

Varnashram

The Varna system in ancient Hindu society was a classification based on societal roles, not skin colour, contrary to early theories of Aryan vs. Indigenous distinctions.

Originating in the Vedic period (around 1500 BCE), it categorized people into four groups: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (labourers). Initially flexible, it became more rigid over time, evolving into the caste system.

While later texts like Manusmriti entrenched hierarchies, philosophies in Buddhism and Jainism emphasized equality, rejecting birth-based divisions and advocating for merit and ethical conduct.

What is Varna?

The term "Varna" originates from the Sanskrit word meaning "to classify," "to cover," or "colour." While the literal meaning of "colour" once led to speculation that class distinctions were based on differences in skin pigmentation between lighter-skinned Aryans and darker Indigenous people of ancient India, this theory has been discredited since the mid-20th century. Instead, the notion of "colour" likely served as a device of classification, as seen in the division of texts in the Yajurveda into White and Black.

Varna System Meaning

The Varna system is a traditional social classification in Hindu society, which categorizes individuals into four primary groups based on their roles, duties, and societal functions. This classification has its roots in ancient texts, particularly the Vedas, and has evolved, influencing social dynamics in India. It categorises individuals into four groups—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.

Varna System Evolution

The Varna system originated around 1500 BCE during the Vedic period with the arrival of Aryans. The Sanskrit term Varna means "class" or "colour," initially referring to societal roles rather than skin colour. While early theories linked it to distinctions between Aryans and indigenous Dasas, this has been discredited.

The first reference to the Varna system is found in the Purusha Sukta hymn (Rigveda 10.90), where society is metaphorically depicted as originating from different parts of a cosmic being (Purusha):

Brahmins (priests and scholars) – From the mouth.

Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers) – From the arms.

Vaishyas (merchants and agriculturalists) – From the thighs.

Shudras (labourers and service providers) – From the feet.

Early Vedic Period: The Varna system was fluid and flexible, determined by an individual's karma (actions) and merit rather than birth. Social mobility was possible, allowing individuals to change their Varna based on their conduct, skills, and achievements.

Later Vedic Period (1000-500 BCE): The Varna system became more rigid and hereditary. Factors such as social complexity due to growing populations, religious texts like the Manusmriti reinforcing caste distinctions, and economic changes like the rise of landownership entrenched social hierarchies.

As a result, Shudras, once part of the system, were increasingly relegated to menial tasks and excluded from privileges enjoyed by the higher Varnas.

Philosophical perspectives: The Upanishads shifted the focus from external societal roles to inner spiritual qualities, advocating for merit-based societal status. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna emphasized duty (dharma) over birth, highlighting that one's actions define their worth, not their lineage.

Challenges and External Influences: The Varna system faced opposition and reforms through Buddhism and Jainism promoting equality, the Bhakti Movement advocated devotion over caste.