

Varna, Ashrama and Dharma-Social Class, Life-Stage and Religious Duty

Some Hindu religious practice or '**dharma**' is the same for everyone, regardless of their '**varna**' or '**ashrama**', their social class and life stage.

This kind of practice is known as '**sanatana dharma**' or eternal religion. Generally speaking, the practice of sanatana dharma involves adhering to the principles of non-violence, not stealing, remaining morally pure and controlling the senses.

Another kind of Hindu religious practice, '**varnashramdharma**', is different for everyone, depending on their social class (**varna**) and life stage (**ashrama**); varnashramdharma means '*religious practices for social class and life stage*'. Before we can understand what these various practices are, we need to have a deeper understanding of the terms varna and ashrama.

Lesson 1-Varna-Social Class

The Laws of Manu, an important Hindu text which some believe dates back to around 1500 BCE, divided society up into four main groups or varnas. These groups, membership of which was determined by birth, were: brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra.

Brahmins are holy men, priests with the responsibility for performing rituals and teaching others the meaning of the holy books. Nowadays, many Indian professionals are brahmins.

Kshatriyas were the kings and warriors who were charged with the responsibility of ruling and defending the people. Nowadays many kshatriyas work as administrators and in the armed forces.

Vaishyas are the business people in society: merchants, farmers and so on.

Shudras are the manual workers and servants within society. They are roughly equivalent to what used to be known as the working classes.

According to the **Rig Veda**, one of the earliest and most important of Hindu holy books, the different varnas were made from various body parts of a giant, primal man, the Purusha, who existed from the very beginnings of time:

*How many parts did they divide primal man into,
when they divided him?*

What was his mouth, his arms?

What were his thighs called and his feet?

His mouth was the Brahmin,

His arms the Prince,

His thighs the commoners

And from his feet came the Shudras

(Rig Veda X: 11-12)

A fifth group of people, **‘the untouchables’**, are considered to be so low that they do not even occupy an ‘official position’ within Hindu society. These people refer to themselves as **Dalits**, or ‘the oppressed’. Even nowadays, when discrimination against these people is outlawed in India, one still finds dalits working in the dirtiest and most menial jobs. Many Hindus still believe that you get bad karma if the shadow of a dalit passes over you!

Is ‘Caste’ the same as ‘Varna’?

This system of dividing society up into different social groups has become known in the West as **the caste system**. Actually ‘caste’ is a translation of the word ‘jati’ and not ‘varna’. Jatis are divisions *within* the varnas and refer to things like differences in trade—a cobbler and a builder would both be members of the same varna but they would have different jatis, for instance. *It is therefore wrong to use the term ‘caste system’ when referring to the varnas.*

Tasks

- ❖ What does the term ‘varna’ mean?
- ❖ Make a chart of the four varnas. Include an explanation of their different duties.
- ❖ What is the difference between ‘varna’ and ‘jati’?
- ❖ Which varna would you choose to be born into and why?
- ❖ If you look, you can see that school and classes are divided into different groups. In pairs, identify which groups are helpful and which groups are not.
- ❖ Nowadays, many people think that the varna system is unfair. Why do you think this is?
- ❖ Many traditional Hindus believe that the varna system is beneficial for individuals and communities. Try to think of some advantages to the system. List them under two headings: ‘Individual’ and ‘Community’.
- ❖ Discrimination against people on the basis of their social class or caste was made illegal in India in 1949. However, although one finds that discrimination is decreasing in cities and people are beginning to mix, the varnas system is still strong in the village communities. Do you think that discrimination on the basis of social class/caste will ever die out in Hindu society? Why/why not?