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**Ph.D Thesis:** “Social Mobility in Ancient Eastern India (600BC-600AD)”

### **Abstract**

The study of social mobility in early India is an important issue of research. Within the field of social mobility the issue of emergence of caste is a central area of research in sociology. Some historians believe that the entire pattern of change in early India can be characterized as a transition from tribe to caste.

This study is an attempt to understand the transition from tribe to caste in the Middle Gangetic valley from fifth century BCE to third century CE by studying the Jātakas. The Jātaka stories focus on the area of eastern Uttar Pradesh and north Bihar. In the course of research work, I made an attempt to understand the process of the social and cultural changes and developments that shaped the identity of various groups in this region. I have studied the prevailing notions of tribe and caste, and the construction of caste identities. The processes of transition to state society and cultural formations in the fifth century BCE are believed to have led to the emergence of new identities. The state formation, expansion of agriculture, development of new religious cultures, evolution of caste structure and the spread of *Varṇa-Jāti* ideology have all been studied in this thesis.

The first section of this thesis has attempted to analyze how tribes interacted with caste society. In the second and third sections, our main emphasis will be on tracing the social and cultural history of these developments.

In the reconstruction of caste identities of various occupational groups in the region of the Middle Gangetic valley, a common tendency has been to rely on the *Jātakas* as a literary source. *Brāhmanical* texts are concerned with high tradition. They neglect the role of common people. This would direct me to gauge the various social and cultural changes and developments of distinct cultural identities in the Middle Gangetic valley.

After thoroughly analyzing and critically examine we can say that the society at the time of the Buddha followed the *varṇa* structure but besides this, the *kul* also played a vital role in order to maintain this social structure. The term *Kul* is used to identify the family descent one could belong to. This shows that the places of *high* and *low varṇa* were taken by the *high* and *low Kul*. This does not mean that *varṇa* did not exist. *Varṇa* was still practiced but was overshadowed by the *Kul*.

In this thesis, I have also attempted to sketch a picture of the society at time of the Buddha: society in which, *varṇa* based on birth was rebutted but the birth based on *Kul* was accepted. This concept, did not mean however that a person having been born into a *high kul*, gained respect by default. He would be respected only when he had proved his character through his *Kamma*.