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Who Were the Sūtas? Recovering Identity and Countering Misrepresentation with Special Reference to the Mahābhārata

Vartika Singh Lodhi [1]

ABSTRACT

The Sūta community, often misunderstood and misrepresented in contemporary adaptations, is a mixed Jāti, tracing its origins as offspring of Brāhmaṇa mothers and Kṣatriya fathers. Despite clear textual evidence, the Sūta Jāti occupies a contested position in scholarship on ancient Indian social structures. The depiction of the Sūta Jāti is often one dimensional, which rigidly flattens their role only as charioteers. Popular media representations, particularly through Karṇa's portrayal in widely watched television adaptations of B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988) and Star Plus's *Mahabharat* (2013), have enforced narratives of caste-based discrimination, probably in the name of artistic expression and creative liberty (*Mahabharat*, B.R. Chopra; *Mahabharat*, Star Plus). Against this backdrop, a fundamental question emerges: Is Sūta a Jāti, a birth-based identity, or something else altogether? This study employs systematic textual analysis of the Mahābhārata and other relevant literature to examine comprehensive representation of Sūta community, beyond contemporary interpretations. The paper attempts to locate the societal position of the Sūta community by examining the dynamic roles played by its members: Sañjaya (Dhṛtarāṣṭra's counsellor), Kīcaka (Matsya's commander), Queen Sudeṣṇā (King Viraṭa's consort), Ṛṣi Ugrasravas (Mahābhārata's narrator), and Sumantra (Daśaratha's chief minister). This paper addresses the gap between popular narratives and textual evidence by providing comprehensive data and contributes to the wider understanding of the position Sūta community, beyond reductive narratives through Bharatiya perspective.

Keywords: Sūta, Jāti, Varṇa, Mahābhārata, misrepresentation.

Introduction:

The Mahābhārata is one of the India's greatest Itihāsic texts, which has been narrated, retold, and reinterpreted across centuries. These reinterpretations have shaped collective consciousness regarding ancient Indian society, and its social structures. However, in the recent dramatized and literary retellings, the historical complexity has often been sacrificed in the name of creative liberty, simplified storytelling and hyperbole. The collateral damage caused by such reductive narratives can be best illustrated through the examination of the representation of Sūta community, a Jāti whose members have played diverse roles and held important positions in the ancient Indian society. Yet, their identity has been systematically flattened to be portrayed as emblematic victims of caste-based oppression.

The Sūtas, originally understood as offspring of Kṣatriya fathers and Brāhmaṇa mothers, occupied multifaceted roles in classical Indian society. Members of this Jāti surface multiple times in the Mahābhārata not just as charioteers, their most commonly identified occupation, but also as royal counsellor, army commanders, queens, respected narrators of sacred texts, and also as the progenitors of illustrious dynasties.

Ugrasravas Sāuti, one of the narrators of the Mahābhārata itself, who recounted it to the assembly of Brahmarṣis. Sañjaya, the reliable counsellor of king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who was granted the divine vision to witness and narrate the Kurukṣetra war. Queen Sudeṣṇā of Matsya and her brother Kīcaka, Matsya's military commander, were Sūtas who wielded considerable political and martial prowess. Conceivably most salient, Yadu himself, the ancestor of Yādava dynasty into which Śrī Kṛṣṇa was born, was technically a Sūta, as he was the son of Kṣatriya king Yayāti and Devayānī, daughter of the Brāhmaṇa sage Śukrācārya.

Irrespective of this textual evidence of social range and mobility, modern popular culture has constructed a monolithic narrative of Sūta identification centred solely around Karṇa. Television adaptations, for instance B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988-1990) and Star Plus's *Mahabharat* (2013-2014) have

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1. *Research Scholar, Department of Political Science & Public Administration, Dr. Hari Singh Gour University, Email: vartikasinghlodhi6@gmail.com*

reached millions of viewers, becoming for many Indians their only encounter with the epic (*Mahabharat*, B.R. Chopra; *Mahabharat*, Star Plus). These adaptations persistently presented fabricated scenes: Droṇa refusing to educate Karṇa because of his Jāti, Draupadī humiliating Karṇa at her svayaṃvara on grounds of his Jāti, and a general atmosphere of caste-based discrimination that imposes contemporary social conflicts onto ancient social structures (*Mahabharat*, B.R. Chopra; *Mahabharat*, Star Plus). Academic works have perpetuated similar distortions: D.D. Kosambi's influential *Myth and Reality* wrongly translates Varṇa as caste while Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* presents several fabrications as fact, including invented discriminatory episodes entirely absent from the source text.

This research emerges from a realization that the dominant narratives surrounding the Sūta community are not simply incomplete but actively deceptive. The politics of narrative operates here at multiple degrees: the omission of inconvenient evidence (which includes the Mahābhārata's own narrators being Sūtas), the fabrication of discriminatory episodes, and the conceptual imposition of later social structures onto ancient periods. The conflation of Varṇa, Jāti, and caste three conceptually distinct concepts that advanced across different historical periods has additionally compounded these distortions, enforcing colonial-era and post-colonial understandings of rigid social stratification onto ancient texts where such rigidity demonstrably did not exist.

This research addresses the gap between textual evidence regarding the Sūta community and its contemporary representation in popular culture and academic discourse. While in the Mahābhārata and secondary literature Sūtas are found to be the people holding important social positions, contemporary narratives push a one-dimensional identity, viewing Sūtas only through the lens of victimization and social marginalization. This study aims at providing a comprehensive, textual examination of the Sūta community's position in ancient Indian society, focusing on their representation in the Mahābhārata, and to critically examine how modern-day representations have distorted the general understanding of masses when it comes to Sūtas.

This study employs textual analysis as its primary research methodology, examining two primary editions of the Mahābhārata: the critical edition from the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, as translated into English by Bibek Debroy, and the Sanskrit to Hindi edition translated by Sāhityācārya Paṇḍit Rāmnārāyaṇdatt Śāstrī Pāṇḍey 'Rām', published by Gita Press, Gorakhpur. These are supplemented by references to the Ṛg Veda, Manusmṛti, Purāṇas, Upaniṣads, and the Rāmāyaṇa.

This paper is organized into four broad sections, following the introduction. The first section builds the conceptual framework by providing meaning and nuances of Varṇa, Jāti, and how caste came into existence. The second section documents certain prominent Sūtas within the Mahābhārata, focusing on their roles and achievements. The third section examines how omission, fabrication and conceptual conflation in contemporary retellings have distorted Sūta identity. The concluding section consolidates the findings and reflects on their implications for understanding ancient Indian social system. Through this analysis, the paper builds a thorough case for a more accurate, textually grounded understanding of the Sūta community that challenges the reductive narratives of ancient Indian society.

Construction of Identity: Varṇa, Jāti and Caste

a. Varṇa

One of the most commonly believed references to the conceptual precursors of the Varṇa system is usually determined through the Puruṣa Sūkta of the Ṛg Veda. The Puruṣa Sūkta describes the creation of the universe through a cosmic yajña performed on Puruṣa, the divine supreme being. However, it is noteworthy that in the Puruṣa Sūkta, Puruṣa does not mean a man but serves as an allegorical establishment. The mantra 10.90.12 of the Puruṣa Sūkta states: **"brāhmaṇo asya mukham āsīt bāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtaḥ | ūrū tad asya yad vaishyaḥ padbhyāṃ śūdro ajāyata" (Rao 71)**, which translates to **"The Puruṣa who was got ready to be sacrificed, had Brāhmaṇa as his face, the Rājanya as his arms, the Vaiśya as his thighs, and the Śūdra was born from his feet" (Rao 71).** The Puruṣa Sūkta does not refer to human society or social divisions in the least, since it concerns the moment of cosmic creation rather than the organization of society. **As Rao notes, the caste system was altogether alien to the Ṛg Vedic corpus (Rao 71-72),** and this verse rather suggests that the four qualities of Brāhmaṇa, Rājanya, Vaiśya and Śūdra were instilled in every human being through the sacrifice of Puruṣa (Bhalerao). The concept of society based on Varṇa was still in a very early stage of development even for the duration of the later Vedic and Itihāsic period **(Malhotra and Viswanathan, "A Brief Social History"),** let alone at the time of creation of the universe. A clearer understanding of Varṇa can be found through the first section of 13th verse of the fourth chapter of the Bhagavadgītā in which Śrī Kṛṣṇa states: "chātur-varṇyaṁ mayā sṛiṣhṭaṁ guṇa-karma-

vibhāgaśhaḥ", which translates to the four categories of occupations were created by him, according to people's qualities and actions, and not by birth (Mukundananda 4.13).

Another evidence can be found in Mahābhārata's Mokṣa Dharma Parva in the dialogue among Brahama Ṛṣi Bhṛgu and Bharadvāja, in which Ṛṣi Bhṛgu, on being questioned about Varṇa, answers that "there is no special distinction between the Varṇas. the entirety in this universe first consisted of Brahman (the supreme being). Brahman created all of them earlier and that they attained Varṇa due to their deeds" (Mahābhārata, Śāntiparva 188.10; Debroy, vol. 9, Moksha Dharma Parva). This provides clear evidence that Varṇa was a fluid system based on qualities that humans attained later in life.

The foundation of the Varṇa system lies in a dynamic interplay between one's inherent guṇas (qualities) and karma (actions), a system that firmly provides structure to the society while remaining flexible enough to allow room for individual transformation through present conduct.

The Bhagavadgītā establishes "Brāhmaṇa-kṣatriya-viśāṁ śūdrāṇāṁ ca paran-tapa karmāṇi pravibhaktāni svabhāva-prabhavair guṇaiḥ," that, the duties of the Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras are distributed according to their qualities, in accordance with their guṇas (and not by birth) (Mukundananda 18.41).

Sri Ādi Śaṅkarācārya has described guṇas as one's svabhāva (nature). The Svabhava of Brāhmaṇa is sattvik, that of Kṣatriya is rajasik with sattva being the subordinate svabhāva, that of Vaiśyas is rajasik with tamas as the subordinate svabhāva and lastly of Śūdras is tamas with rajas as the subordinate svabhāva. However, the key insight is that the svabhāv one attains in the present birth is the prabhav (result) of one's karma (actions) in past lives (Śaṅkarācārya).

This karmic understanding is also substantiated by the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, which states "Among them, those who did good work in this world [in their past life] attain a good birth accordingly. But those who did bad work in this world [in their past life] attain a bad birth" (Lokeswarananda 5.10.7). Śrī Keśava Kāśmīri's commentary on the same also reinforces this guṇa-based classification, while also putting forth scope of exception through the famous example from the Jābāla Upaniṣad which narrates the tale of an outcaste boy who approaches Gautama Ṛṣi for initiation. When asked about his father, the boy honestly confessed that his mother had told him that she had slept with many men before he was born and so she could not verify who his father was. Despite the circumstances of his birth, Gautama Ṛṣi recognized that total honesty possessed by the boy is an undeniable virtue of sattva guṇa thus qualifying him to receive initiation (Kashmiri 18.41).

The account from Jābāla Upaniṣad isn't merely an exception to the rule, the Mahābhārata reinforces the same through the dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and King Nahuṣa who was cursed to be a python.

"The serpent asked, "Truthfulness and knowledge of the brahman can be found in all the four Varṇas. O Yudhiṣṭhira! Truthfulness, charity, lack of anger, lack of cruelty, non-violence and compassion can also be found among Śūdras."

Yudhiṣṭhira replied, "If these traits, not even found in a Brāhmaṇa, are seen in a Śūdra, he is not a Śūdra. A Brāhmaṇa in whom a Brāhmaṇa's traits are not found, is a Śūdra. O serpent! It is said that one in whom these traits are found is a Brāhmaṇa. O serpent! One in whom these traits are not found, is marked as a Śūdra" (Debroy, vol. 3, Vana Parva).

These texts distinctly establish that though birth circumstances reflect one's accumulated karma from actions of past lives, transformation through present conduct is always possible. Thus, birth is just the starting point shaped by past karma, not an immutable destiny.

The example from Jābāla Upaniṣad and the excerpt from Yudhiṣṭhira's dialogue from the Mahābhārata are testament to the very rudimentary understanding that Varṇa is based on guṇa and karma, while past karma may set the stage for one's entry into the world, present actions and inherent qualities ultimately determine one's true Varṇa.

b. The Genesis and Purpose of Jāti System - Varṇa-Saṅkara

The literal meaning of Varṇa-Saṅkara is failure to maintain Varṇa . According to the Manusmṛti 10.24, this failure can be caused due to three reasons, "by adultery (committed by persons) of (different) Varṇas, by marriages with women who ought not to be married, and by the neglect of the duties and occupations (prescribed) to each, are produced (sons who owe their origin) to a confusion of the Varṇas" (Bühler 407).

Considering the causes of Varṇa-Saṅkara, it becomes imperative to question, if Varṇa was predominantly defined by guṇas, what happened when individuals born of inter-Varṇa unions possessed intermediate combinations of guṇas? The emergence of Jātis can be understood as a practical response to inter-Varṇa marriages as they were not a rarity. The frequent occurrence of inter-Varṇa unions through marriages can be attributed to the common knowledge derived from the Manusmṛti 2.240, "Excellent wives,

learning, (the knowledge of) the law, (the rules of) purity, good advice, and various arts may be acquired from anybody" (Bühler 73) and to the comprehensive documentation of different Jatis given in the Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa.

The Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa also attributes the proliferation of Jātis to inter-Varṇa marriages. However, these marriages, were deliberately caused by King Vena, who wanted to observe the consequence of the systematic disruption in the Varṇa system. The subsequent result of inter-Varṇa marriage was the creation of the following Jatis: Karana, Ambashtha, Grandhavanika, Kamsya Vanika, Sankha Vanika, Ugra Kṣatriya, Rajputa, Kumbhakara, Tantuvaya, Karmakara, Rasa, Magadha, Gopa, Napita, Modaka, Barajivi, Suta, Malakeara, Tambuli, Tailika, Taksha, Rajaka, Svarnakara, Suvarnavanika, Abhira, Taila Karaka, Dhivara, Saundika, Nata, Savaka, Sekhara, Jalika, Grihi, Kudaba, Chandala, Vadura, Churmakara, etc. (Banerji ch. 57).

Though the Varṇa system is often believed to be the ultimate law, Varṇa-Saṅkara reveals the actual gap between the theory and practice in the then society. It is evident that the society engaged in inter-Varṇa marriages and the four-fold classification of Varṇa was not broad enough to incorporate the numerous mixed Varṇa offspring. Therefore, Jāti system was a device of bringing all the offspring of mixed unions of one blood with the Varṇas (Sharma, "The Doctrine of Varṇas in the Manusmṛti," sec. IX).

The emergence of Jātis was a practical adaptation to the social realities, though the cause of origin might differ in different literary sources the essence remains the same. Varṇa-Saṅkara demanded acknowledgment, which manifested in an expanded social framework that came to be known as Jāti. The creation of Jātis was broadening of Varṇa system, aimed at inducting offspring of inter-Varṇa unions, into the social classification as they fell out of the existent four-fold Varṇa system.

In this sense, the origin and expansion of Jātis reveals an important truth about social systems that they are shaped not only by scriptural ideals but also by the complex realities of human society. The Varṇa system's evolution into the Jāti system demonstrates how theoretical constructs bend to incorporate the ever-evolving human society.

c. Jati and Caste

It is essential to emphasise that Varṇa, Jāti, and caste are distinct concepts that cannot be used interchangeably, and there exists a fundamental problem of non-translatability between the three. Jāti is based on birth and refers to the occupational community into which one is born (Ganatra, "Dharma Meets Strength," note 21). However, it does not restrict one's Varṇa. The Jāti system is believed to have evolved only some centuries before the common era (Malhotra and Viswanathan, "A Brief Social History"). The rigidity of the Jāti system during the period of Islamic invasions and settlements became most pronounced during the Mughal period which came as a communal defence response. Islamic rule introduced a fundamental division of society into believers and non-believers, the latter who were the natives, were designated as Dhimmīs or Kāfirs, with their status being reduced to that of servile subjects of the Muslim state (Narain, "Presuppositions of Jizyah"). Jizyah was a religious tax levied exclusively on non-Muslims, which remained in force across twelve centuries of Islamic rule in India, starting from MuHammad bin Qasim and carrying forward to Aurangzeb with varying degrees of emphasis (Narain, "Jizyah in India"). Simultaneously, economic exploitation through ruthless taxation and extraction of surplus wealth created conditions of immobility and despair for the native population, stifling trade, agriculture, and social mobility (Malhotra and Viswanathan, "A Brief Social History"). In such an environment of religious and economic pressure, communities of people belonging to the same Jāti turned inward, seeking to protect their way of life and ensure that protection carried forward generationally. It was this defensive contraction, not an inherent feature of the Jāti system itself, that later observers mistook for an ancient and unchanging social order.

During the sixteenth century, upon their arrival in India, the Portuguese observed society organized into occupational Jātis, which they termed 'casta,' a word that eventually became 'Caste'**.** The Caste construct was later systematized by the British for administrative convenience and social stratification **(Malhotra and Viswanathan, "A Brief Social History").**

Having clearly distinguished between Varṇa Jāti and Caste, as implied from Manusmṛti 10.11, it can now be relevantly stated that Sūta was a Jāti of offspring born to a Kṣatriya father and a Brāhmaṇa mother (Bühler 404).

Table 1: Varṇa, Jāti and Caste: A Comparative Overview

Parameter	Varṇa	Jati	Caste
Basis	Guṇa (qualities) and	Birth into an occupational community	Colonial administrative category

of classification	karma (actions).	resulting from inter-Varṇa unions.	imposed on Jāti.
Birth-based?	No. Past karma shapes the birth circumstance, but present conduct determines true Varṇa.	Yes. One is born into a Jāti.	Treated as birth-based and hereditary by colonial administrators.
Quality-based?	Yes. Bhagavadgītā 4.13 and 18.41 establish Varṇa as guṇa-karma based.	No. Jāti is occupational and hereditary.	No.
Can it change?	Yes. The Yudhiṣṭhira-Nahuṣa dialogue and the Jābāla Upaniṣad both affirm that transformation through present conduct is always possible.	Fluid in earlier periods; became rigid during the Mughal era as a defence mechanism for survival.	Systematically rigidified by the British for administrative convenience.
When did it become rigid?	Theoretically never. Fluidity is inherent to Varṇa and rigidity is a later imposition.	Rigidified during the Mughal era.	From the 16th century onwards, first named “casta” by the Portuguese and then systematized by the British.
How was it determined?	Through one's inherent guṇas and karma. Śaṅkarācārya describes guṇas as expressions of past-life karma manifesting in present nature through birth, but guṇas can be attained.	By parentage, specifically the Varṇa combination of one's father and mother. For example, Sūta = Kṣatriya father and Brāhmaṇa mother, as per Manusmṛti 10.11.	Assigned externally by colonial census and administrative categories.
Textual origin	Bhagavadgītā 4.13 and 18.41; Mahābhārata Śāntiparva 188.10	Manusmṛti 10.24 (Varṇa-Saṅkara); Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa ch. 57 ; Manusmṛti 10.11.	No ancient textual basis. Portuguese casta (16th century) adopted and codified by the British.
Relationship to the other two	Foundational. The theoretical fourfold framework from which Jati eventually emerged.	An expansion of Varṇa to accommodate inter-Varṇa offspring. It does not restrict one's Varṇa.	A colonial flattening of Jāti and not equivalent to either Varṇa or Jati.

Prominent Sūtas in the Mahābhārata

Accounts of the origin of Sūtas are found in the Brahma Purāṇa and Vāyu Purāṇa, which state that to glorify King Pṛthu, who ruled the earth well, sages performed a sacrifice from which emerged Jātis known as the Sūtas and the Magadhas. These texts describe Sūtas and Magadhas as cross-breeds, with Sūtas in particular being the offspring of Kṣatriya fathers and Brāhmaṇa mothers. Sūtas are believed to hold predominantly dual occupational identities, firstly, as the individuals who narrated scriptures such as the Itihāsas and Purāṇas to sages and others, a role that was not anything less than teaching, and secondly, they were also renowned as charioteers, a position held by the king's trusted individuals who possessed knowledge of warfare and its strategies as they accompanied kings to battle (Shastri and Bhatt 1.82-85; Tagare 1.13-16; Debroy, vol. 1). An examination of distinguished Sūtas within the Mahābhārata reveals the range of roles they occupied and the respect they commanded in historical Indian society:-

1. Lomaharṣaṇa: Lomaharṣaṇa, also known as Romaharṣaṇa, was one such prominent Sūta. According to the Vāyu Purāṇa, Lomaharṣaṇa was a disciple of the great sage Vedavyāsa and had learned the Purāṇas from him (Tagare 1.13-16). Lomaharṣaṇa was a well-known Sūta, who was respected and honoured in the assemblies of kings and sages. At many instances it can be observed that the salutations used by sages to greet Sūta Lomaharṣaṇa consistently acknowledged his greatness. Lomaharṣaṇa was not only a recounter but was also a member of the court of Yudhiṣṭhira (Mahābhārata, Sabha Parva 4.12), indicating that Sūtas were respected well enough to hold positions in royal courts over and beyond the general understanding of them only as bards and charioteers.

It has also been documented in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa that Sūta Lomaharṣaṇa had six disciples (Dutt 185), and Pargiter's study of *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition* explicitly records their full names with respective gotra as Ātreya Sumati, Kāśyapa Akṛtavraṇa, Bhāradvāja Agnivarcas, Vasiṣṭha Mitrayu, Sāvarṇi Somadatti and Śuśarman Śaṃśapāyana (Pargiter 22-23). Five of these gotra names, Ātreya, Kāśyapa, Bhāradvāja, Vasiṣṭha and Sāvarṇi, are established Brāhmaṇa lineages, indicating that five of Lomaharṣaṇa's six disciples were Brāhmaṇas. The fact that Brāhmaṇas became formal disciples of a Sūta demonstrates that a Guru was selected based on his knowledge and merit and not based on his Jāti.

Further elevating Lomaharṣaṇa's standing, the Vāyu Purāṇa regards him as an incarnation of Viṣṇu, born with the specific mission of recounting the Purāṇa-Saṃhitā (Tagare 1.13-16, n. 1). If Lomaharṣaṇa's identity as a Sūta were one of low standing and disrepute, the tradition would not have accorded him the status of a divine incarnation. His recognition as a reincarnation of Viṣṇu is a testament to the reverence in which he and by extension the Sūta community were held.

2. Ugrasravas: Ugrasravas Sāuti, the son of Lomaharṣaṇa, is another representative of the Sūta community. Ugrasravas Sāuti finds his mention in the Mahābhārata as one of its principal narrators, having narrated it to an assembly of Brahmarṣis at the ashram of Maharṣi Śaunaka in Naimiṣāraṇya (Mahābhārata, Ādi Parva 1.1-1.27). Ugrasravas Sāuti's contributions to the epic extend beyond narration, as he is the one who reclassified the original hundred-parva classification of the Mahābhārata done by Vyāsa into the eighteen-parva classification (Mahābhārata, Ādi Parva 2.84), representing the version of Mahābhārata that is widely known in the current times. The reverence accorded to both father and son can again be seen in the Anuśāsana Parva of the Mahābhārata, where Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira about the names of ṛṣi who are revered not just by humans but also by the gods and recitation of whose names frees one from all sins. In this sacred list, Bhīṣma mentions the names of both Lomaharṣaṇa and Ugrasravas Sāuti (Mahābhārata, Anuśāsana Parva 165.43-165.46), placing them among the most venerated sages. This placement of Lomaharṣaṇa and his son Ugrasravas Sāuti again emphasises on the fact that Jāti was not rigid and did not affect one's Varṇa.

3. Sañjaya: Another prominent representative of Sūta Jāti was Sañjaya. Sañjaya who is noted as the advisor and lesser known as the charioteer of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, was also a Sūta (Mahābhārata, Ādi Parva 1.149). As the political positions held by Sañjaya clearly suggests, he was a man who was greatly trusted and respected by the king. This trust and respect exhibits in the Sañjaya-Yana Parva of the Udyoga Parva, which reveals that Sañjaya was sent as Hastināpur's ambassador for peace negotiations with the Pāṇḍavas in an effort to avert war (Debroy, vol. 4, Sanjaya Yana Parva). His diplomatic role appears particularly significant when viewed in parallel with Śrī Kṛṣṇa serving as the Pāṇḍavas' ambassador to the Kauravas for peace negotiations giving the readers a perspective as to how important the role of an ambassador really was.

As it is a well-known fact that the peace negotiations failed due to Duryodhana's obstinacy. When the war became inevitable, sage Vyāsa offered to grant Divine vision to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, but on Dhṛtarāṣṭra's refusal, Sañjaya was granted Divya Dṛṣṭi (divine vision) by Veda Vyāsa, who blessed him that nothing in Kurukṣetra would remain invisible to him (Mahābhārata, Bhīṣma Parva 2.9). This divine blessing demonstrates that a Sūta was considered spiritually worthy to receive such extraordinary powers and to serve as the conduit through which the sacred events of the Mahābhārata war would be transmitted to posterity.

4. Karṇa: Perhaps one of the most celebrated warriors of the Mahābhārata who has garnered immense applause in the recent times is Karṇa. It is no secret that Karṇa was referred to as Sūta-Putra, the son of a Sūta as he was raised by Adhiratha and his wife Radha. Adhiratha was a Sūta, who worked as royal charioteer. Adhiratha is also mentioned as a friend of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra (Mahābhārata, Vana Parva 309.1), indicating the high social standing of Sūta families in royal circles. As son of Sūta Adhiratha, Karṇa also received his education in archery from Droṇācārya himself, alongside Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 2.5-2.7), demonstrating that Sūtas too had access to the same gurukuls as royal princes. His prowess as a warrior was such that he was crowned king of Aṅgadeśa by Duryodhana, ascending him to royal status. Karṇa also participated in Princess Draupadī's svayaṃvara, though he could not fulfil the condition of the svayaṃvar as he could not even string the bow and thus did not win (Mahābhārata, Ādi Parva 186.15-186.19).

5. Others: Beyond these individual examples, there are several other Sūtas who deserve to be mentioned. Perhaps most remarkably, Yadu, the progenitor of Yādava dynasty in whose lineage Śrī Kṛṣṇa was born, was technically a Sūta. Kṣatriya king Yayāti married to Brāhmaṇa Devayānī the daughter of Śukrācārya (Mahābhārata, Ādi Parva 78.22-23).

Through this marriage, Yayāti and Devayānī gave birth to Yadu (Mahābhārata, Ādi Parva 82.5), whose lineage became the illustrious Yādava dynasty. Other examples of people belonging to Sūta Jāti include Sudeṣṇā, the queen of King Virāṭa of the Matsya kingdom, (the mother-in-law of Abhimanyu) and her brother Kīcaka, the commander of the Matsya army (Mahābhārata, Virāṭa Parva 14.4, 14.6, 14.34) affirming the fact that Karṇa's ascension to royalty was not an exclusive example of a Sūta royalty.

Examples of Sūta are found in the Rāmāyaṇa as well. Sumantra, who served as friend, charioteer, and advisor to King Daśaratha, was a Sūta. Such was the authority of Sumantra that when Śrī Rāma got exiled, he directly approached Queen Kaikeyī to reproach her and ask her to lift her impositions from Rāma (Vālmīki, Ayodhya Kāṇḍa 2.35.1-5), demonstrating the respect and agency he exercised.

These examples collectively demonstrate that Sūtas occupied diverse and often elevated positions across the Mahābhārata, from Bards to charioteers to royalties to military commanders and trusted ministers.

Table 2: Prominent Sūtas Across Texts, their Roles and Significance

Name	Text and Source	Role(s)	Significance
Lomaharṣaṇa (also known as Romaharṣaṇa)	Vāyu Purāṇa, Viṣṇu Purāṇa, Mahābhārata.	Disciple of Vedavyāsa, narrator of Purāṇa, member of Yudhiṣṭhira's court.	Had five Brāhmaṇa disciples, proving that a Guru was chosen on merit and not Jāti. Venerated by name in the Anuśāsana Parva among sages honoured by gods themselves.
Ugrasravas Sāuti	Mahābhārata.	Principal narrator of the Mahābhārata, reclassified its structure from hundred parvas to eighteen parvas.	Son of Lomaharṣaṇa. Named by Bhīṣma alongside his father among sages venerated by gods.
Sañjaya	Mahābhārata.	Advisor and charioteer of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, ambassador of Hastināpur, recipient of Divya Dṛṣṭi.	for peace negotiations, a role parallel to Śrī Kṛṣṇa's role on the Pandava side. Granted divine vision by Vedavyāsa, indicating a Sūta was considered spiritually worthy.
Adhiratha	Mahābhārata.	Royal charioteer, friend of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra.	Foster father of Karṇa. His friendship with Dhṛtarāṣṭra indicates the high social standing of Sūta families in royal circles.
Karṇa	Mahābhārata.	Student of Droṇācārya, king of Aṅga, commander of the Kaurava army.	Raised as a Sūta, educated in the same gurukul as royal princes. Crowned king by Duryodhana.
Sudeṣṇā	Mahābhārata.	Queen of King Virāṭa of Matsya, mother-in-law of Abhimanyu.	Her position as queen affirms that Sūta royalty was not limited to Karṇa's case.
Kīcaka	Mahābhārata.	Commander of the Matsya army, brother of Queen Sudeṣṇā.	Held one of the highest military positions in the Matsya kingdom, demonstrating Sūta presence in martial leadership.
Yadu	Mahābhārata.	Progenitor of the Yādava dynasty.	Born of Kṣatriya king Yayāti and Brāhmaṇa Devayānī, daughter of Śukrācārya, making him

			technically a Sūta. The ancestor of the lineage into which Śrī Kṛṣṇa was born.
Sumantra	Rāmāyaṇa.	Friend, charioteer, and advisor to King Daśaratha.	Directly reproached Queen Kaikeyī regarding Rāma's exile, demonstrating the respect and agency he exercised in the royal household.

Narrative Discrepancies: Modern Misrepresentations of Sūtas

The textual evidence provided in the previous section exemplifies the varied presence of people belonging to Sūta Jāti, that sharply contrasts with current popular portrayals. Contemporary retellings through television adaptations, and academic interpretations, have consistently underrepresented and misrepresented the social status of Sūtas, which has resulted in oversimplification of a multifaceted and varied community into a singular narrative focused on Caste-based discrimination. This section explores the various narratives through which these inaccuracies have arisen and their effects on the public's comprehension of ancient Indian social hierarchies.

1. Selective Representation in Popular Media

Well known television series such as Star Plus's *Mahabharat* (2013-2014) and B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988-1990) have predominantly portrayed Sūtas through the single character of Karṇa, often neglecting and completely omitting to mention other significant Sūta figures (*Mahabharat*, B.R. Chopra; *Mahabharat*, Star Plus). These adaptations often completely skip on the information that one of the narrators of the Mahābhārata, Ugrasravas Sāuti was a well-respected Sūta. Likewise, the Sūta identities of Sudeṣṇā, Kīcaka, and Sañjaya are never explicitly stated. These exclusions prevent mass audiences from fully grasping the original societal role and positions of Sūtas. Audiences are also not presented with the information that Bhīṣma told Yudhiṣṭhira in the Śāntiparva that, Sūta Lomaharṣaṇa and Ugrasravas are ṛṣi who must be venerated, showcasing how esteemed they really were.

2. The Construction of Educational Discrimination

Modern depictions have established a narrative, and falsely so, that Guru Droṇa declined to accept Karṇa as his student, based on his Sūta Jāti. This inaccurate assertion has been repeatedly reinstated through television depictions ("Arjun Saves Dronacharya"; "Karna Starts Learning Archery") as well as through literary depiction like Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (Pattanaik, "Karna's Story"). The evidence against this narrative is found in the Śānti Parva, where it is explicitly stated that Karṇa was indeed a student of Guru Droṇa alongside the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, and that Droṇa imparted archery skills to Karṇa (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 2.5). What Droṇa refrained from teaching Karṇa was the Brahmāstra, not due to Karṇa's Jāti, but because Droṇa recognized Karṇa's intention to use it against Arjuna. After being denied by Droṇa, Karṇa took his leave from his gurukul and sought out Paraśurāma to get the knowledge of the Brahmāstra, in doing so he even deceived Paraśurāma about his identity to secure acceptance (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 2.10-2.15). That being mentioned, Karṇa was never obstructed from receiving education due to his Sūta Jāti; he was merely denied access to Brahmāstra by Droṇa, because of his evident animosity towards his fellow students.

3. The Svayamvara Fabrication

Another widespread misconception, attributed to the modern adaptations, is the depiction of Draupadī's svayaṃvara. The popular adaptations present a falsely dramatized narrative in which Draupadī stops Karṇa from participating in her svayaṃvara because of his Sūta Jāti ("Draupadi's 'Swayamvar'"; "Karna at the Swayamvar"). This portrayal stands in sharp contrast with the Mahābhārata, which reveals that Karṇa did in fact participate in the svayaṃvara but could not string the bow (Mahābhārata, Ādi Parva 186.15-186.19). On referring to the Mahābhārata, we find that Draupadī neither stopped Karṇa's participation nor she disrespected him because of his Jāti. Furthermore, in Bibek Debroy's translation of the Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata from the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, it is mentioned that when Arjuna, in the guise of a Brāhmaṇa, decided to participate in the svayaṃvar, the Brāhmaṇas present at the assembly commented that how a Brāhmaṇa could succeed when Kṣatriyas like Karṇa and Shalya had not, suggesting, that the Brāhmaṇas in the assembly did not view Karṇa as just a Sūta, rather, they considered him as a Kṣatriya based on his skills and abilities (Debroy, vol. 1, Droupadi-Svayamvara Parva).

4. Misrepresentation of Karṇa's Political Alliance

Modern narratives have set a perspective in the minds of masses that Karṇa got inclined towards Duryodhana, despite his amoralistic tendencies, because of his gratefulness, for being made king of Aṅga, thus giving a portrayal of Karṇa as a man of conditional loyalty because of social upliftment. Such a portrayal is a deviation from the original account. Karṇa and Duryodhana met in childhood at Droṇa's gurukul and thereafter became friends due to their mutual disliking for the Pāṇḍavas (Mahābhārata, Śānti Parva 2.7). Their friendship was before Duryodhana's political act of crowning Karṇa as king of Aṅga and therefore, it was not a bond of rescue but of mutual aversion.

5. Translation Issues in Academic Literature

The establishment of faulty narrative and misrepresentation of Sūtas is rooted in the very problem of the wrongful translation of Jāti as Caste. As it has already been established, Caste, Jāti, and Varṇa cannot be used interchangeably, but a repeated imprudence has been witnessed in academic translations and interpretations. **D.D. Kosambi, in his book** *Myth and Reality***, translated Bhagavadgītā 4.13 as "The four-caste division has been created by Me," rendering** *cāturvarṇya* **as four-caste rather than four-varṇa, and thereby imposing a rigid, birth-based reading onto a verse that Śrī Kṛṣṇa explicitly grounds in guṇa and karma (Kosambi). Further, Wendy Doniger, in** *The Hindus: An Alternative History***, described the first bards who recited the epics as "a caste called Charioteers (Sūtas)," collapsing the distinction between Jāti and the colonial construct of caste, and reducing the Sūta community to a single occupation while erasing their well-documented roles as counsellors, ministers, commanders, and narrators (Doniger).** Such translations impose modern Caste categories onto ancient social structures, obscuring the actual nature of **the** Varṇa system.

Similarly, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* presents a plethora of misinformation as facts. The work claims that Droṇa refused to teach Karṇa and asked him to stick to his father's trade (Pattanaik, **"Karna's Story").** It further claims that Karṇa was publicly humiliated and prevented from participating in Draupadī's svayaṃvara on account of his Jāti **(Pattanaik, "Draupadi's Swayamvara").** The book also attributes to Śrī Kṛṣṇa the claim that Draupadī was responsible for rejecting Karṇa on the grounds of caste and that her disrobing would not have occurred had she chosen him **(Pattanaik, "Krishna Visits the Pandavas").** Finally, it presents Draupadī as having been in love with Karṇa and regretting not marrying him on account of his caste **(Pattanaik, "Draupadi Admits a Secret").** These are complete fabrications with no basis in the Mahābhārata, yet they have shaped popular understanding for thousands of readers.

6. The Reductive Victimization of Karṇa

Karṇa's character has been persistently romanticized due to selective depiction of his story, majorly, through the modern lens of Caste-based discrimination. This narrative completely overlooked the nuances of Karṇa's character by reducing him to a heroic victim. While Karṇa was indeed a great warrior, he repeatedly accompanied Duryodhana and Śakuni in their attempts to kill the Pāṇḍavas through deceit (Debroy, vol. 1, Adi- Vamshavatarana Parva). Furthermore, Karṇa also expressed immense joy at the humiliation and disrobing of Draupadī. Such was his elation that, he actively encouraged Duḥśāsana to continue the act (Mahābhārata, Sabha Parva 67.45).

By reducing Karṇa to a one-dimensional victim of discrimination, modern narratives have completely dropped the moral compass, when it came to his actions, leading to a state where even his antagonistic acts are either omitted, or portrayed as a reaction of social marginalisation.

7. Contradictions in the Sūta-as-Charioteer Narrative

Owing to popular portrayals, Sūtas are generally understood as charioteers. Somehow, it has been fed to the minds of the masses that charioteers stood low in social hierarchy. However, a very fundamental question that this narrative fails to answer is, why would Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself serve as Arjuna's charioteer during the Kurukṣetra war, if it was a job of such low order (Debroy, vol. 4, Udyoga Parva)? Another interesting question that arises is that, how can a job of giving direction to a king's chariot, who often went to wars, be considered as job of low order? The answers to these questions are evident: charioteers were skilled not just to drive the chariot but to also to strategically protect the king during the time of crisis. They were trusted people, who were close to kings and their families, and possessed knowledge of strategy and warfare. To exemplify this, it must be stated that Śalya, the king of Madra, served as Karṇa's charioteer during the war, demonstrating that the position was neither unimportant nor socially degraded (Debroy, vol. 7, Karna-Vadha Parva).

Finally, to sum up, the elementary problem with modern representations is that it imposes the theory of Caste-based discrimination onto the society of that time, when the Caste system, as we understand

today, did not exist. The representation of Sūtas as lower Castes, who were constantly discriminated against, contradicts the textual evidence of Sūtas holding positions of authority, respect, and reverence.

I. Conclusion

This research establishes that Varṇa, Jāti, and Caste are three distinct concepts, that cannot be used interchangeably, as its fundamental statement. Varṇa is a fluid system based on the qualities that one achieves later in life, and Jāti refers to the occupational community into which one is born, which became rigid as a defence mechanism during the Mughal era. However, Caste was a colonial construct which originated when the Portuguese termed Indian Jātis as 'casta,' which were later systematized by the British for administrative convenience and social stratification. Conflation of these terms onto ancient periods where rigidity of the sort, demonstrably did not exist, lead to faulty understanding of ancient Indian societies.

The study reveals through textual examination that Sūtas were the offspring of Kṣatriya fathers and Brāhmaṇa mothers, who played diverse roles in ancient Indian society, for example, Lomaharṣaṇa and his son Ugrasravas Sāuti were revered narrators of sacred texts, with Ugrasravas being one of the principal narrators of the Mahābhārata, such was their greatness that both were mentioned by Bhīṣma among sages venerated by gods themselves. Other examples of Sūtas include, Sañjaya who was Dhṛtarāṣṭra's trusted advisor, Yadu, the progenitor of the Yādava dynasty, queen Sudeṣṇā and her brother Kīcaka, military commander of Matsya, and lastly, the well-known Karṇa, disciple of Droṇācārya, and the king of Aṅga.

In the last section, the paper demonstrates, how the modern representations have systematically distorted Sūta identity through fabricated episodes and selective omission. Television adaptations, and academic work, often present invented scenes, for instance, Droṇācārya refusing to teach Karṇa, Draupadī humiliating Karṇa at her svayaṃvara, that contradict primary sources. Contemporary narratives reduce the multifaceted Sūta community to a one-dimensional victim identity. This research demonstrates that textually grounded analysis reveals a far more complex ancient social system than contemporary politics of narrative would suggest.

Ultimately, this study calls for a more honest and nuanced engagement with ancient Indian texts to understand the ancient society, its social structures and evolution thereafter. This is not to deny that discrimination never existed in the Indian society, but rather to insist that we examine historical facts as they were, instead of projecting present-day social categories and conflicts backward, when society functioned differently, according to different principles.

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