

Varna (Hinduism)

Vaṛṇa (वर्ण) is a Sanskrit word which means type, order, colour or class.^{[1][2]} The term refers to social classes in Brahminical books like the *Manusmṛiti*.^{[1][3][4]} These and other Hindu literature classified the society in principle into four varṇas.^{[1][5]}

- Brahmins: priests, scholars and teachers.
- Kshatriyas: rulers, warriors and administrators.
- Vaishyas: agriculturalists and merchants^[6]
- Shudras: laborers and service providers.

Communities which belong to one of the four varnas or classes are called *savarna*. In the present-day context, they include all the forward castes. The Dalits and scheduled tribes who do not belong to any varna, are called avarna.^{[7][8]}

This quadruple division is a form of social stratification not to be confused with the much more nuanced *Jāti* or the European term "caste".^[9]

The varna system is discussed in Hindu texts, and understood as idealised human callings.^{[10][11]} The concept is generally traced to the *Purusha Sūkta* verse of the Rig Vēda.

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

Contents

Etymology and origins

The Vedas

The Dharmasastras

The Epics

Varna in Buddhist texts

Varna in Jaina texts

Varna in Sikh texts

Tantra

Varna and jāti

See also

References

Further reading

Etymology and origins

Varna is a Sanskrit term *varṇa* (वर्ण). It is derived from the root *vr̥*, meaning "to cover, to envelop, count, classify consider, describe or choose" (compare *vr̥tra*).^[14]

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

The Vedas

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.^[15]

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.^[15]

This *Purusha Sukta* *varna* verse is now generally considered to have been inserted at a later date into the Vedic text, possibly as a charter myth.^[16] 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".^[16]

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".^[17]

In the post-Vedic period, the *varna* division is described in the *Dharmashastra* literature, the *Mahabharata* and in the *Puranas*.^[18]

The Dharmasastras

Varna system is extensively discussed in *Dharma-sastras*.^[19] The *Varna* system in *Dharma-sastras* 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.^{[20][21]} Barbarians and those who are unrighteous or unethical are also considered outcastes.^[22]

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-sastras*, states that ancient and medieval Indian texts do not support the ritual pollution, purity-impurity as the basis for *varna* system.^[23] According to Olivelle, purity-impurity is discussed in the *Dharma-sastra* 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).^[19] In his review of *Dharma-sastras*, 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".^[23] 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.^[24] 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.^[25]

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.^[26]

The first three^[27] *varnas* are described in the *Dharmasastras* 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.^[28] The emperors of Kosala and the prince of Kasi are other examples.^[6]

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".^[29] 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.^[30]

The Epics

The *Mahabharata*, estimated to have been completed by about the 4th century CE, discusses the varna system in section 12.181.^[18]

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".^[18] 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".^[18]

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.^[31] 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."^[32]

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.^[33]

Varna in Buddhist texts

Ancient Buddhist texts mention Varna system in South Asia, but the details suggest that it was a non-rigid, flexible and with characteristics devoid of features of a social stratification system.^[34] Maurice Walshe, a German scholar and translator of *Digha Nikaya*, provides a discussion between Gotama Buddha and a Hindu Brahmin named Sonadanda who was very learned in the Vedas.^{[35][36]} Gotama Buddha asks in Digha Nikaya, according to the Theravada Pali text translation by Walshe, "By how many qualities do Brahmins recognize another Brahmin? How would one declare truthfully and without falling into falsehood, "I am a Brahmin?"^[35] Sonadanda initially lists five qualities as, "he is of pure descent on both the mother's and the father's side, he is well versed in mantras, he is of fair color handsome and pleasing, he is virtuous learned and wise, and he is the first or second to hold the

sacrificial ladle".^{[35][36]} Buddha then asks the Brahmin, "If we omit one of these qualities you just listed, could not one be still a true Brahmin?" Sonadanda, one by one, eliminates fair colour and looks, then eliminates Varna in which one was born, and then eliminates the ability to recite mantra and do sacrifices as a requirement of being a Brahmin.^{[35][36]} Sonadanda asserts that just two qualities are necessary to truthfully and without falling into falsehood identify a Brahmin; these two qualities are "being virtuous and being learned and wise".^{[35][36]} Sonadanda adds, states Walshe, that it is impossible to reduce the requirement for being a Brahmin any further, because "for wisdom is purified by morality, and morality is purified by wisdom; where one is, the other is, the moral man has wisdom and the wise man has morality, and the combination of morality and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world".^[35] Brian Black and Dean Patton state Sonadanda admits after this, "we [Brahmins] only know this much Gotama; it would be well if Reverend Gotama would explain meaning of the two [moralitywisdom]".^[37]

Peter Masefield,^[34] a Buddhism scholar and ancient Pali texts translator, states that during the Nikāya texts period of Buddhism (3rd century BC to 5th century AD), *Varna* as a class system is attested, but the described *Varna* was not a caste system. The Pali texts enumerate the four Varnas *Brahmin*, "Kshatriya", *Vessa* (Vaishya) and *Sudda* (Shudra).^[34] Masefield notes that people in any *Varna* could in principle perform any profession. The early Buddhist texts, for instance, identify some Brahmins to be farmers and in other professions. The text state that anyone, of any birth, could perform the priestly function,^[34] and that the Brahmin took food from anyone, suggesting that strictures of commensality were as yet unknown. The Nikaya texts also imply that endogamy was not mandated in ancient India. Masefield concludes, "if any form of caste system was known during the Nikaya period - and it is doubtful that it was - this was in all probability restricted to certain non-Aryan groups".^[34]

Varna in Jaina texts

Ādi purāṇa, an 8th-century text of Jainism by Jinasena, is the earliest mention of Varna and Jati in Jainism literature.^[38] Jinasena does not trace the origin of Varna system to Rigveda or to Purusha Sukta, instead traces varna to the Bharata legend. According to this legend, Bharata performed an "ahimsa-test" (test of non-violence), and those members of his community who refused to harm or hurt any living being were called as the priestly varna in ancient India, and Bharata called them *dvija*, twice born.^[39] Jinasena states that those who are committed to ahimsa are *deva-Brāhmaṇas*, divine Brahmins.^[40]

The text *Adi purana* also discusses the relationship between varna and jati. According to Padmanabh Jaini, a professor of Indic studies, Jainism and Buddhism, the *Adi purana* text states "there is only one jati called *manusyajati* or the human caste, but divisions arise account of their different professions".^[41] The varna of Kshatriya arose when Rishabh procured weapons to serve the society and assumed the powers of a king, while Vaishya and Shudra varna arose from different means of livelihood in which they specialised.^[42]

Varna in Sikh texts

Sikhism is a 15th-century religion that originated in the Punjab region in the Medieval India. Sikh text mention *Varna* as *Varan*, and *Jati* as *Zat* or *Zat-biradari*. Eleanor Nesbitt, a professor of Religion and specialising in Christian, Hindu and Sikh studies, states that the *Varan* is described as a class system in 18th- to 20th-century Sikh literature, while *Zat* developed into caste system particularly during the British colonial era.^[43] In theory, Nesbitt quotes the Sikh dictum to be,

A Sikh should be a Brahmin in piety, a Kshatriya in defense of truth and the oppressed, a Vaishya in business acumen and hard work, and a Shudra in serving humanity. A Sikh should be all castes in one person, who should be above caste.^[43]

Tantra

The Tantric movement that developed as a tradition distinct from orthodox Hinduism between the 8th and 11th centuries CE^[44] also relaxed many societal strictures regarding class and community distinction. However it would be an over generalisation 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*.^[45]

Varna and jāti

The terms *varna* (theoretical classification based on occupation) and *jāti* (caste) are two distinct concepts. *Jāti* (community) refers to the thousands of endogamous groups prevalent across the subcontinent. A *jāti* may be divided into exogamous groups based on the same gotras. The classical authors scarcely speak of anything other than the *varnas*; even Indologists sometimes confuse the two.^[46]

See also

- Adi Dravidar
- Classical Hindu law
- Four occupations— fourfold Confucian division
- Hindu law
- Hindu reform movements
- Manuvāda

References

- Doniger, Wendy (1999). *Merriam-Webster's encyclopedia of world religions*. Springfield, MA, USA: Merriam-Webster. p. 186. ISBN 978-0-87779-044-0
- Stanton, Andrea (2012). *An Encyclopedia of Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa* USA: SAGE Publications. pp. 12–13. ISBN 978-1-4129-8176-7.
- Monier-Williams, Monier (2005) [1899]. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=zUezTfym7CAC&pg=PA924>) (Reprinted ed.). Motilal Banarsidass. p. 924. ISBN 978-81-208-3105-6
- Malik, Jamal (2005). *Religious pluralism in South Asia and Europe* Oxford UK: Oxford University Press. p. 48. ISBN 978-0-19-566975-6
- Ingold, Tim (1994). *Companion encyclopedia of anthropology* London New York: Routledge. p. 1026. ISBN 978-0-415-28604-6
- Kumar, Arun (2002). *Encyclopaedia of Teaching of Agriculture* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=fhWZNMlzHewC&pg=PA411>). Anmol Publications. p. 411. ISBN 978-81-261-1316-3
- Chandram, Bipan (1989). *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947* (https://books.google.com/books?id=UUn_FQ_I5voC&pg=PA231), pp. 230-231. Penguin Books India
- Yājñika, Acyuta and Sheth, Suchitra (2005). *The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva, and Beyond* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=wmKliAPgnF0C&pg=PA260>), p. 260. Penguin Books India
- Juergensmeyer, Mark (2006). *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=SwXz4uFWiRgC&pg=PA54>). Oxford University Press, USA. p. 54. ISBN 978-0-19-972761-2
- Bayly, Susan (2001), *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* Cambridge University Press, p. 8, ISBN 978-0-521-26434-1
- Thapar, Romila (2004), *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* University of California Press, p. 63, ISBN 978-0-520-24225-8
- David Lorenzen (2006). *Who invented Hinduism : essays on religion in History* Yoda Press. pp. 147–149. ISBN 978-81-902272-6-1
- Bayly, Susan (2001), *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* Cambridge University Press, p. 9, ISBN 978-0-521-26434-1
- Krishna Charitra by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay V&S Publishers

15. Basham, Arthur Llewellyn(1989). *The Origin and Development of Classical Hinduism*(<https://books.google.com/books?id=2aqqTYIhLikC>)(Reprinted ed.). Oxford University Press. p. 25 ISBN 978-0-19-507349-2
16. Jamison, Stephanie; et al. (2014). *The Rigveda : the earliest religious poetry of India*Oxford University Press. pp. 57–58. ISBN 978-0-19-937018-4
17. Sharma, Ram Sharan(1990). *Śūdras in Ancient India: A Social History of the Lower Order Down to Circa A.D. 600* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=gsZkAu-RHVgC&pg=PR10>). Motilal Banarsidass Publishers. p. 10.
18. Hiltebeitel, Alf (2011). *Dharma : its early history in law, religion, and narrative*. Oxford University Press. pp. 529–531. ISBN 978-0-19-539423-8
19. Olivelle, Patrick (1998). "Caste and Purity: A Study in the Language of the Dharma Literature" *Contribution to Indian Sociology*. **32** (2): 189–216.
20. Olivelle, Patrick (1998). "Caste and Purity: A Study in the Language of the Dharma Literature" *Contribution to Indian Sociology*. **32** (2): 199–216.
21. Bayly, Susan (2001), *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* Cambridge University Press, pp. 9–11, ISBN 978-0-521-26434-1
22. Olivelle, Patrick (1998). "Caste and Purity: A Study in the Language of the Dharma Literature" *Contribution to Indian Sociology*. **32** (2): 199–203.
23. Olivelle, Patrick (2008). Chapter 9. Caste and Purity in *Collected essays* Firenze, Italy: Firenze University Press. pp. 240–241. ISBN 978-88-8453-729-4
24. Olivelle, Patrick (2008). Chapter 9. Caste and Purity in *Collected essays* Firenze, Italy: Firenze University Press. p. 240. ISBN 978-88-8453-729-4
25. Olivelle, Patrick (2008). Chapter 9. Caste and Purity in *Collected essays* Firenze, Italy: Firenze University Press. pp. 240–245. ISBN 978-88-8453-729-4
26. Olivelle, Patrick (1998). "Caste and Purity: A Study in the Language of the Dharma Literature" *Contribution to Indian Sociology*. **32** (2): 210.
27. Juergensmeyer, Mark (2006). *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*(<https://books.google.com/books?id=SwXz4uFWiRgC&pg=PA27>). Oxford University Press, USA. p. 27. ISBN 978-0-19-972761-2
28. Rawat, Ramnarayan (2011). *Reconsidering untouchability : Chamars and Dalit history in North India* Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 53–63. ISBN 978-0-253-22262-6
29. Ingold, Tim (1994). *Companion encyclopedia of anthropology* Routledge. p. 1026. ISBN 978-0-415-28604-6
30. Bayly, Susan (2001), *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* Cambridge University Press, p. 29, ISBN 978-0-521-26434-1
31. Hiltebeitel, Alf (2011). *Dharma : its early history in law, religion, and narrative*. Oxford University Press. p. 532. ISBN 978-0-19-539423-8
32. Hiltebeitel, Alf (2011). *Dharma : its early history in law, religion, and narrative*. Oxford University Press. p. 594. ISBN 978-0-19-539423-8
33. Swarupananda. "Srimad-Bhagavad-Gita"(<http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbg/sbg23htm>). *Internet Sacred Text Archive*. John Bruno Hare Retrieved 28 November 2017.
34. Masefield, Peter (2008). *Divine revelation in Pali Buddhism* Routledge. pp. 146–154. ISBN 978-0-415-46164-1
35. Walshe, Maurice (1995). *The long discourses of the Buddha : a translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* Boston: Wisdom Publications. pp. 129–131. ISBN 978-0-86171-103-1
36. T. W. Rhys Davids. *DN4: To Sonadanda, Dīgha Nikaya Verses 13-21, Translated from the Pāli*(<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/dob/dob-04tx.htm>) Oxford University Press.
37. Black, Brian; Patton, Dean Laurie (2015) *Dialogue in early South Asian religions : Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions*. Burlington: Ashgate. pp. 245–246. ISBN 978-1-4094-4013-0
38. Jaini, Padmanabh (1998). *The Jaina path of purification* Motilal Banarsidass. pp. 294, 285–295. ISBN 978-81-208-1578-0.
39. Jaini, Padmanabh (1998). *The Jaina path of purification* Motilal Banarsidass. p. 289. ISBN 978-81-208-1578-0
40. Jaini, Padmanabh (1998). *The Jaina path of purification* Motilal Banarsidass. p. 290. ISBN 978-81-208-1578-0
41. Jaini, Padmanabh (2000). *Collected papers on Jaina studies* Motilal Banarsidass Publishers. p. 340. ISBN 978-81-208-1691-6.

42. Jaini, Padmanabh (2000). *Collected papers on Jaina studies* Motilal Banarsidass Publishers. pp. 340–341.
ISBN 978-81-208-1691-6
43. Nesbitt, Eleanor (2005). *Sikhism a very short introduction* Oxford New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 116–120.
ISBN 978-0-19-280601-7.
44. Flood, Gavin (2005) [2003]. *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* p. 208.
45. Bhattacharyya, N. N. *History of the Tantric Religion*. pp. 44–45.
46. Dumont, Louis (1980), *Homo hierarchicus: the caste system and its implications*, University of Chicago Press, pp. 66–67, ISBN 0-226-16963-4

Further reading

- Ambedkar, B.R. (1946) *Who were the Shudras?*
 - Alain Danielou (1976). *Les Quatre Sens de la Ve*, Paris
 - Sri Aurobindo (1970), *The Human Cycle, The Ideal of Human Unity War and Self-Determination* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust), ISBN 81-7058-281-4 (hardcover), ISBN 81-7058-014-5 (paperback)
 - Kane, Pandurang Vaman: *History of Dharmasastra: (ancient and mediaeval, religious and civil law)* Poona : Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute 1962–1975
 - G. S. Ghurye (1969). *Caste and Race in India* Popular Prakashan, Mumbai 1969 (Original print: 1932)
 - Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar (1967) *Human Society-2* Ananda Marga Publications, Anandanagar P.O. Baglata, Dist. Purulia, West Bengal, India.
 - Ghanshyam Shah, *Caste and Democratic Politics in India* 2004
 - Welzer, Albrecht. 1994. "Credo, Quia Occidentale: A Note on Sanskrit varna and its Misinterpretation in Literature on Mamamsa and Vyakarana". In: *Studies in Mamamsa: Dr Mandan Mishra Felicitation Volume* edited by R.C. Dwivedi. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass
 - Lal, Vinay (2005), *Introducing Hinduism*, New York: Totem Books, pp. 132–33, ISBN 978-1-84046-626-3
-

Retrieved from '[https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Varna_\(Hinduism\)&oldid=833190604](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Varna_(Hinduism)&oldid=833190604)

This page was last edited on 30 March 2018, at 04:29.

Text is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License](#); additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the [Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.](#), a non-profit organization.