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# Lecture-21



## Varna (Hinduism)

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**Varna** (Sanskrit: वर्ण, romanized: *varṇa*), a Sanskrit word with several meanings including type, order, colour or class,<sup>[1][2]</sup> was used to refer to social classes in Hindu texts like the *Manusmriti*.<sup>[1][3][4]</sup> These and other Hindu texts classified the society in principle into four varnas:<sup>[1][5]</sup>

- **Brahmins**: priests, scholars and teachers.
- **Kshatriyas**: rulers, warriors and administrators.
- **Vaishyas**: agriculturalists and merchants.<sup>[6]</sup>
- **Shudras**: laborers and service providers.

Communities which belong to one of the four varnas or classes are called **savarna** or "caste Hindus". The **Dalits** and **tribes** who do not belong to any varna were called **avarna**.<sup>[7][8]</sup>

This quadruple division is a form of social stratification, quite different from the more nuanced system *Jātis* which correspond to the European term "caste".<sup>[9]</sup>

The varna system is discussed in Hindu texts, and understood as idealised human callings.<sup>[10][11]</sup> The concept is generally traced to the *Purusha Sukta* verse of the Rig Veda.

The commentary on the Varna system in the *Manusmriti* is oft-cited.<sup>[12]</sup> Counter to these textual classifications, many Hindu texts and doctrines question and disagree with the Varna system of social classification.<sup>[13]</sup>

## Etymology and origins

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The Sanskrit term *varna* is derived from the root *vr*, meaning "to cover, to envelop, count, classify consider, describe or choose" (compare *vrtra*).<sup>[14]</sup>

The word appears in the *Rigveda*, where it means "colour, outward appearance, exterior, form, figure or shape".<sup>[3]</sup> The word means "color, tint, dye or pigment" in the *Mahabharata*.<sup>[3]</sup> Varna contextually means "colour, race, tribe, species, kind, sort, nature, character, quality, property" of an object or people in some Vedic and medieval texts.<sup>[3]</sup> Varna refers to four social classes in the *Manusmriti*.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

## The Vedas

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The earliest application to the formal division into four social classes (without using the term *varna*) appears in the late Rigvedic *Purusha Sukta* (RV 10.90.11–12), which has the Brahman, Rajanya (instead of Kshatriya), Vaishya and Shudra classes forming the mouth, arms, thighs and feet at the sacrifice of the primordial *Purusha*, respectively:<sup>[15]</sup>

11. When they divided Purusa how many portions did they make?

What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet?

12. The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made.  
His thighs became the Vaishya, from his feet the Shudra was produced.<sup>[15]</sup>

Some modern indologists believe the *Purusha Suktam* to be a later addition, possibly as a charter myth.<sup>[16]</sup> However, others believe it to be a genuine hymn.<sup>[17]</sup> Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton, a professor of Sanskrit and Religious studies, state, "there is no evidence in the *Rigveda* for an elaborate, much-subdivided and overarching caste system", and "the varna system seems to be embryonic in the *Rigveda* and, both then and later, a social ideal rather than a social reality".<sup>[16]</sup>

Traditional commentators of the Vedas like *Sayanacharya* do not hint at the *Purusha Suktam* being a fabrication<sup>[18]</sup>

Ram Sharan Sharma states that "the Rig Vedic society was neither organized on the basis of social division of labour nor on that of differences in wealth ... [it] was primarily organised on the basis of kin, tribe and lineage."<sup>[19]</sup>

In the post-Vedic period, the varna division is described in the *Dharmashastra* literature, the *Mahabharata* and in the *Puranas*.<sup>[20]</sup>

## The Dharmasastras

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Varna system is extensively discussed in Dharma-shastras.<sup>[21]</sup> The Varna system in Dharma-shastras divides society into four varnas (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras). Those who fall out of this system because of their grievous sins are ostracised as outcastes (untouchables) and considered outside the varna system.<sup>[22][23]</sup> Barbarians and those who are unrighteous or unethical are also considered outcastes.<sup>[24]</sup>

Recent scholarship suggests that the discussion of varna as well as untouchable outcastes in these texts does not resemble the modern era caste system in India. Patrick Olivelle, a professor of Sanskrit and Indian Religions and credited with modern translations of Vedic literature, Dharma-sutras and Dharma-shastras, states that ancient and medieval Indian texts do not support the ritual pollution, purity-impurity as the basis for varna system.<sup>[25]</sup> According to Olivelle, purity-impurity is discussed in the Dharma-shastra texts, but only in the context of the individual's moral, ritual and biological pollution (eating certain kinds of food such as meat, urination and defecation).<sup>[21]</sup> In his review of Dharma-shastras, Olivelle writes, "we see no instance when a term of pure/impure is used with reference to a group of individuals or a varna or caste".<sup>[25]</sup> The only mention of impurity in the Shastra texts from the 1st millennium is about people who commit grievous sins and thereby fall out of their varna. These, writes Olivelle, are called "fallen people" and impure, declaring that they be ostracised.<sup>[26]</sup> Olivelle adds that the overwhelming focus in matters relating to purity/impurity in the Dharma-sastra texts concerns "individuals irrespective of their varna affiliation" and all four varnas could attain purity or impurity by the content of their character, ethical intent, actions, innocence or ignorance, stipulations, and ritualistic behaviours.<sup>[27]</sup>

Olivelle states:

Dumont is correct in his assessment that the ideology of varna is not based on purity. If it were we should expect to find at least some comment on the relative purity and impurity of the different varnas. What is even more important is that the ideology of purity and impurity that emerges from the Dharma literature is concerned with the individual and not with groups, with purification and not with purity, and lends little support to a theory which makes relative purity the foundation of social stratification.<sup>[28]</sup>

The first three<sup>[29]</sup> varnas are described in the *Dharmashastras* as "twice born" and they are allowed to study the *Vedas*. Such a restriction of who can study Vedas is not found in the Vedic era literature.

*Manusmriti* assigns cattle rearing as Vaishya occupation but historical evidence shows that Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Shudras also owned and reared cattle and that cattle-wealth was mainstay of their households. Ramnarayan Rawat, a professor of History and specialising in social exclusion in the Indian subcontinent, states that 19th century British records show that Chamars, listed as untouchables, also owned land and cattle and were active agriculturalists.<sup>[30]</sup> The emperors of Kosala and the prince of Kasi are other examples.<sup>[6]</sup>

Tim Ingold, an anthropologist, writes that the *Manusmriti* is a highly schematic commentary on the varna system, but it too provides "models rather than descriptions".<sup>[31]</sup> Susan Bayly states that *Manusmriti* and other scriptures helped elevate Brahmin in the social hierarchy and these were a factor in the making of the varna system, but the ancient texts did not in some way "create the phenomenon of caste" in India.<sup>[32]</sup>

## The Epics

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The *Mahabharata*, estimated to have been completed by about the 4th century CE, discusses the Varna system in section 12.181.<sup>[20]</sup>

The Epic offers two models on Varna. The first model describes Varna as colour-coded system, through a sage named Bhrigu, "Brahmins Varna was white, Kshatriyas was red, Vaishyas was yellow, and the Shudras' black".<sup>[20]</sup> This description is questioned by another prominent sage Bharadvaja who says that colours are seen among all the Varnas, that desire, anger, fear, greed, grief, anxiety, hunger and toil prevails over all human beings, that bile and blood flow from all human bodies, so what distinguishes the Varnas, he asks? The *Mahabharata* then declares, according to Alf Hiltebeitel, a professor of religion, "There is no distinction of Varnas. This whole universe is Brahman. It was created formerly by Brahma, came to be classified by acts."<sup>[20]</sup>

The *Mahabharata* thereafter recites a behavioural model for Varna, that those who were inclined to anger, pleasures and boldness attained the Kshatriya Varna; those who were inclined to cattle rearing and living off the plough attained the Vaishyas; those who were fond of violence, covetousness and impurity attained the Shudras. The Brahmin class is modelled in the epic, as the archetype default state of man dedicated to truth, austerity and pure conduct.<sup>[33]</sup> Indeed, it goes on to assert that all men are children of Brahmins, which does not make sense, unless understood this way. In the *Mahabharata* and pre-medieval era Hindu texts, according to Hiltebeitel, "it is important to recognize, in theory, Varna is nongenealogical. The four Varnas are not lineages, but categories."<sup>[34]</sup>

The *Bhagavad Gita* describe the professions, duties and qualities of members of different varnas.

There is no entity on earth, or again in heaven among the Devas, that is devoid of these three Gunas, born of Prakriti.

Of Brâhmanas and Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, as also of Sudras, O scorcher of foes, the duties are distributed according to the Gunas born of their own nature.

The control of the mind and the senses, austerity, purity, forbearance, and also uprightness, knowledge, realisation, belief in a hereafter— these are the duties of the Brâhmanas, born of (their own) nature.

Prowess, boldness, fortitude, dexterity, and also not flying from battle, generosity and sovereignty are the duties of the Kshatriyas, born of (their own) nature.

Agriculture, cattle-rearing and trade are the duties of the Vaishyas, born of (their own) nature; and action consisting of service is the duty of the Sudras, born of (their own) nature.<sup>[35]</sup>

## **Manusmriti and the Varna System of Hindu Social Order:**

*Manusmriti* is one of the greatest texts that uphold the varna system. Manu the author of *Manusmriti* express clearly the partiality and dogmatism in his treatment of caste. He presents a detailed code of and caste duties and penalties in unequivocal terms.

He divided people into four varnas namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Sudras. *Manusmriti* does not acknowledge the fifth varna. It explains the concept of mixed castes, which included these people who were born out of inter-caste marriages. The offspring born of them are considered the most degraded people in society. According to Manu, the lowest groups were the Chandals who were the offspring of inter-caste marriages.

The Chandals are a mixed race born of a Sudra father and a Brahmin mother. They live outside the villages. For Manu, the highest duty of a *Sudra* is to serve the Brahmins. The service of a Brahmin is declared to be an excellent occupation for a *Sudra*. A *Sudra* is not entitled to perform sacrifices or study of Vedas. *Sudras*, want to gain merit and knowledge but they are not given. They imitate the practice of various men without reciting the sacred text.

The varna system is a unique social framework of the Hindu social order. It signifies a division of labor, placement in the social hierarchy, and normative expectations. The caste system, it is said, is a

perverse form of the varna system, which signifies consonance between capacity, ability, and adoption of specific work in the society. Manu's description of the varna system reveals a more or less rigid hierarchy with greater privileges for the Brahmins.