

Varna (Hinduism)

Varna refers to the categorization of the Hindu society by four castes, hypothesized by the Brahmins and their sacred texts. This quadruple division is not to be confused with *Jāti* or even the much finer division of the contemporary caste system in India.^[1] The four varnas, or *chatur varna*, are mentioned in ancient texts in the following (stratified) order, from top to bottom,^[2]

- the **Brahmins**: scholars, teachers, priests and sages.
- the **Kshatriya**: kings, warriors, and rulers.
- the **Vaishyas**: cattle herders, agriculturists and merchants^[3]
- the **Shudras**: labourers, craftsmen and artisans.

The first three varna are considered *Arya*, and thus allowed to participate in Vedic rituals from which the non-Arya Shudra varna is excluded.^[4]

Separate and shunned by the society were the "untouchables" like the *Chandal* (*cāṇḍāla*), who had to deal with the disposal of dead bodies and are described as dirty and polluted. There was a belief that one's Karma in the past, resulted in one's condition in this birth. "Now people here whose conduct is good can expect to quickly attain a pleasant birth, like that of a Brahmin, the Kshatriya, or the Vaisya. But people of evil conduct can expect to enter a foul womb, like that of a dog, a pig, or a Chandal".^[5]

The varna system of Hindu society is described in the various Puranas and Smritis, among others. *Manusmriti*, is one of many Dharmashastra texts reflecting the laws and society of Maurya period India and being a reference work for the Brahmins of Bengal especially, was relied upon by the British colonial administrators and scholars based in Calcutta, the capital city. *Manusmriti* was almost unknown south of the Vindhyas. The modern Hindu caste system recognizes many more social groupings not mentioned in the Hindu scriptures and only theoretically accepts the necessity of following prescribed duties. Caste politics is a controversial issue in the contemporary Republic of India.

Etymology and origins

Further information: *varṇa* (disambiguation) and trifunctional hypothesis

Varna is a Sanskrit term *varṇa* (वर्ण) is derived from the root *vr̥*, meaning "to cover, to envelop" (compare *vr̥tra*). Derived meanings include "kind, sort, character, quality". All these meanings are already present in the Rigveda's use of the word.

The meaning "class of men, tribe" in the Rigveda refers to the division between Aryas and Dasa.^[6] The earliest application to the formal division into four social classes appears in the late Rigvedic Purusha Sukta (RV 10.90.11–12), which has the Brahman, Rajanya (= Kshatriya), Vaishya and Shudra classes made of the head, arms, thighs and feet of the primordial giant, Purusha, respectively. Other Vedic texts and the *Manusmriti*, a law text dating to roughly between 200 BCE and 200 CE follow suit.

The varna classification was first described, almost in passing, in the Purush Sukta of the Rgveda 1090.

Rigvedic evidence of such a quadruple division of society has been compared to similar systems, especially with a view to reconstructing hypothetical Proto-Indo-European society. Such comparison is at the basis of the trifunctional hypothesis presented by Georges Dumézil. Dumézil postulates a basic division of society into a priesthood (Brahmins), warrior class or nobility (Kshatriyas) and commoners (Vaishyas), augmented by a class of unfree serfs (Shudras), as was done in ancient Iran and Greece as well (where the fourth class is called pan-Hellenes).

Hindu tradition

The Purusha Sukta in the Rig-Veda 10:90 refers to the four principal varnas, although the word varna is not used, described in Manu's code, viz. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. They are compared to the body of the "primordial man" or Purusha: "The Brâhmana was his head, of both his arms was the Râjanya made. His thighs became the Vaishya, his feet became the Sûdra" (RV 10.90.12) This model is often cited for its hierarchical ordering of the varnas, however, by the same logic the model also implies the concept of interdependence and interchangeability of the varnas. Furthermore reading this mantra within the entire context of the Purusha Sukta, which also describes the Purusha as the origin of the Sun (from his eye), the Moon (from his mind), the sky (from his head), air (from his navel), horses, cattle, etc. leads one to the conclusion that the entire Sukta is emphasizing the point that all these come from the original Purusha.

Many Hindu yogis and sages have, over the centuries, constantly commented about inheriting social status. Ramanujacharya initiated people from all castes into his tradition, and broke taboos by inviting them to his house for food. Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (15th century), the powerful bhakti of Krishna also denounced inheriting social status. He famously distributed the Hare Krishna mantra to all around India, claiming this was the True path to moksha.

Kanakadasa of the 15th century also denounced inherited social status. He believed that Life in every human being is Divine, and that only the ignorant wrought injustice against their own brethren by this practice. Basavanna of the 12th century is said to have denounced inherited social status and tried to unify all communities under the Linga (form of Shiva).

Dharmaśāstras

The concept of dharma deals mainly with the duties of the different varṇas and āśramas (life cycles).

Manusmṛiti is often quoted in reference to the Varna system as an inherited social class system. However, the Hindu rightists usually point out that the *Manusmṛiti* is a later work that does not form a part of Hindu Scriptures, so it is of questionable relevance. The rightists content that the *Manusmṛiti* has been used by British colonialists, politicians and sociologists to denigrate those of the Hindu faith.^[7]

The *Manusmṛiti* claims that by the time it was written in ancient times, Hindu society included another class (untouchables) of people without a position in any of the four Varnas and therefore associated with the lowest of the jobs. The upper classes, who were supposed to maintain ritual and corporal purity, came to regard them as untouchables. The people of this "fifth varna" are now called Dalits (*the oppressed*) or Harijans; they were formerly known as "untouchables" or "pariahs". However, this last addition social strata is not a part of the religion of Hinduism. Hinduism only categorizes occupations into four categories.

"Twice born"

The first three varnas are seen as "twice born" and they are allowed to study the Vedas. In India and Nepal the sub-communities within a varna are called "jat" or "jati" (the varna is also used instead of jat). Traditionally, individuals are allowed to marry only within their jati. People are born into a jati and normally it cannot be changed, though there were some exceptions in Hindu Scriptures. For example, the sage Vishwamitra was born as a Kshatriya and by deep *tapas* (meditation) became a venerable Brahmin rishi. Good deeds during ones lifetime can allow a low class jati member to ascend to the upper class and study the Vedas as a Brahmin priest.

Traditional occupations

The occupations of the Vaishya are those connected with trade, the cultivation of the land and the breeding of cattle; while those of a Kshatriya consist in ruling and defending the people, administering justice, and the duties, of the military profession generally and ruling and expounding all dharma. Both share with the Brahmin the privilege of reading the Vedas. To the Brahmin belongs the right of teaching and expounding the sacred texts. Shudras were the serfs, and performed agricultural labour.

Manusmriti assigns cattle rearing as Vaisya occupation, however there are sources in available literature that Kshatriyas also owned and reared the cattle and cattle-wealth was mainstay of their households. Emperors of Kosala and Prince of Kasi are some of many examples.^[3]

Tantric view

The Tantric movement that developed as a tradition distinct from orthodox Hinduism between the 8th and 11th centuries CE^[8] also relaxed many societal strictures regarding class and community distinction. However it would be an over generalization to say that the Tantrics did away with all social restrictions, as N. N. Bhattacharyya explains:

"For example, Tantra according to its very nature has nothing to do with the [class] system but in the later Tantras [class] elements are pronounced. This is because although many of our known Tantric teachers were non-Brāhmaṇas, rather belonging to the lower ranks of society, almost all of the known authors of the Tantric treatises were Brāhmaṇas."^[9]

Varna and jāti

The terms *varna* (general classification based on occupation) and *jāti* (caste) are two distinct concepts: while varna is a four-part division of all Hindu groups, jāti (community) refers to specific endogamous groups. Generally a sub-community is divided into exogamous groups based on same gotras (गोत्र). The classical authors scarcely speak of anything other than the varnas; Indologists sometimes confuse the two.^[10]

Modern India

Opposition within Hinduism

Critics point that the effect of communities (jatis) inheriting varna was to bind certain communities to sources of influence, power and economy while locking out others and thus create more affluence for jatis in higher classes and severe poverty for jatis in lower classes and the outcaste Dalit. In the last 150 years Indian movements arose to throw off the economic and political yoke of an inherited class system that emerged over time, and replace it with what they believed to be true Varnashrama dharma as described in the Vedas.

Swami Krishnananda, a foremost disciple of Swami Sivananda and former General Secretary of the Divine Life Society, noted the following about inherited social status in his autobiography:

While the [varna] system was originally evolved for the necessary classification of human duty in order to preserve the organic stability of society, its original meaning and its philosophical foundation was forgotten through the passage of time, and bigotry and fanaticism took its place through the preponderance of egoism, greed and hatred, contrary to the practice of true religion as a social expression of inner spiritual aspiration for a gradual ascent, by stages, to God Almighty. Vidura, famous in the Mahabharata, was born of a Shudra woman. But he had the power to summon the son of Brahma, from Brahmaloaka, by mere thought. Which orthodox Brahmin can achieve this astounding feat? It is, therefore, necessary for everyone to have consideration for the facts of world-unity and goodwill, Sarvabhuta-hita, as the great Lord mentions in the Bhagavad Gita. Justice is more than law. No one's body is by itself a Brahmin, because it is constituted of the five gross elements,- earth, water, fire, air and ether. Else, it would be a sin on the part of a son to consign to

flames the lifeless body of a Brahmin father. It is, therefore, not proper to victimise a colleague by an action plan of any religious community wedded to fundamentalist doctrines.

—[11]

Paramahansa Yogananda also opposed what he called the un-Vedic inherited social status as we know it today. He taught that varna originated in a higher age, but became degraded through ignorance and self-interest. Yogananda said:

These were (originally) symbolic designations of the stages of spiritual refinement. They were not intended as social categories. And they were not intended to be hereditary. Things changed as the yugas [cycles of time] descended toward mental darkness. People in the higher [classes] wanted to make sure their children were accepted as members of their own [class]. Thus, ego-identification caused them to freeze the ancient classifications into what is called the 'caste system.' Such was not the original intention. In obvious fact, however, the offspring of a brahmin may be a shudra by nature. And a peasant, sometimes, is a real saint.

—Conversations with Yogananda, Crystal Clarity Publishers, 2003

Further reading

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- *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, by Susan Bayly and Gordon Johnson.

External links

- Maanoj Rakhit on the Varna system ^[13]
- Jati system in India ^[14] at AttributetoHinduism.com
- India Together on Caste ^[15]
- *Annihilation of Caste with a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi* Part I ^[16] & Part II ^[17] by *Dr. B. R. Ambedkar*
- Writings by Dr Ambedkar about Caste ^[18]
- Varna Ashram and Hindu Scriptures (pdf) ^[19] at Hindu-International.org
- Articles on caste ^[20] by Koenraad Elst
- Is Caste System Intrinsic to Hinduism? ^[21] at EPW.org.in

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- [5] *Chhandogya Upanisad* 5.10,7
- [6] *Macdonnell-Keith, Vedic Index II* 247 sq.
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- [21] <http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2003&leaf=11&filename=6474&filetype=html>
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