Rg Veda and the Bhagavad Gītā to the modern period. He used the presuppositions he absorbed from, and which were assumed to be true by, his Westernized education and reached back in Indian texts to show that the Hindu class/caste ideal is as he defined it and that the implementation of that ideal today is in the best interests of the individual, society, democracy, and the spirit of tolerance.

His most sustained attempts at definition and defense of the ideal system are found in his Upton Lectures delivered in 1926 and published as The Hindu view of life, in his lectures from 1936–38 published as Eastern religions and Western thought, and in the Kamala Lectures delivered in 1942 and published as Religion and society. As he said in the second: 'While caste has resulted in much evil, there are some sound principles underlying it' (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 90)

THE CASTE SYSTEM AS UNIVERSAL

Radhakrishnan believed that as all of 'Hinduism' is rooted in the assumptions of the Neo-Advaita Vedānta that is his own understanding of the religious position represented by the eighth-century thinker Śaṅkara, so too is the system of caste/class as he defined it. For Radhakrishnan, then, the Highest reality is the impersonal, absolute brahman, which is pure consciousness, pure being, and absolute bliss. Brahman is 'One without a second' and the true Self, ātman. The world is temporarily real as dependent upon brahman, but since the Absolute is within and One, all are essentially this same one. Only ignorance, avidyā, keeps us from seeing that this is so.
It is at the deeper level of the true Self within that the caste system, he said, actually promotes both equality and democracy. As a working out of ‘Hinduism,’ which is for Radhakrishnan Neo-Advaita Vedānta, caste, he assumes and asserts but does not argue for, is also based on Neo-Advaita Vedāntic views of reality. Thus, when speaking in imprecise philosophical terms for a more popular audience and assuming that the affirmation of this deep true Self in all is behind the caste system, he asserted that the system ‘is a democracy so far as the spiritual values are concerned, for it recognizes that every soul has in it something transcendent and incapable of gradations’ (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 83).

At what he calls the ‘spiritual’ level, then, the ideal insists on the equality of all (Radhakrishnan 1918: 181, 1940: 367). It is on this deep equality, the level of the true Self, ātman, that all are One and, thus, we find the basis for the equality behind democracy. In fact, he went on further to say, unlike the modern class systems of the West, the caste system provides the basis for a truly ‘spiritual’ society: ‘we have to take a lesson from the caste system, and build a spiritual civilisation on love and brotherhood, freedom and fellowship’ (Radhakrishnan 1918: 185).

His defense of the caste/class system is also based on his understanding of society as organic in nature. In fact, as B. Mallik has noted, Radhakrishnan ‘upheld the “caste” form as the only suitable one for the organic society. And this conclusion follows from the basal fact that the organic society was oriented on the notion of unity rather than on “individuality” or “relationship” ’ (1952: 740–41). As early as 1914 Radhakrishnan wrote that the Vedāntin ‘presses home the organic nature of society’ (177), but in his later writings this became a key part of his definition and defense of the system. As an organism, each layer of society is equally necessary and interrelated. The differences in function that the four varṇa system recognizes and values are ‘actual differences’ among human beings, and, thus, each caste ‘in fulfilling its distinctive function conditions the fulfilment of the function by the rest, and is in turn conditioned by the fulfilment of its function by the rest’ (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 76). He labeled this position a ‘spiritual view of society,’ as opposed to ‘the individualistic conception of society.’ The ‘spiritual view,’ he said, considers service to humanity a superior motive to economic success, expediency, self-interest, and individual desire (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 82)

As Radhakrishnan repeated and expanded upon his definition of the nature of society as organic, and as he further defined the ‘true’ nature of the caste system, the fourfold class (varṇa) system became for him not merely one of a number of possible ways to organize a society or even merely an impermanent order with four temporary classes that could fade away with the arrival of an ideal classless society. He taught instead that the fourfold varṇa system is the exclusive way to
organize every society and that the four classes, as Radhakrishnan defined them, are necessary for any healthy society. Hence, in his argument they took on an absolute value as classes established for all time. Thus, in *Eastern religions and Western thought*, he took pains to define the four classes (Radhakrishnan 1940: 357–64), while he set forth their universal value and necessity:

The fourfold classification is conceived in the interests of world progress. It is not intended specially for the Hindus, but applies to the whole human race, which has one destiny which it seeks and increasingly attains through the countless millenniums of history (Radhakrishnan 1940: 356).

He reasserted its universal application in 1942 in *Religion and society* and in 1948 in his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, in the former saying that: ‘It is a classification based on social facts and psychology....It is a mould into which all human beings can be poured, according to their vocational aptitude and temperament’ (Radhakrishnan 1948b: 131–32, see also 1948a: 364). As he did in defining ‘Vedānta’ and ‘Hinduism’, Radhakrishnan was not merely an interpreter and defender of the fourfold class system. In the light of his Neo-Advaitin view and his definition of society as an organism, he was an advocate for the system as the sole solution to the predicaments of modern, human social organization.

**THE CASTE SYSTEM AS AN ORDER BASED ON TEMPERAMENT**

Though the above bases for the class system are not argued but merely asserted by Radhakrishnan, he did mount an argument for the fact that caste/class in its earliest form was based upon the temperament and character of the individual, not on birth. He further advocated that the ideal of the traditional system, class by temperament, is what is applicable in the present.

Radhakrishnan (1940: 375–76, 1948b: 131–32, 1960b: 86) quoted numerous texts to support his argument about the original character-based nature of the system. In each case his interpretations of these texts might be questioned. For example, he quoted *janmanā jāyate śūdraḥ saṃskāraṁ dvīja ucyate* to show that the text supports the equality of all by teaching that all people are born originally as Śūdras, while the status of Brāhmaṇahood is based upon their actions (‘through purification’). It could just as easily be the case that this text teaches that only the upper classes were allowed to actually take the rites to
which the text actually refers, the samskāras, which make one ‘twice-born’
(Radhakrishnan 1948b: 129). Or when he quotes the Chāndogya Upaniṣad story
of Satyakāma, who answers correctly his potential guru’s question about his
lineage, the text may be indicating that Satyakāma is to be considered a Brāhmaṇa
because he has earned this status by his character, or that the text believes that
only one born a Brāhmaṇa would actually have the character to have answered
correctly. The latter understanding is more likely, because the text is asking,
after all, a question of lineage not character: ‘Of what family (gotra), pray am I?’
(Radhakrishnan 1940: 375, 1957: 64, 66).

Particularly important for Radhakrishnan was the Bhagavad Gītā, especially
4.13a: ‘The four class system (cātur-varṇam) was created by Me. With distinc-
tions of qualities (guna) and actions (karma) [for each class].’ In The Hindu
view of life he comments: ‘The author of the Bhagavadgītā believes that the
divisions of caste are in accordance with each man’s character and aptitude.
Karma is adapted to guna, and our qualities in nature can be altered only gradu-
ally’ (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 79).7 The Bhagavad Gītā was his favorite text in
support of Hindu ethics, but this verse does not establish that class was not
hereditary. It merely says people are born with the characteristics appropriate for
each class. In the context of the entire text, it probably enforces caste by birth,
teaching that one is born into a class and that one is also born with talents and
aptitudes appropriate to the class into which one is born (see Bhagavad Gītā
18.41–44; Minor 1982a: 157–58, 480–81). It is therefore both natural and des-
tined that each person act according to the assigned duties for her or his class,
her or his varṇadharma. In fact, the Gītā (3.35, 18.47) repeats that it is better to
do one’s own duties even though done poorly than to perform those of another
class and do them well (in their textual contexts, see Minor 1982a: 136–37,
480–82). In any case, Radhakrishnan marshaled this and other texts to support
his contention that ‘the Hindu’ position is actually class/caste by temperament,
talents, and character, rather than birth.

Though in his M.A. thesis, he treated the Rg Vedic concept of the four
classes as a primitive notion superseded by the Upaniṣadic idea of ‘Universal
brotherhood [sic]’ (Radhakrishnan 1908: 10), in these later writings, he credited
subsequent historical developments for the caste system’s current rigidity, its
emphasis upon heredity and birth, and its promotion of ‘privilege and snob-
bbery.’

The substitution of the principle of birth for virtue and valour has been the
main factor in the process of social crystallization and caste separatism. Birth
is said to indicate real, permanent differences in the mental attitudes of men
though they cannot be easily measured by the rough and ready methods of
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Historically, he wrote, birth became the criterion for the determination of one’s class as a concession to the difficulty of determining the aptitudes of people, though even then exceptions were allowed (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 79). So, though Radhakrishnan would prefer to place people in their class by aptitude, he conceded that in general the easiest determinant of one’s class was the social level of one’s birth. This was the historical experience of India, he said. And, he continued, the importance of heredity and the belief in class by birth, which was acted out in the consequent training and education of children through the centuries, formed ‘hereditary grooves’ for those who are even today born into certain socioeconomic groupings (Radhakrishnan 1940: 373).

At this point in his argument in The Hindu view of life, Radhakrishnan became an apologist for the fact that traditionally birth had been used as a major criterion for determining caste. He spoke of the importance of heredity and criticized those who today would exaggerate the influence of environment upon people over hereditary factors. ‘There is such a thing as social heredity. Each successive generation acquires by conscious effort the social acquisitions of the groups’ (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 74). However, in his later presentations, he gave up this portion of his defense.

His essential position is that aptitudes, talents, and temperament place people in four categories. In an early article he spoke of people simply in three classes: ‘men of thought, men of feeling, and men of action,’ with the fourth class consisting of those ‘in whom no one quality is particularly developed’ (Radhakrishnan 1922: 16). These categories are closer to the types of people whom he elsewhere said follow the three yogas—jñāna, bhakti, and karma—as different religious paths to the same goal for people of different temperaments, a view also set forth by Svāmī Vivekānanda (see Radhakrishnan 1908: 66). His later descriptions of the temperament of members of each caste are instead related to a classification of human beings into four categories based upon the dominant, functional qualities of their natures. The ‘four types’ in which human beings fall, as found in his Eastern religions and Western thought, are: ‘the man of learning and knowledge, the man of power and action, the skilled craftsman, and the labourer. The types are determined by the prominent elements of man’s active nature’ (Radhakrishnan 1940: 357). In The Hindu view of life the classes and their temperaments are also described functionally. The Brāhmaṇas are ‘the cultural and the spiritual,’ the Kṣatriyas, ‘the military and the political,’ the Vaiṣyas, ‘the economic classes,’ and the Śūdras, ‘the unskilled workers.’ Each caste has a purpose and function in society, and each, Radhakrishnan said, was regarded as ‘equally important to the well-being of the whole’ (1960b: 76–77).
The caste system, he asserts, is actually more democratic than the ‘cold and cruel competition’ of other schema, for it does not cast people of different talents and abilities together to compete in what would obviously favor those with the requisite talents. ‘The castes are not allowed to compete with one another’ (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 79). Competition is within classes and is, thus, among those of similar abilities and natures, not between people who begin with different capacities. The system sorts this out. It recognizes that: ‘Equality refers to opportunity and not to capacity’ (Radhakrishnan 1940: 368). All have the right to contribute as far as they are capable.

In *The Hindu view of life* Radhakrishnan went further than he did later and sought to justify the fact that Indian traditions placed restrictions upon inter-caste interaction, particularly inter-marriage. He did not find restrictions in the early Vedic material (Radhakrishnan 1940: 372), but in *The Hindu view of life* he explained their later appearance as justifiable, because they are based upon what he argued are generally applicable principles for good marital relations. It is generally the case that the best marriages, he said, occur ‘when the stocks are of nearly the same level.’ Thus, the principle of *savarña* (‘same class’) marriage is ‘not unsound’ and reflects the belief that the best marriages are between those who are of approximately the same type. That the early Hindu thinkers held this advanced position may be due to ‘a lucky intuition or an empirical generalization’ (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 72, 73).

If we want to prevent the suicide of the social order, some restrictions have to be observed with regard to marital relations. Marriages should be, not necessarily in one’s own caste but among members of approximately the same level of culture and social development....While every attempt should be made to energize the weak and the lowly by education and moral suasion, indiscriminate marriage relations do not seem to be always desirable (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 74).

In his later writings defending the system, such as *Eastern religions and Western thought*, Radhakrishnan dropped his defense of endogamy, apparently no longer interested in defending its restrictions even in a modified form. Instead he listed endogamy along with heredity and commensal restrictions as the three features of ‘caste’ which constitute the corruption of the four class system due to society placing a growing importance on one’s birth. He then opted for the ‘class idea,’ the ideal he found more flexible in such matters, and ended his whole discussion with the reminder that: ‘Nowhere is it suggested that one should follow one’s hereditary occupation without regard to one’s personal bent and capacities. The caste system is a degeneration of the class idea’ (Radha-
THE CASTE SYSTEM AS A HIERARCHY OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Though Radhakrishnan rejected the idea that any one of the four classes is more important than the others in traditional terms of purity and pollution or in its importance for the organism which is society as he defined it, he proposed his own hierarchy in its place: a hierarchy of classes on the basis of human evolution or development. The Brâhmaṇa class is the most developed, the closest to spiritual perfection or 'self-realization' (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 85, see also 1922: 17).8

The four classes represent four stages of development in our manhood. Every human being starts with a heavy load of ignorance and inertia. His first stage is one of toil demanded by the needs of the body, the impulse of life, and the law of society. From the lowest stage we rise into a higher type when we are driven by the instinct for useful creation. We have here the vital man. At a higher level, we have the active man with ambition and will power. Highest of all is the Brahmin, who brings a spiritual rule into life (Radhakrishnan 1940: 366, cf. 1960b: 83–84).

Every human being will over her or his lifetimes gradually pass through these stages, but in the present one's status and class are determined by the place one finds oneself on the spiritual ladder of class as objectified in the social system. As a hierarchy of development, the interpretation of the Brâhmaṇa class as the most spiritually developed allows the Brâhmaṇa to affirm that her or his position is developmentally and spiritually superior.

In fact, the second class itself, the Kṣatriyas, embodies a concession to this lack of development. Hindu society, Radhakrishnan wrote, is actually ‘attached’ to the principle of nonviolence, a principle embodied in the ‘Brahminic ideal.’ But, ‘As long as human nature is what it is, as long as society has not reached its highest level, we require the use of force’ (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 78, see 1940: 361) The Kṣatriyas are the class ‘dedicated to the use of force.’ So they embody this concession in the ideal social system.

In the Hindu scheme the cultural forms the highest and the economic lowest, for the cultural and the spiritual are ends in themselves and are not pursued for the sake of anything else. The highest in the social hierarchy is the true Brah-
min, in whom we find a complete union of opposites, a self-sacrifice which is true freedom, a perfect self-control which is perfect service, absence of personal ambition along with the most intense devotion to the world. The valiant knight, the Ksatriya hero, is not the ideal of India, for he has not the vision of the whole....He has always something opposed to him which he aims at overpowering....Courage becomes the chief virtue of the Ksatriya, but this type is not the highest, for Ksatriya valour, however sublimated, is the expression of the primitive in us (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 83–84).

Likewise, the Śūdra embodies the least developed humanity. When ‘the Hindu’ tradition says that Śūdras are only ‘once born’ as opposed to the upper three, ‘twice born,’ classes, Radhakrishnan wrote, it means that the highest human ideals do not govern the activities of these Śūdra/workers. Radhakrishnan felt it was no criticism to affirm their least developed place in ‘the Hindu’ scheme of spirituality and then defend it by saying of them that: ‘It only means that the activities of the members of the fourth class are instinctive and not governed by ideals of knowledge, strength, or mutual service.’ He characterized those who naturally fall into the fourth class as those who are generally unaware of the over-all plan of the social order, as people motivated by the satisfaction of their own needs, and as those who, ‘when these are gratified,...tend to lapse into a life of indolence and inertia’ (Radhakrishnan 1940: 364). Those who fall in this class are ‘the less evolved in whom the powers of self-analysis and self-direction have not arisen’ (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 85).

Though he denied the exclusiveness of any qualities to one class or another, there is little in this to affirm the spiritual dignity of the current Śūdra. They are Śūdras because they are the least evolved spiritually. Thus, even in Radhakrishnan’s scheme, the Śūdra is simply one born untalented enough to be mentally and spiritually equal in development to higher classes.

Actually, Radhakrishnan hoped to counter claims of Brāhmaṇa superiority by emphasizing that though privilege is more important in the caste by birth scheme, in his model (‘the Hindu’ view) ‘the social duty of the individual is insisted on, not his personal rights’ (1940: 374, see 1960b: 84). The higher on the class scale one is, the greater are the corresponding obligations. Theoretically, anyone can rise to the top of this new hierarchy if he or she ‘has the courage to undergo the discipline, the strength to deny himself the pleasures of life, and the capacity to develop his powers.’ One may, therefore, take personal spiritual strides to rise up in the system, but the admitted importance of natural capacity is still an element which distinguishes classes and, thus, limits the individual. The Brāhmaṇa must have the character expected of a true Brāhmaṇa, not merely the hereditary claim, but still, according to Radhakrishnan’s scheme, he or she is the one
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born with talents and capacities which are further developed than those of the Śūdra. Those who fall into this category were born with less ability.

The Brāhmaṇa, then, is the highest class both because it embodies the ideals of Hindu society and because it represents the most spiritually advanced human condition. The Kṣatriya embodies the ideal less, as a concession to the lack of spiritual development of humanity, and the Śūdra is so undeveloped spiritually as to not be capable of rising above personal interests in its labor. Śūdra liberation movements would hardly accept this scheme. Radhakrishnan denied that the Śūdra is any less important to society than the Brāhmaṇa, but no Marxist would deny this either. Instead they would hold the worker the most important, of course.

CASTE AS AN EXPRESSION OF INCLUSIVISM

From the time of his study of Rabindranath Tagore in 1918, Radhakrishnan spoke of the four class system as 'a social system based on the recognition of spiritual unity as well as racial differences' (181). It is a system which aims at 'universal brotherhood' and 'mutual harmony' and which is the ideal means for bringing outsiders into the Hindu fold. Apparently from Tagore, Radhakrishnan adopted as central the idea that the caste system 'has enabled races with widely different cultures and even antagonistic social and religious usages and ideals to settle down peaceably side by side' (1918: 186, citing Tagore 1910: 184–87). 'Paradoxical as it may seem,' Radhakrishnan said,

the system of caste is the outcome of tolerance and trust. Though it has now degenerated into an instrument of oppression and intolerance, though it tends to perpetuate inequality and develop the spirit of exclusiveness, these unfortunate effects are not the central motives of the system (1960b: 67).

The central motive of the system, he believed, is to allow the variety of racial groups that enter India to affirm their differences and then 'develop the best' in each; that is to say, each group through this system is accepted at its level and then expected to modify its individuality somewhat to fit into Hindu society. In the process the new group will modify the larger society as well.

The fourfold class system allows each group to be accepted into the society, as an individual caste, and then allows society to mold the group. Mallik reminds us that to understand Radhakrishnan's view we must keep in mind 'his persistent claim that Hindu society dealt with groups and not individuals and solved all
problems of conflicts and disagreements by the one expedient of creating fresh castes' (1952: 741). The caste system gives equality of opportunity to groups which Radhakrishnan understood to be developmentally unequal. Its process, he asserted, is to lead the 'backward ones to a full utilization of the opportunities of their environment and a development of their distinctive natural characteristics' (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 69). Historically and philosophically, he believed, the system developed to organize different ethnic groups into one society, without extermination, subordination, or dissolution. His examples were most often 'the aboriginal tribes,' who were brought into the fold and improved or 'civilized' by it, but he also included the Āryans themselves. 'Though the Vedic Aryans started their life in India with a rigid and narrow outlook, regarding themselves as a sort of chosen people, they soon became universal in intention and developed an ethical code applicable to the whole of humanity, a mānava dharma' (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 70).9 The rules of those groups brought into the system may seem crude and false, but they were accepted because they aided the community brought into the system. But when a new outside group is taken into the system it is affiliated with one of the four classes and thereby 'tamed and civilized' (Radhakrishnan 1960b: 79).10 This is accomplished, Radhakrishnan believed, because the fourfold class system, its class rules, and the differences between the classes, supersede the differences between the new foreign group and the larger indigenous society (1948b: 130, 1960b: 77).

CONCLUSIONS

As one element of his defense of 'Hinduism,' Radhakrishnan was not prepared to jettison the class/caste system completely as, for example, Rammohun Roy and the Brahmo Samaj had done. He took up its defense but did so not in terms of its existence as the social system of his time with its emphasis on caste by birth, its hundreds of subcastes (jāti), its hierarchy of ritual purity and pollution, and its untouchability. Instead, Radhakrishnan spoke in terms of 'equality' and 'democracy.' These formed the basis for his definition and defense of a class system that was founded on what he understood to be 'the Hindu' ideal.11 The system was, first, 'Hindu,' and in his mind that meant ultimately its foundation is rooted in the assumptions of Neo-Advaita Vedānta as he defined it. Second, his definition and defense assumed that society was an organism. That meant that every class was a vital part of the whole society, each mutually benefiting the other. Third, it was based upon the ideal taught historically, he believed, in 'the Hindu' tradition, and that meant it was essentially the fourfold class system
the ancient texts taught was built into the world by the Divine, but not the multiple castes in contemporary existence, nor a classless society altogether.

He insisted that the emphasis of this Hindu social scheme was a recognition that people have different propensities, talents, and aptitudes, that these grouped people into the four basic categories represented by the fourfold system, and that heredity was a factor in this grouping but individual character was more important. It was difficult for him to move away from the limitations that he believed birth placed on people and that the tradition often seemed to teach, for the more one emphasized inborn talents, the more one returned to affirming that class was determined by birth. All human beings were to be given the opportunity to develop the capacities in them, he said. They were not, therefore, chained to the caste of their ancestry. If people did not give evidence that they were born with these capacities through their development of them, it did not matter in what family they were born. They were not truly Brāhmaṇa or Kṣatriya or Vaiśya. But people are still born with these capacities and, thus, born functionally into a class in which they should stay. It was still class by birth, but not class by heredity. The burden of each individual was to develop her or his innate abilities in service to the whole.

This understanding of society as an organism and the resulting belief that each class was equally valuable to the society meant that Radhakrishnan affirmed that no one class was more important than the other. All were necessary to keep the social body healthy. Radhakrishnan rejected the idea that there was a hierarchy of purity or prestige in the true 'Hindu' system. However, in the process of redefining the system he replaced this old hierarchy with another. From top to bottom, the fourfold class system represented the most and least developed stages in the spiritual growth of human beings. The Brāhmaṇas are the closest to the spiritual goal of self-realization. They are the least ignorant. They bring 'a spiritual rule into life.' The Śūdras are ruled by instinct, self-satisfaction, and even inertia. Such statements from one who is a Brāhmaṇa himself advocate a hierarchy of development, evolution, understanding, and, finally, religious attainment. To those outside the upper class, this may sound like quite a privileged claim for oneself, no matter how one speaks of the consequent greater responsibilities involved.

At times his defense took him to defending forms of endogamy and even the renewal of importance given to heredity over environment. It also brought him to claim that the fourfold class system was the only spiritual, democratic, and healthy way to organize a society. Though he rejected the system of caste as having 'no contemporary value,' the fourfold class system, he argued, is the singular valuable model for all human society. As he did when he defended 'Hinduism' in general, his position of defending the tradition turned into the
advocacy of ‘the Hindu’ social system, with the recognition it gives to inborn propensities and with its hierarchy of spiritually developed people, as the exclusive approach to the perfection of all the earth, sarva mukti—which, in the end, was Radhakrishnan’s ultimate concern.

Notes

1. Note also his similar statement that caste and untouchability must be ‘scrapped’ in Indian Constituent Assembly debates 1946–50: 772. On untouchability, which he firmly rejected, Radhakrishnan was Chairman of the Scheduled Castes Subcommittee of the Sapru Committee for recommending constitutional proposals (see Constitutional proposals of the Sapru Committee 1945: 215–40).

2. Note that in Radhakrishnan’s ‘Reply to critics,’ written during this later period (see Schillp 1952: 840–41), his only negative comments can be represented by: ‘I should like to make it clear that any scheme based on heredity is not only undemocratic but unspiritual.’ But note my discussion below as to why B. Mallik might be unclear about this.

3. On the influence of his education on his thought, see Minor 1987; on his use of terms such as ‘democracy,’ ‘socialism,’ and ‘secularism’ as religious categories in his thought, see Minor 1987; on his definition of ‘tolerance,’ see Minor 1982a, 1993.

4. Radhakrishnan did not use the terms ‘class’ and ‘caste’ as direct equivalents of varna and jāti in a consistent manner. Neither do early texts such as the Bhagavad Gītā, however, which uses the terms interchangeably. However, as argued below, his references to ‘class’ and ‘caste’ positively refer only to the four varna.

5. He takes more time to do this than he did in his earlier 1960b: 77–79.

6. For a discussion of the process of definition of ‘Vedānta,’ ‘Hinduism,’ and later his ‘religion of the spirit,’ which took place while he moved from a defensive posture to advocacy, see Minor 1995.


8. In a 1938 lecture he spoke of the classes as a hierarchy of development of the virtues: ‘honour and comradeship, humanity and sympathy,’ characteristics which, therefore, must be more obvious and developed in the Brāhmaṇa (Radhakrishnan 1944: 43).

9. This, of course, is a case of the conquerors assimilating the conquered through the system (see also Radhakrishnan 1922: 18).

10. In Radhakrishnan 1940: 357, the new foreign settlers are affiliated with more than one of the classes.

11. See note 3 above.

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