

Varna System

4 Varna systems in Hindu society are categories based on roles and duties: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Initially, there was some social mobility based on merit, but over time, the system became more rigid, evolving into the caste system. Communities outside the 4 Varna system, like Dalits, are considered Avarna, reflecting the deep social stratification.

Brahmins

Brahmins are the priestly and scholarly class, revered as custodians of sacred knowledge and spiritual wisdom. They act as intermediaries between humans and the divine, preserving religious traditions.

Status: Brahmins, considered the highest varna, symbolized wisdom and moral discipline, vital for societal order. Their status was based on adherence to knowledge and virtues, not merely birth.

Duties: Brahmins performed religious rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies to uphold dharma, taught Vedic scriptures through the guru-shishya tradition, and lived a life of study, meditation, and discipline.

They served as advisors to kings, imparted moral guidance, and renounced worldly pleasures, embodying virtues like humility and detachment.

Brahmin men and women: Brahmin men practised celibacy (Brahmacharya) before marriage and moderation afterwards. Brahmin women were revered for their chastity and had the right to choose their spouse, enjoying elevated social standing.

However, marrying outside their caste, especially into the Shudra varna, was discouraged.

Exceptions: Brahmins, primarily teachers, priests, and scholars, occasionally took on roles as warriors, traders, or agriculturists during times of adversity.

Kshatriyas

Kshatriyas are the warrior and ruler class, responsible for governance, defence, and maintaining order. They are seen as the arms of society, symbolizing strength, power, and leadership.

Status: Positioned second in the hierarchy, Kshatriyas were celebrated as heroic figures in Hindu epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. They were seen as protectors of dharma and enforcers of law.

Duties: Kshatriyas protected the kingdom, upheld justice, trained in warfare, governed fairly, and performed sacrifices(yajnas) to maintain prosperity and divine favour.

Men and women: Kshatriya men received education in Brahmins' ashrams followed by military training, while Kshatriya women were trained in warfare and administration, playing active roles in governance and defence.

Marriage and lineage: Kshatriya men could marry women from all four varnas. Marrying a Shudra woman, although uncommon, was permissible while maintaining lineage purity was crucial for succession and sovereignty.

Vaishyas

Vaishyas represent the merchant, agricultural, and economic class. As the providers of society, they sustain the economy through trade, agriculture, and commerce.

Status: Vaishyas are the third varna, symbolizing the thighs of society in the Purusha Sukta. Their role in ensuring economic stability was indispensable for societal harmony.

Duties: Vaishyas ensured economic prosperity through agriculture, trade, cattle rearing, and business management while contributing to the kingdom's wealth and protecting cattle and land.

Men and women: Vaishya men were trained by Brahmins in ethics and religious duties, while Vaishya women actively participated in agriculture, trade, and family businesses, contributing to economic and household stability.

Rights and marriage: Vaishya women had legal protection, rights to remarriage, and inheritance, with the freedom to choose spouses from all varnas except Shudras, as marrying lower varnas was discouraged.

Shudras

Shudras are the labouring and service-providing class, responsible for supporting the other three varnas. They form the feet of society, symbolizing strength and foundational support.

Status: Positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy, Shudras were not twice-born and were traditionally denied access to Vedic education. However, texts like the Atharva Veda and Mahabharata advocate for their inclusion in learning and spiritual growth.

Duties: Shudras performed manual labour, served higher varnas, engaged in agriculture, skilled trades, and provided essential services, supporting both economic and domestic life as artisans, craftsmen, and labourers.

Flexibility in Occupations: While primarily labourers, Shudras under special circumstances engaged in occupations traditionally reserved for Vaishyas, such as agriculture and trade, to support economic stability during crises.

Marriage: Shudra men could marry within their varna, while Shudra women had more flexibility in marrying across varnas and often worked as companions, attendants, or domestic helpers in royal and noble households.

Fifth category: This, however, excludes a large portion of the population, including the 'outcastes', foreigners, slaves, conquered peoples, and others, often referred to as the Panchamas or the fifth category.