Varna System in Vedas

The Purusha Sukta (Rig Veda 10.90) describes the Varna system, with the four varnas emerging from the cosmic being: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (labourers). It emphasizes the importance of each varna for societal harmony.

Duties and Dharma: Each varna has specific duties (dharmas) contributing to societal stability, such as Brahmins performing rituals, Kshatriyas protecting, Vaishyas engaging in trade, and Shudras providing labour.

Evolution of the Concept: Originally based on tribal roles, the Varna system became more rigid over time, evolving into a birth-based hierarchy, as reflected in later texts.

Influence of Later Texts: Texts like Manusmriti codified the Varna system, reinforcing caste-based discrimination and outlining specific duties for each varna.

Philosophical Underpinnings: Vedic texts associated higher varnas with purity and lower varnas with pollution, influencing social interactions.

Varna System in Buddhist Texts

The Varna system in Buddhist texts offers a more egalitarian view than the rigid Hindu caste hierarchy. Buddhism rejects caste, emphasizing that worth is determined by actions (karma), not birth. Buddha taught that enlightenment depends on character, promoting equality across social classes. The Saṅgha exemplifies this, uniting individuals from different varnas. Buddha also critiqued Brahmanical claims about divine caste origins, calling them artificial. Buddhism challenged caste-based inequalities through its focus on compassion and ethics.

Varna System in Jain Texts

Jainism rejects a rigid caste system, emphasizing skills and duties over birth. Introduced by Adinath, it links social status to karma and ethics, as shown in Mahavira's life. Jainism denies caste hierarchy, asserting that spiritual progress, not birth, determines one's status. It promotes non-violence (Ahimsa) and truth, addressing social inequities and encouraging transcendence beyond caste distinctions. Modern Jainism advocates for equality and merit-based social reform.