

Re-conceptualizing society: A critical exploration of the conceptual structure of classical Indian thought from the perspective of Daya Krishna

Abstract

Daya Krishna challenges conventional interpretations of society in classical Indian philosophy, encouraging a rethinking of its conceptual foundations. He notes that while ancient Indian thought lacks a direct equivalent to the modern term society, it provides a profound framework for understanding collective human existence through concepts such as *samāja*, *samasti*, and *varna*. By exploring the interdependence between individual and collective well-being, Daya Krishna critiques rigid readings of *varna*, *dharma*, and *dāna*, advocating for a more open, flexible, and ethically grounded understanding. Engaging with Western thought, he envisions a society founded on mutual support, selfless service, and the recognition of intrinsic human values. His philosophy presents Indian thought as a living, evolving tradition capable of addressing contemporary ethical and social challenges with compassion and creativity.

Keywords-*Samāja*, *Varna*, *Dāna*, Society, Ethics, Reinterpretation

Introduction

Indian philosophy, though primarily concerned with metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, has always aimed at the harmonious development of both the individual and society. It recognizes that individual well-being cannot be separated from the welfare of the collective, as moral growth and social order are deeply interlinked (Chatterjee & Datta, 1984, p. 27). Within this intellectual tradition, Daya Krishna emerges as one of the most original voices of modern Indian thought, seeking to reinterpret ancient concepts through a critical and creative lens. His writings challenge static readings of *varna*, *dharma*, and *samāja*, and invite reflection on how these ideas can inform modern understandings of community, equality, and ethical responsibility (Krishna, 1991, p. 42). Daya Krishna observes that classical Indian philosophy lacks a direct equivalent to the modern concept of “society.” Yet, it presents a rich framework for understanding human collectivity through ideas such as *samāja*, *samasti*, and *loka*. These terms refer not only to social structures but also to moral and spiritual dimensions of human existence. As Radhakrishnan (1923, p. 64) notes, Indian thought views life as part of a universal moral order governed by *rta*, or cosmic harmony. For Daya Krishna, this interconnected vision reveals that society is not merely an external organization but a moral field sustained by ethical participation and mutual responsibility. He reexamines the traditional idea of *varna*, which has often been associated with hierarchy and social rigidity. Daya Krishna (2003, p. 118) interprets *varna* as a symbolic expression of the diversity of human capacities and functions rather than a fixed social category. Each *varna*, in his view, represents a form of human contribution that sustains the balance of the community. This interpretation, like Sharma’s (2001, p. 53)

explanation of the moral foundation of varna-dharma, transforms the notion of duty from social privilege to ethical cooperation. Engaging in dialogue with modern thinkers, Daya Krishna also reflects on Marx's concept of labour and its relation to human freedom (Krishna, 1996, p. 75). He argues that work and service possess intrinsic moral worth when performed with awareness and sincerity. His emphasis on *seva* (selfless service) and *dāna* (generosity) as ethical principles demonstrates how social harmony emerges from compassion and reciprocity rather than dominance or birth.

Philosophy, for Daya Krishna, is not a closed doctrine but a living and creative process of inquiry. He encourages critical openness and intellectual humility, affirming that genuine thought must engage with life and society rather than remain confined to theoretical speculation. His reinterpretation of *varna*, *dharma*, and society reaffirms Indian philosophy as a continuing dialogue between tradition and modernity. It envisions a moral community shaped by cooperation, freedom, and the shared pursuit of truth.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative and analytical approach grounded in textual interpretation. It focuses on Daya Krishna's writings, along with key classical and modern philosophical works, to explore how he reinterprets *varna*, *dharma*, and society. The analysis relies on a comparative and hermeneutic method that connects his ideas with both Indian and Western traditions of thought. Rather than using empirical data, the study emphasizes reflective understanding and conceptual clarity. The overall aim is to present Daya Krishna's philosophy as a living conversation between tradition and modernity, showing its continuing relevance to contemporary moral and social life.

The Philosophical Tradition's Inquiry into the Idea of Society

The philosophical inquiry into the idea of society in the Indian tradition reveals a deep moral and spiritual concern for the collective dimension of human existence. Although classical Indian thinkers did not use a term directly corresponding to the modern concept of "society," they explored its meaning through a variety of interconnected ideas such as *samāja*, *samasti*, *jana*, *loka*, and *janapada*. Each of these concepts reflects a particular aspect of social organization and moral responsibility (Krishna, 1991, p. 42). The Indian tradition thus does not treat society as an external structure but as a moral and spiritual unity formed through shared duties and ethical awareness. This vision arises from the understanding that human beings are part of a larger moral order governed by *rta*, which represents truth, justice, and harmony. As Radhakrishnan (1923, p. 72) explains, Indian thought views every individual as a participant in maintaining the balance of the universe. The relationship between the individual and the community is therefore ethical rather than contractual. The dharma of each person contributes

to the collective good, making moral conduct an essential foundation for social stability and cosmic order. Daya Krishna reinterprets these traditional insights to show that Indian philosophy contains an implicit social theory even without a direct equivalent of the term “society.” He argues that the Indian vision of collective life is broader and more inclusive, extending beyond material and political concerns to embrace spiritual interdependence (Krishna, 2003, p. 117). For him, this interconnection of moral and metaphysical dimensions gives Indian thought a distinctive character that transcends the limits of modern sociological analysis. The absence of a single word for “society” does not indicate a lack of social awareness. Rather, it reflects the flexible and holistic nature of Indian philosophy, which conceives life as a continuous web of relationships sustained by mutual responsibility. As Sharma (2001, p. 81) observes, the Indian mind perceives the social and the spiritual as two sides of one reality. Daya Krishna continues this tradition by highlighting that the harmony between individual purpose and collective welfare remains the true basis of moral and philosophical life.

Society as a Cosmic Web

In classical Indian thought, society is not seen as an isolated human creation but as an integral part of the cosmic order. The universe itself is viewed as a web of interdependent relationships where every being contributes to the preservation of balance and harmony. Human life, therefore, cannot be separated from the moral structure of the cosmos. This understanding reflects the central idea of *rta*, the principle that sustains truth, justice, and universal order (Radhakrishnan, 1923, p. 74). Within this vision, social relationships are not only ethical obligations but also sacred connections that bind individuals to one another and to the larger universe. Daya Krishna reinterprets this traditional understanding by describing society as a living web of mutual influence and moral responsibility. He explains that every action, thought, and intention has consequences that extend beyond the individual, influencing the collective life of the community (Krishna, 1991, p. 44). In this way, social existence becomes a reflection of both ethical awareness and spiritual growth. The idea of *samasti* expresses this interconnectedness by emphasizing the unity of the whole rather than the separation of its parts. According to Daya Krishna, this cosmic perspective implies that human beings are not merely political or economic agents but participants in a spiritual network of meaning. Each person’s actions contribute to the larger moral order, and every act of injustice or selfishness disturbs the equilibrium of the world (Krishna, 2003, p. 120). This vision makes social harmony a sacred responsibility rather than a matter of external regulation. Modern society, in contrast, tends to focus on the material and institutional aspects of collective life. Daya Krishna draws attention to this difference, suggesting that ancient Indian philosophy provides a deeper understanding of the human condition by connecting moral action with cosmic purpose (Krishna, 1996, p. 75). By reviving this insight, he calls for a renewed awareness of the ethical

dimension of social life, where compassion, cooperation, and justice are not abstract ideals but the very fabric of existence.

A New Understanding of Varna and Society

Daya Krishna presents a thoughtful reinterpretation of the varna framework, encouraging a return to its original ethical and social meaning. He explains that the purpose of varna was not to enforce hierarchy or social rigidity but to organize human capacities in a way that promotes cooperation and moral balance within society (Krishna, 2003, p. 118). The concept was meant to reflect harmony among different forms of human activity, allowing every person to contribute meaningfully to the collective good. According to Daya Krishna, *varna* should be understood as a moral classification rather than a hereditary one. Each varna represents a different kind of social function that contributes to the well-being of the whole. The *brāhmaṇa* symbolizes knowledge and reflection, the *kṣatriya* embodies courage and protection, the *vaiśya* stands for sustenance and trade, and the *śūdra* represents service and dedication. When performed with awareness and sincerity, all these roles hold equal moral worth (Krishna, 1991, p. 48). This vision redefines service as a virtue, where *seva*, or selfless action, becomes the foundation of social harmony rather than a mark of subordination. By comparing traditional Indian thought with modern perspectives, Daya Krishna shows that ethical participation gives meaning to social life. He refers to the concept of labor in Marx's philosophy to argue that dignity arises from the moral intention behind work, not from social status (Krishna, 1996, p. 75). This interpretation suggests that true equality comes from moral understanding rather than structural uniformity. Through this reinterpretation, Daya Krishna restores the moral and humanistic foundation of the varna system. He invites readers to see varna not as a closed structure of privilege but as a flexible and dynamic expression of human cooperation. His vision promotes a society guided by ethical awareness, mutual respect, and shared responsibility, where diversity strengthens unity and moral consciousness forms the true basis of social order.

Daya Krishna and the Dynamics of Philosophical Thinking

Daya Krishna's philosophy reflects his deep conviction that thinking must remain a living and creative process. He believed that philosophy loses its vitality when it becomes a mere repetition of inherited ideas. Instead, it should evolve through critical engagement, dialogue, and openness to reinterpretation. He regarded Indian philosophy not as a closed system but as an ongoing conversation that grows through questioning and renewal (Krishna, 1991, p. 66). He distinguishes between two modes of thought, one mechanical and one creative. The mechanical mode repeats what is already established, while the creative mode brings new insight through the act of inquiry itself. Drawing on a distinction similar to R. G. Collingwood's idea of craft and art, Daya Krishna suggests that true philosophical activity resembles artistic creation. It requires imagination, reflection, and a willingness to face uncertainty in the pursuit

of truth (Krishna, 2003, p. 121). Through this approach, he demonstrates that philosophy must not be confined to abstract speculation but should engage actively with life and human experience. This dynamic approach can be seen in his interpretation of ethical and social concepts such as *dāna* and *seva*. He questions both the traditional ritualistic view and the Western critique that reduces *dāna* to charity or self-interest. Instead, he interprets it as a deeply moral act that expresses human connectedness and empathy (Krishna, 1996, p. 77). Through *dāna*, individuals extend themselves toward others, reinforcing the bonds that sustain the moral and social fabric of society. Similarly, *seva* embodies the spirit of selfless contribution that lies at the heart of Daya Krishna's ethical vision. For Daya Krishna, philosophy must unite reflection with ethical action. He believes that genuine thought involves the transformation of the thinker and the community. This vision aligns with the broader tradition of Indian philosophy, where knowing and doing are inseparable aspects of the search for truth (Sharma, 2001, p. 89). By integrating reflection, compassion, and creativity, Daya Krishna presents philosophy as a transformative process that enriches both individual life and social consciousness.

Conclusion

Daya Krishna's reinterpretation of Indian philosophy reveals a continuous search for meaning within tradition and a commitment to questioning inherited assumptions. His reflections demonstrate that philosophy, when practiced as a living dialogue, can address both personal and social transformation. Through his critical engagement with concepts such as *varna*, *dharma*, and *samāja*, he restores to Indian thought its creative and humanistic dimension. He challenges the historical distortions that turned flexible moral ideas into rigid social hierarchies, insisting that philosophy must remain responsive to the realities of human life (Krishna, 1991, p. 69). For Daya Krishna, society is not a static system, but an evolving moral community sustained by cooperation and compassion. Every individual, regardless of their social position, contributes to this harmony through conscious ethical action. His reinterpretation of *dāna* and *seva* gives moral depth to social relationships, showing that generosity and service are not limited to ritual acts but are foundational principles of human coexistence (Krishna, 2003, p. 123). This perspective brings Indian philosophy into dialogue with the modern world, where ethical and social challenges demand renewed reflection on interdependence and moral responsibility. Daya Krishna bridges the gap between classical and contemporary thought by viewing philosophy as an active process of reinterpretation. His work affirms that freedom, equality, and compassion are deeply rooted in Indian moral consciousness and not foreign impositions (Krishna, 1996, p. 79). By reexamining traditional concepts through a critical yet respectful lens, he demonstrates that Indian philosophy is a living tradition capable of evolving with time while remaining grounded in its ethical core. Ultimately, Daya Krishna's thought offers a vision of society guided by self-awareness, service, and mutual respect. His work encourages

180 future generations to engage with philosophy as an instrument of understanding and
181 transformation, reaffirming that the pursuit of truth is inseparable from the pursuit of humanity
182 itself.

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