

Brahmin

A Brahmin is a member of the highest *varna* in Hinduism. The Brahmins are the varna from which Hindu priests are drawn, and are responsible for teaching and maintaining sacred knowledge. The other major varnas, from highest to lowest, are the Kshatriya (warriors and princes), Vaisya (farmers or merchants) and Shudra (laborer's). The Varna system is discussed in Hindu texts, and understood as idealized human callings. The concept is generally traced to the *Purusha Sukta* verse of the Rig Veda. The Varna system was practiced in Satya Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwapar Yuga, and now in Kali Yuga age.

This quadruple division of the Varna system of Hinduism is a form of social stratification and is not to be confused with the much vaguer term of *Jati* or the European term caste.

Europe/United Kingdom:

- The social structure of the United Kingdom has historically been highly influenced by the concept of social class, with the concept still affecting British society in the early-21st century.
- British society, like its European neighbors and most societies in world history, was traditionally (before the Industrial Revolution) divided hierarchically within a system that involved the hereditary transmission of occupation, social status and political influence.
- Until recently the Parliament of the United Kingdom was organized on a class basis, with the House of Lords representing the hereditary upper class and the House of Commons representing everyone else. The British monarch is usually viewed as being at the top of the social class structure.

The British study the Indian society and started seeing Indian society from the Western perspective. They looked at the Hindu religion and modeled it like Christianity. The four Varnas of the Manu Smriti were taken as the four castes and is being categorized on the model of Western Upper/Lower caste.

“The caste system in Europe is vertical”-divided hierarchically within a system that involved the hereditary transmission of occupation, social status and political influence. The British monarch is usually viewed as being at the top of the social class structure.

In contrast - “The varna system in Hinduism is horizontal and not vertical”- Hence Vedanta says our birth is the result of our past actions. We are born in a family, as male or female, in an environment dictated by our purva janma vasanas (latent impressions of previous births). This classification is intended not to judge others, whether the other is Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya or Sudra but to judge oneself to see what type of sadhana (is a discipline undertaken in the pursuit of a goal-Moksha).

Jaati:

Jaati means a classification based on source of origin. Nyaya Sutra states those having a similar birth source form a Jaati.

A Jaati is based on Kulam and Gothram. A Gothram is a group of people coming from same paternal lineage. All individuals from the same Gothram are brothers and sisters. A Kulam is a group of Gothrams, having matrimonial bonding. So, a Kulam is a total composite of individual Gothrams. So, Jaathi can be based on birth. Similarly, various animals like elephant, lion, rabbits etc. form different 'Jaati'. In same manner, entire humanity forms one 'Jaati'.

A particular Jaati will have similar physical characteristics, cannot change from one Jaati to another and cannot cross-breed. Thus, Jaati is creation of Ishwar or Bhagvan. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra are not different Jaati because there is no difference in source of birth or even physical characteristics to differentiate between them. In reality, all humans form one single Jaati.

In India today a person profession is based on birth. The farmers, the barbers, the cobblers, the blacksmith, the Brahmins all continue their traditional profession. In the birth base Jaatis of the traditional societies the whole community is involved in the profession. The entire family works in that same profession (Wife, children). When there is less business, the community shares the opportunity, and so as when there is more business, it is also shared. The person who becomes more successful in the profession, leads the community, helping those not-so talented. There is a collective entrepreneurship and a collective ownership.

Varna System:

The six proper activities of Brahmins, ranked from the highest to the lowest, are teaching, studying the Vedas, offering ritual sacrifices, officiating at rituals for others, giving gifts, and accepting gifts. Brahmins study the religious texts, such as the Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, Gita etc. and teach members of other castes about the holy books. They also perform temple ceremonies, and officiate at weddings and other important occasions. Traditionally, the Brahmins served as the spiritual guides and teachers of the Kshatriya princes and warriors, preaching to the political and military elites about the dharma (at no time in the history of India Brahmins were the rulers), but today they perform ceremonies for Hindus from all the varnas.

BG 4-13: The four categories of occupations were created by me (Krishna) according to people's qualities and activities. Although I am the creator of this system, know me to be the non-doer and eternal.

- The Vedic philosophy explains this variety in a more scientific manner. It states that the material energy is constituted of three *gunas* (modes): *sattva guna* (mode of goodness), *rajo guna* (mode of passion), and *tamo guna* (mode of ignorance).
- The Brahmins are those who have a preponderance of the mode of goodness. They are predisposed toward teaching and worship.

- The Kshatriyas are those who have a preponderance of the mode of passion mixed with a smaller amount of the mode of goodness. They are inclined toward administration and management.
- The Vaishyas are those who possess the mode of passion mixed with some mode of ignorance. Accordingly, they form the business and agricultural class.
- Then there are the Shudras, who are predominated by the mode of ignorance.

“Shree Krishna explains in this verse that the classification of the *Varna-Ashram* system was according to people’s qualities and activities”.

BG 3.4: ‘One cannot reach the state beyond Karma, without first performing Karma.’

- This is because Karmas like Vedic sacrifices etc. destroy the negative residue of sins accumulated by us over our many births, consequently leading to a purification of the mind (chitta-shuddhi).
- It is only after our sins have been destroyed that True Knowledge (Jnana) reveals itself to us.
- However, regarding the actual experience of the Ultimate Truth the Karmas have no direct role. But they do have an inevitable role in granting us the necessary eligibility for receiving this Truth.
- There is no Nishkama Karma higher than working according to the Varna given to us by God, which is one way of always living under His patronage. It is what Shankaracharya Ji calls working like a servant under God. (Commentary on Bhagavad Gita 3.30)

BG 2.5.37: The brahmanas represent His mouth, the kshatriyas His arms, the Vaishyas His thighs, and the śūdras are born of His legs.

- All living beings are stated to be the parts and parcels of the Supreme Lord, and how they are explained in this verse. The four divisions of human society, namely the intelligent class (the brahmanas), the administrative class (the kshatriyas), the mercantile class (the Vaishyas), and the laborer class (the śūdras), are all in different parts of the body of the Lord. As such, no one is different from the Lord.
- According to Vedanta this verse of the Gita can also be interpreted that the Sudra’s vasana or personality are mostly tamasic (legs) -lowest of the personality. As the personality develops he/she will progress to the thighs (tamasic and rajastic), then to the arm (rajastic and satvic), and lastly to the head (satvic).

BG 5.18: Lord Krishna said a true devotee does not make any distinction between species or castes. The *brahmana* and the outcaste may be different from the social point of view, or a dog, a cow, or an elephant may be different from the point of view of species, but these differences of body are meaningless from the viewpoint of a learned transcendentalist. This is due to their relationship to the Supreme, for the Supreme Lord, by His plenary portion as Paramatma, is present in everyone's heart. Such an understanding of the Supreme is real knowledge.

BG -2.37: “The Gita describes many different paths and practices for people of different order, nature and caste. Perfectly executing one's *dharma* (right action / duty) awards heaven. When Arjuna was unwilling to fight, Krishna reminds him of His duty and tells him, if he follows his *kshatriya dharma* (warrior duty), then even by getting killed in the battle he'll attain heaven.”

B G- 3.35:

- *Dharma* comes from the root word *dhri*, which means *dhāraṇ karane yogya*, or “responsibilities, duties, thoughts, and actions that are appropriate for us.” For example, the *dharma* of the soul is to love God. It is like the central law of our being.
- *Swadharma* is our personal *dharma*, which is the *dharma* applicable to our context, situation, maturity, and profession in life.
- This *swa-dharma* can change as our context in life changes, and as we grow spiritually. By asking Arjun to follow his *swa-dharma*, Shree Krishna is telling him to follow his profession, and not change it because someone else may be doing something else. It is more enjoyable to be ourselves than to pretend to be someone else.
- The duties born of our nature can be easily performed with stability of mind. The duties of others may seem attractive from a distance and we may think of switching, but that is a risky thing to do.
- If they conflict with our nature, they will create disharmony in our senses, mind, and intellect. This will be detrimental for our consciousness and will hinder our progress on the spiritual path.
- Shree Krishna emphasizes this point dramatically by saying that it is better to die in the faithful performance of one's duty than to be in the unnatural position of doing another's duty.

Vasana: is the past impressions formed in our consciousness. The impression of anything remaining in the mind. The law of karma is impartial and operates until the Jiva realizes its true state. Death is not the end of the life and birth is not the beginning of the life either. The law of cause and effect is valid from birth to death and therefore does not just disappear before birth or after death. Hence Vedanta says our birth is the result of our past actions. We are born in a family, as male or female, in an environment dictated by our *purva janma vasanas* (latent impressions of previous births).

If we have satvic, rajasic or tamasic *vasanas* we will be born in an environment for the further evolution of these:

- A Brahmin is one who has predominately satvic *vasanas*.
- A Kshatriya is one who has predominately rajasic with satvic *vasanas* as second.
- A Vaisya is one with rajasic and tamasic *vasanas*.
- And a Sudra is one with predominately tamasic *vasanas*.

These are mental makeup of individuals - hence based on guna which then propels one to act according to his guna his actions (karma) differs. This classification is universal - and applies to all human beings who have mind and intellect to feel and to think. This classification is intended not to judge others, whether the other is Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya or Sudra but to judge oneself to see what type of sadhana (is a discipline undertaken in the pursuit of a goal. A *sādhaka*, or practitioner, is one who skillfully applies...mind and intelligence in practice towards a spiritual goal) would help for one to progress.

The *Vishnu Purana* :

- asserts that the Brahmin should study shastras, worship gods and perform libations on behalf of others,
- the Kshatriya should maintain arms and protect the earth,
- the Vaishya should engage in commerce and farming,
- while the Shudra should subsist by profits of trade, service other varnas and through mechanical labor.
- The text asserts the ethical duties of all varnas is to do good to others, never abuse anyone, never engage in calumny or untruth, never covet another person's wife, never steal another's property, never bear ill-will towards anyone, never beat or slay any human being or living being.
- Be diligent in the service of the gods, sages and guru, asserts the Purana, seek the welfare of all creatures, one's own children and of one's own soul.
- Anyone, regardless of their varna or stage of life, who lives a life according to the above duties is the best worshipper of Vishnu, claims the *Vishnu Purana*.

Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya:

- "Dvija" means "twice-born": the first birth is physical, while the second birth is a 'spiritual' one. The second 'birth' occurs when one takes up fulfilling a role in society, at the time of Upanayana initiation ceremony (the sacred thread (*yajnopavita*) is received by the boy during this ceremony, that he continues wearing across his chest thereafter). For example, a Brahmin is initiated into school to study and pursue Brahmopadesha (preach, counsel) in the matter of the nature of Brahman, the ultimate reality). Traditionally, a Kshatriya would start learning the use of arms, while a Vaishya would start a trade apprenticeship.
- Sandhyavandana is a mandatory religious ritual performed, traditionally, by *Dvija* communities of Hindus, particularly those initiated through the sacred thread ceremony referred to as the Upanayanam and instructed in its execution by a *Guru*, in this case one qualified to teach Vedic ritual. The Sandhyavandanam consists of recitation from the Vedas, accompanied by ritual. These rituals are performed three times a day- at morning (*prātaḥsaṁdhyā*), noon (*mādhyaḥnika*) and evening (*sāyaṁsaṁdhyā*). The Sandhyavandanam is the oldest extant liturgy in world religion. As a practice, it may be descended from the much older daily Agnihotra ritual.

The Shudra:

The Sudras are working class people, artisans and craftsmen. They are possessed of Tamas with a base of Rajas. Mandla 10, suktam 90 of Rig-Veda describes the followers of Shudra Varna as good at unskilled work, of good physique, handsome and of high character. The Sudra class is indispensable to society as they are like a spiral chord on which rests the social structure.

- Since all parts of the body are equally important and they help each other for a healthy body, so all these varnas should assist, cooperate and sustain each other for achieving an ideal society.
- His occupation should subsist by profits of trade, service other varnas and through mechanical labor. The Shudra has not been asked to chant the Vedas. This is not at all a hindrance in his spiritual progress. The result of chanting the Vedas is only that it purifies the mind (chitta-shuddhi), making it a fit vessel for receiving the Ultimate Truth (Brahma-Jnana). However, the same chitta-shuddhi that the other three Varnas receive through the chanting of the Vedas, the same result is gained by the Shudra just by following his Dharma.
- In fact, it is much easier for him. The three Varnas have to get up every morning before dawn to learn to recite the Vedas through a lengthy and continuous process. And what is the result they get? Purification of the mind. This is easily gained by the fourth Varna by merely following his Dharma as laid down in the Shastras.

He is fully entitled to the knowledge of Vedanta. In the final analysis, the Ultimate Truth, which we have to understand through Vedanta, admits of no Varna. Therefore, the scriptures are full of examples of the fourth Varna who have been Brahma-Jnanis (e.g. Dharma-Vyadha in the Mahabharata, the Alvars, Nayanars, etc.)

Brahmins:

The Dharma sutras and Dharmasatras text of Hinduism describe the expectations, duties and role of Brahmins. The rules and duties in these Dharma texts of Hinduism, are primarily directed at Brahmins.

- Knowledge of the Atman-contemplation of the Ishvara (God/Supreme Being, Brahman, True Self, Unchanging Reality), attunement to the supreme consciousness.
- Self-Control-austerity, self-discipline, persistent meditation, perseverance.
- Contentment-acceptance of others and of one's circumstances as they are.
- Forgiveness
- Righteous living
- Purification- clearness of mind, speech and body.
- Control of the senses, mind, intellect and ego.
- Wisdom

- Truthfulness
- Absence from anger

Brahmins are vegetarian, in keeping with Hindu beliefs. Activities that are forbidden to Brahmins according to the *Manusmriti* include making weapons, butchering animals, making or selling poisons, trapping wildlife, and other jobs associated with death.

A well-disciplined Brahmin, although he knows just the Savitri verse, is far better than an undisciplined one who eats all types of food and deals in all types of merchandise though he may know all three Vedas. – *Manusmriti 2.118, Translated by Patrick Olivelle*

Modern demographics and economic condition:

According to 2007 reports, Brahmins in India are about five percent of its total population. The Himalayan states of Uttarakhand (20%) and Himachal Pradesh (14%) have the highest percentage of Brahmin population relative to respective state's total Hindus.

According to a *Wall Street Journal* report, an estimated 65 percent of the Brahmin households in India, with about 40 million people, lived on less than \$100 a month in 2004; this number dropped to about 50% in 2007. Brahmins have also included wealthier and politically successful members.

Contribution of some famous Brahmins in India:

- Jawaharlal Nehru-first prime minister, Marari Desai Fourth prime minister ,Atal Bihari Vajpayee -tenth Prime minister, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan-second President ,Shankar Dayal Sharma-Ninth President of India, Gopal Krishna Gokhale -political guru of Mahatma Gandhi, Mangal Pandey-rebellion in 1857 against the British, Rabindranath Tagore-literature, music and Nobel prize winner,, Shakuntala Devi - writer and mental calculator(human calculator) ,Bhimsen Joshi, singer.
- Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar-was an Indian Bengali polymath and a key figure of the Bengal Renaissance. He was a philosopher, academic educator, writer, translator, printer, publisher, entrepreneur, reformer and philanthropist. His efforts to simplify and modernize Bengali prose were significant. He also rationalized and simplified the Bengali alphabet and type, which had remained unchanged since Charles Wilkins and Panchanan Karmakar had cut the first (wooden) Bengali type in 1780.He also forced British to pass widow remarriage act.
- Chanakya- 4th century BCE was an Indian teacher, philosopher, economist, jurist and royal advisor. He is traditionally identified as Kautilya or Vishnugupta, who authored the ancient Indian political treatise, the *Arthashastra*. As such, he is

considered the pioneer of the field of political science and economics in India, and his work is thought of as an important precursor to classical economics. His works were lost near the end of the Gupta Empire and not rediscovered until the early twentieth century. Chanakya assisted the first Mauryan emperor Chandragupta in his rise to power. He is widely credited for having played an important role in the establishment of the Maurya Empire. Chanakya served as the chief advisor to both emperors Chandragupta and his son Bindusara.

The contribution of Brahmins to Hinduism:

- Adi Shankara a proponent of Advaita Vedanta, was born in a Brahmin family, and is credited with unifying and establishing the main currents of thought in Hinduism. (Spiritual leaders/organization are followers of Advaita Vedanta -Dashanami Sampradaya, Divine Life Society, Chinmaya Mission, Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Ramakrishna Order, Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi and Others).
- Goswami Tulsidas was a Hindu poet-saint, reformer and philosopher from Ramanandi Sampradaya in the lineage of Jagadguru Ramanandacharya renowned for his devotion to the Lord Shri Rama. A writer of several popular works in Sanskrit and Awadhi, he is best known as the author of the epic *Ramcharitmanas*, a retelling of the Sanskrit *Ramayana* based on Rama's life in the vernacular Awadhi.
- Many of the prominent thinkers and earliest champions of the Bhakti movement were Brahmins, a movement that encouraged a direct relationship of an individual with a personal god. Among the many Brahmins who nurtured the Bhakti movement were Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Vallabha and Madhvacharya of Vaishnavism, Ramananda, another devotional poetsant. Born in a Brahmin family, Ramananda welcomed everyone to spiritual pursuits without discriminating anyone by gender, class, caste or religion (such as Muslims). He composed his spiritual message in poems, using widely spoken vernacular language rather than Sanskrit, to make it widely accessible. His ideas also influenced the founders of Sikhism in 15th century, and his verses and he are mentioned in the Sikh scripture Adi Granth. The Hindu tradition recognizes him as the founder of the Hindu Ramanandi Sampradaya, the largest monastic renunciant community in Asia in modern times.
- Other medieval era Brahmins who led spiritual movement without social or gender discrimination included Andal (9th-century female poet), Basava (12th-century Lingayatism), Dnyaneshwar (13th-century Bhakti poet), Vallabha Acharya (16th-century Vaishnava poet), among others.
- Many 18th and 19th century Brahmins are credited with religious movements that criticized idolatry. For example, the Brahmins Raja Ram Mohan Roy led Brahmo Samaj and Dayananda Saraswati led the Arya Samaj.

- The biggest contribution of Brahmins is sustaining the Sanskrit language. The Vedas and other important Hindu text are written in Sanskrit, and also our rituals are performed in the language.
- Brahmins have been the torch bearers of spiritual knowledge, upheld the spiritual and cultural legacy, kept the sanctified rituals alive and gave a distinct identity to Sanatan Dharma.
- The Brahmin's traditional occupation is that of temple priest (purohit) officiating religious functions. Their sole income is mostly Biksha (alms) given by devotees. And another section of Brahmins are teachers, that too are sometimes without salary.
- Brahmins were neither rich nor powerful at any point of time in history. Pick up any old Indian story book, you will see 'Garib Brahmin' (Poor Brahmin) quoted as a virtue. (Remember Kuchela-Krishna story?)

Though their profession/duty is considered the highest in the Varna system of the society, the Brahmins way of survival is mostly alms given by devotees.

In today's world, many are seeking other means of survival.

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(information taken from various sources)