

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

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3 Abstract

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

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

15 Introduction

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

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

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

49 **Methodology**

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

58 **The Philosophical Tradition's Inquiry into the Idea of Society**

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

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

84 **Society as a Cosmic Web**

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

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

109 **A New Understanding of Varna and Society**

110 Daya Krishna presents a thoughtful reinterpretation of the varna framework, encouraging a
111 return to its original ethical and social meaning. He explains that the purpose of varna was not
112 to enforce hierarchy or social rigidity but to organize human capacities in a way that promotes
113 cooperation and moral balance within society (Krishna, 2003, p. 118). The concept was meant
114 to reflect harmony among different forms of human activity, allowing every person to
115 contribute meaningfully to the collective good. According to Daya Krishna, *varna* should be
116 understood as a moral classification rather than a hereditary one. Each varna represents a
117 different kind of social function that contributes to the well-being of the whole. The
118 *brāhmaṇa* symbolizes knowledge and reflection, the *kṣatriya* embodies courage and protection,
119 the *vaiśya* stands for sustenance and trade, and the *śūdra* represents service and dedication.
120 When performed with awareness and sincerity, all these roles hold equal moral worth (Krishna,
121 1991, p. 48). This vision redefines service as a virtue, where *seva*, or selfless action, becomes
122 the foundation of social harmony rather than a mark of subordination. By comparing traditional
123 Indian thought with modern perspectives, Daya Krishna shows that ethical participation gives
124 meaning to social life. He refers to the concept of labor in Marx's philosophy to argue that
125 dignity arises from the moral intention behind work, not from social status (Krishna, 1996, p.
126 75). This interpretation suggests that true equality comes from moral understanding rather
127 than structural uniformity. Through this reinterpretation, Daya Krishna restores the moral and
128 humanistic foundation of the varna system. He invites readers to see varna not as a closed
129 structure of privilege but as a flexible and dynamic expression of human cooperation. His vision
130 promotes a society guided by ethical awareness, mutual respect, and shared responsibility,
131 where diversity strengthens unity and moral consciousness forms the true basis of social order.

132 **Daya Krishna and the Dynamics of Philosophical Thinking**

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

143 of truth (Krishna, 2003, p. 121). Through this approach, he demonstrates that philosophy must
144 not be confined to abstract speculation but should engage actively with life and human
145 experience. This dynamic approach can be seen in his interpretation of ethical and social
146 concepts such as *dāna* and *seva*. He questions both the traditional ritualistic view and the
147 Western critique that reduces *dāna* to charity or self-interest. Instead, he interprets it as a
148 deeply moral act that expresses human connectedness and empathy (Krishna, 1996, p. 77).
149 Through *dāna*, individuals extend themselves toward others, reinforcing the bonds that sustain
150 the moral and social fabric of society. Similarly, *seva* embodies the spirit of selfless contribution
151 that lies at the heart of Daya Krishna's ethical vision. For Daya Krishna, philosophy must unite
152 reflection with ethical action. He believes that genuine thought involves the transformation of
153 the thinker and the community. This vision aligns with the broader tradition of Indian
154 philosophy, where knowing and doing are inseparable aspects of the search for truth (Sharma,
155 2001, p. 89). By integrating reflection, compassion, and creativity, Daya Krishna presents
156 philosophy as a transformative process that enriches both individual life and social
157 consciousness.

158 **Conclusion**

159 Daya Krishna's reinterpretation of Indian philosophy reveals a continuous search for meaning
160 within tradition and a commitment to questioning inherited assumptions. His reflections
161 demonstrate that philosophy, when practiced as a living dialogue, can address both personal
162 and social transformation. Through his critical engagement with concepts such as *varna*,
163 *dharma*, and *samāja*, he restores to Indian thought its creative and humanistic dimension. He
164 challenges the historical distortions that turned flexible moral ideas into rigid social hierarchies,
165 insisting that philosophy must remain responsive to the realities of human life (Krishna, 1991, p.
166 69). For Daya Krishna, society is not a static system, but an evolving moral community sustained
167 by cooperation and compassion. Every individual, regardless of their social position, contributes
168 to this harmony through conscious ethical action. His reinterpretation of *dāna* and *seva* gives
169 moral depth to social relationships, showing that generosity and service are not limited to ritual
170 acts but are foundational principles of human coexistence (Krishna, 2003, p. 123). This
171 perspective brings Indian philosophy into dialogue with the modern world, where ethical and
172 social challenges demand renewed reflection on interdependence and moral
173 responsibility. Daya Krishna bridges the gap between classical and contemporary thought by
174 viewing philosophy as an active process of reinterpretation. His work affirms that freedom,
175 equality, and compassion are deeply rooted in Indian moral consciousness and not foreign
176 impositions (Krishna, 1996, p. 79). By reexamining traditional concepts through a critical yet
177 respectful lens, he demonstrates that Indian philosophy is a living tradition capable of evolving
178 with time while remaining grounded in its ethical core. Ultimately, Daya Krishna's thought offers
179 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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