As is well-known, in the Puruṣasūkta, a reference is made to four orders of society as emanating from the sacrifice of the Primeval Being. The names of those orders are given there as Brāhmaṇa, Rājanya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra, who are said to have come respectively from the mouth, the arms, the thighs, and the feet of the Puruṣa 1)

On the basis of this reference to the “four orders of society” in the Puruṣasūkta it has been argued that:

The fact that the four classes are described as of divine origin, although in a later hymn, must be taken as sufficient indication that they were of long duration and very well-defined, even though the exact demarcation of their functions, the regulations regarding their inter-relations, and the extent of their flexibility may not be referred to in the main body of Rigvedic literature which is avowedly of a liturgical nature 2

Thus, the Puruṣasūkta has been cited to “prove that the formulation of castes, if not the Caste System, was already a fait accompli in the age of the Rig Veda” 3).

This paper is an effort to examine this relationship of the Puruṣasūkta with the Caste System.

II

Before this relationship can be fully examined, however, both the Puruṣasūkta and the notion of caste need to be carefully examined. First the Puruṣasūkta. If the concerned verse of the ṚgVeda is

1) ṚgVeda X.90.12.
3) R. C. Majumdar, ed., The Vedic Age (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1963) p. 403, fn. 1.
closely examined it discloses several striking features onomastically; (1) it is only in the Puruṣasūkta that all the four orders are mentioned; (2) the Śūdra is mentioned for the first and only time in the Puruṣasūkta in the RgVeda; (3) the word Rājanya is also mentioned once only in the RgVeda, in the Purusa-suktta (but its equation with the word kṣatriya is freely accepted); (4) not only do rājanya and śūdra occur only in the Puruṣasūkta, the word Vaiśya is also only found therein.

It may also be added that chronologically the Puruṣasūkta is a “late hymn” 4) as it belongs to the tenth maṇḍala. Etiologically, three aspects of the hymn arouse interest: (1) while it refers to the brahmana, the rājanya and the vaiśya not as sprung from, but as identical with the mouth, the arms and the thighs of the Puruṣa, it refers to the śūdra as sprung from the feet 5); (2) the creator-god is not referred to as praṇāpati or brahmā but as puruṣa 6); and (3) this hymn is only one of the several cosmogonic hymns found in the tenth maṇḍala of the RgVeda (see X.121, X.82, X.129 etc.). Finally, ascriptionally, the hymn is associated with the name of the sage Nārāyaṇa. Benimadhab Barua has argued that Nārāyaṇa’s social theory is an adjunct to his cosmological speculation, and that he does not “seem to have taken the least trouble to enquire whether the distinction of four classes was based originally on a mere division of labour or otherwise” 7). Nevertheless, on the basis of this contrived juxtaposition, Barua maintains, “the Puruṣasūkta may be rightly considered as the first theocratic basis of the Cāturvarṇya system of the Brāhmaṇas” 8). One should note here that varṇa does not appear in the Puruṣasūkta at all. The word varṇa appears in the RgVeda and the words brahmana, rājanya, kṣatriya, vāiśya and śūdra appear in the RgVeda, but the word varṇa is never applied to them.

5) R. C. Majumdar, ed., op. cit., p. 388.
7) Benimadhab Barua, *A History of Pre-Buddhist Indian Philosophy* (University of Calcutta, 1921) p. 33.
8) Ibid.