



THE CASTE SYSTEM AND STAGES OF LIFE IN ANCIENT INDIA

The pattern of social classes in Hinduism is called the "caste system." The chart shows the major divisions and contents of the system. Basic caste is called *varṇa* (वर्ण), or "color." Subcaste, or *jāti* (जाति), "birth, life, rank," is a traditional subdivision of *varṇa*.

	CLASS	COLOR	वर्ण GUṆA	योग YOGA
VARNAS: वर्ण	TWICE BORN: Brahmins ब्राह्मण Priests and Teachers	white	sattva सत्त्व	jñānayoga ज्ञानयोग
	Kṣatriyas क्षत्रिय Warriors and Rulers	red	rajas रजस्	karmayoga कर्मयोग
	Vaiśyas वैश्य Farmers, Merchants, Artisans, etc.	brown	tamas तमस्	bhaktiyoga भक्तियोग
	Śūdras शूद्र Laborers	black	tamas तमस्	bhaktiyoga भक्तियोग
OUTCASTES: जातिभ्रष्ट	Untouchables Polluted Laborers		tamas तमस्	bhaktiyoga भक्तियोग

The *Bhagavad Gita* says this about the varṇas:

[41] The works of Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras are different, in harmony with the three powers of their born nature.

[42] The works of a Brahmin (ब्राह्मण) are peace; self-harmony, austerity, and purity; loving-forgiveness and righteousness; vision and wisdom and faith.

[43] These are the works of a Kṣatriya (क्षत्रिय): a heroic mind, inner fire, constancy, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity and noble leadership.

[44] Trade, agriculture and the rearing of cattle is the work of a Vaishya (वैश्य). And the work of the Shudra (शूद्र) is service.

[chapter 18, Juan Mascaró translation, Penguin Books, 1962]

There are literally thousands of subcastes in India, often with particular geographical ranges, occupational specializations, and an administrative or corporate structure. When [Mahâtmâ Gandhi](#) wanted to go to England to study law, he had to ask his subcaste, the Modh Bania, for permission to leave India. ("Bania", means "merchant," and "Gandhi" means "greengrocer" -- from *gandha*, "smell, fragrance," in Sanskrit -- and that should be enough for a good guess that Gandhi was a Vaishya.) Sometimes it is denied that the varn.as are "castes" because, while "true" castes, the jâtis, are based on birth, the varn.as are based on the theory of the [gun.as](#) (the "three powers" mentioned in the Gita). This is no more than a rationalization: the varn.as came first, and they *are* based on birth. The gun.as came later, and provide a poor explanation anyway, since the gun.a *tamas* is associated with both twice born and once born, caste and outcaste, overlapping the most important religious and social divisions in the system. Nevertheless, the varn.as are now divisions at a theoretical level, while the jâtis are the way in which caste is embodied for most practical purposes. Jâtis themselves can be ranked in relation to each other, and occasionally a question may even be raised about the proper varn.a to which a particular jâti belongs. As jâti members change occupations and they rise in prestige, a jâti may rarely even be elevated in the varn.a to which it is regarded as belonging.

Associated with each varn.a there is a traditional color. These sound suspiciously like skin colors; and, indeed, there is an expectation in India that higher caste people will have lighter skin -- although there are plenty of exceptions (especially in the South of India). This all probably goes back to the original invasion of the [Arya](#), who came from Central Asia and so were undoubtedly light skinned. The people already in India were quite dark, even as today many people in India seem positively black. Apart from skin color, Indians otherwise have "Caucasian" features -- narrow noses, thin lips, etc. -- and recent [genetic](#) mapping studies seem to show that Indians are more closely related to the people of the Middle East and Europe than to anyone else. Because Untouchables are not a varn.a, they do not have a traditional color. I have supplied [blue](#), since this is otherwise not found, and it is traditionally used for the skin color of [Vis.n.u](#) and his incarnations. Chief among those is *Kr.s.n.a* (Krishna), whose *name* actually means "black" or "dark," but he is always shown blue rather than with some natural skin color.

The first three varn.as are called the *twice born*, द्विज (*dvija*). This has *nothing* to do with reincarnation. Being "twice born" means that you *come of age* religiously, making you a member of the Vedic religion, eligible to learn Sanskrit, study the [Vedas](#), and perform Vedic rituals. The "second birth" is thus like Confirmation or a Bar Mitzvah. According to the *Laws of Manu* (whose requirements may not always be observed in modern life), boys are "born again" at specific ages: 8 for Brahmins; 11 for Ks.atrityas; and 12 for Vaishyas. A thread is bestowed at the coming of age to be worn around the waist as the symbol of being twice born. The equivalent of coming of age for girls is marriage. The bestowal of the thread is part of the wedding ceremony. That part of the wedding ritual is even preserved in Jainism. Ancient [Iran](#) also had a coming of age ceremony that involved a thread. That and other evidence leads to the speculation

that the *three* classes of the twice born are from the original [Indo-European](#) social system -- the theory of **George Dumézil**. Even the distant Celts believed in three social classes. The three classes of Plato's [Republic](#) thus may not have been entirely his idea. Although there must have been a great deal of early intermarriage in India, nowhere did such an Indo-European social system become as rigid a system of *birth* as there. The rigidity may well be due to the influence of the idea of [karma](#), that poor birth is morally deserved.

According to the *Laws of Manu*, when the twice born come of age, they enter into the four *âshramas*, **आश्रम**, or "stages of life." I notice that dictionaries I have, both of Sanskrit and Hindi, say that these apply to Brahmins. But there is no doubt, from the *Laws of Manu* and from the history, that all they apply to all the twice born.

1. The first is the *brahmacarya*, **ब्रह्मचर्य**, or the stage of the **student** (*brahmacârî* **ब्रह्मचारी**). For boys, the student is supposed to go live with a teacher (*guru*), who is a Brahmin, to learn about Sanskrit, the Vedas, rituals, etc. The *dharma*, **धर्म**, of a student includes being obedient, respectful, celibate, and non-violent. "The teacher is God." For girls, the stage of studenthood coincides with that of the householder, and the husband stands in the place of the teacher. Since the boys are supposed to be celibate while students, Gandhi used the term *brahmacârî* to mean the celibate practitioner that he thought made the best *Satyagrahi*, the best non-violent activist.
2. The second stage is the *gârhasthya*, **गार्हस्थ्य**, or the stage of the **householder**, which is taken far more seriously in Hinduism than in Jainism or [Buddhism](#) and is usually regarded as mandatory, like studenthood, although debate continued over the centuries whether or not this stage could be skipped in favor of a later one. Being a householder is the stage where the principal *dharma* of the person is performed, whether as priest, warrior, etc., or for women mainly as wife and mother. Arjuna's duty to fight the battle in the *Bhagavad Gita* comes from his status as a householder. Besides specific duties, there are general duties that pay off the "three debts": (1) a debt to the ancestors that is discharged by marrying and having children; (2) a debt to the gods that is discharged by the household rituals and sacrifices; and (3) a debt to the teacher that is discharged by appropriately teaching one's wife, children, and, for Brahmins, other students. The three debts are sometimes associated with the three Gods of the [Trimûrti](#) -- the ancestor debt with Brahmâ, the gods debt with Vis.n.u, and the teacher debt with Shiva.
3. The third stage is the *vânaprasthya*, **वानप्रस्थ**, or the stage of the **forest dweller**. This may be entered into optionally, according to *Manu*, if (ideally) one's hair has become gray, one's skin wrinkled, and grandchildren exist to carry on the family. Husbands and wives may leave their affairs and possessions with their children and retire together to the forest as hermits. This does not involve the complete renunciation of the world, for husbands and wives can still have sex (once a month), and a sacred fire still should be kept and minimal rituals performed. This stage is thus not entirely free of *dharma*. The Forest Treatises were supposed to have been written by or for forest dwellers, who have mostly renounced the world and have begun to consider liberation. I am not aware that forest dwelling is still practiced in the traditional way. The modern alternatives seem to consist of the more stark opposition between householding and becoming a wandering ascetic. Nevertheless, forest dwelling is an institution that doesn't really develop as such

4. in [Jainism](#) and Buddhism. Hinduism, which might be said to lack true monasticism -- i.e. there are no monasteries or convents -- nevertheless has mendicants and hermits, where the hermits can include married couples. The idea that husbands and wives would engage in ascetic practices together, without celibacy, would appear extraordinary. In those terms, it is an unfortunate loss if the institution does not continue in modern Hinduism. We see a good deal of forest dwelling in the [Mahâbhârata](#), where Pan.d.u, who himself is on a kind of retreat with his wives in the forest, hoping to overcome his strange reluctance to consummate his marriages, accidentally kills an adept and his wife, who have assumed the form of animals, in the very act of their copulation. Pan.d.u and his wives had previously accepted instruction from this very couple. This episode not only illustrates various uses for forest dwelling, but it reveals that specifically sexual practices can be among them.
5. The fourth stage is the *sannyâsa*, संन्यास, or the stage of the **wandering ascetic**, the *sannyâsî*, संन्यासी (or *sâdhu*, साधु). If a man desires, he may continue on to this stage, but his wife will need to return home; traditionally she cannot stay alone as a forest dweller or wander the highways as an ascetic. The *sannyâsî* has renounced the world completely, is regarded as dead by his family (the funeral is held), and is finally beyond all *dharma* and caste. When a *sannyâsî* enters a Hindu temple, he is not a worshiper but one of the objects of worship. Not even the gods are *sannyâsîs* (they are householders), and so this is where in Hinduism, as in Jainism and Buddhism, it is possible for human beings to be spiritually superior to the gods. It has long been a matter of dispute in Hinduism whether one need really fulfill the requirements of the *Laws of Manu* (gray hair, etc.) to renounce the world. The [Mahâbhârata](#) says that Brahmins may go directly to Renunciation, but it also says that the three debts must be paid -- and the debt to the ancestors could only be paid with husbands and wives living together either as householders or, if renounces, as forest dwellers (indeed, the Pân.d.avas are all born in that way). There are definitely no such requirements in Jainism or Buddhism. The Buddha left his family right after his wife had a baby, which would put him in the middle of his *dharma* as a householder (today there would be lawsuits). Buddhism and Jainism thus developed *monastic* institutions, with monks and nuns, but these did not really develop as such in Hinduism: While wandering ascetics are rather like mendicant monks, we lack monasteries and nuns, and the Hindu ascetics are, traditionally, supposed to have already lived something like a normal, lay life.

The four stages of life may, somewhat improbably, be associated with the four parts of the [Vedas](#): the *samhitâs* with the stage of the student, who is particularly obligated to learn them; the *brâhmanas* with the stage of the householder, who is able to regulate his ritual behavior according to them; the *âraṇyakas* with the stage of the forest dweller, who regulates his ritual behavior according to them and who begins to contemplate liberation; and finally the *upaniṣads* with the stage of the wandering ascetic, who is entirely concerned with meditation on the absolute, *Brahman*.

The twice born may account for as much as 48% of Hindus, though I have now seen the number put at more like 18% -- quite a difference but more believable. The Shudras (58% of Hindus) may represent the institutional provision that the Arya made for the people they already found in India. The Shudras thus remain once born, and traditionally were not allowed to learn Sanskrit or

study the Vedas -- on pain of death. Their *dharma* is to work for the twice born. But even below the Shudras are the Untouchables (24% of Hindus), who are literally "outcastes," जातिभ्रष्ट (*jâtibhras.t.a*), without a varn.a, and were regarded as "untouchable" because they are ritually polluting for caste Hindus. Some Untouchable subcastes are regarded as so polluted that members are supposed to keep out of sight and do their work at night: They are called "Unseeables."

In India, the term "Untouchable" is now regarded as insulting or politically incorrect (like *Eta* in Japan for the traditional tanners and pariahs). Gandhi's *Harijans* ("children of God") or *Dalits*, दलित ("downtrodden"), are preferred, though to Americans "Untouchables" would sound more like the gangster-busting federal agent Elliot Ness from the 1920's. Why there are so many Untouchables is unclear, although caste Hindus can be ejected from their jâtis and become outcastes and various tribal or formerly tribal people in India may never have been properly integrated into the social system. When Mahâtmâ Gandhi's subcaste refused him permission to go to England, as noted above, he went anyway and was ejected from the caste. After he returned, his family got him back in, but while in England he was technically an outcaste. Existing tribal people as well as Untouchables are also called the "scheduled castes" or "scheduled tribes," since the British drew up a "schedule" listing the castes that they regarded as backwards, underprivileged, or oppressed.

The Untouchables, nevertheless, have their own traditional professions and their own subcastes. Those professions (unless they can be evaded in the greater social mobility of modern, urban, anonymous life) involve too much pollution to be performed by caste Hindus: (1) dealing with the bodies of dead animals (like the sacred cattle that wander Indian villages) or unclaimed dead humans, (2) tanning leather, from such dead animals, and manufacturing leather goods, and (3) cleaning up the human and animal waste for which in traditional villages there is no sewer system. Mahâtmâ Gandhi referred to the latter euphemistically as "scavenging" but saw in it the most horrible thing imposed on the Untouchables by the caste system. His requirement on his farms in South Africa that everyone share in such tasks comes up in an early scene in the movie *Gandhi*. Since Gandhi equated suffering with holiness, he saw the Untouchables as hallowed by their miserable treatment and so called them "Harijans" (*Hari=Vis.n.u*). Later Gandhi went on fasts in the hope of improving the condition of the Untouchables, or at least to avoid their being politically classified as non-Hindus.

Today the status of the Shudras, Untouchables, and other "scheduled castes," and the preferential policies that the Indian government has designed for their advancement ever since Independence, are sources of serious conflict, including suicides, murders, and riots, in Indian society. Meanwhile, however, especially since economic liberalization began in 1991, the social mobility of a modern economy and urban life has begun to disrupt traditional professions, and oppressions, even of Untouchables. Village life and economic stasis were the greatest allies of the caste system, but both are slowly retreating before modernity in an India that finally gave up the Soviet paradigm of economic planning.