

# Caste Division in Vedic Period

Dr. Preeti Sharma

Guest lecturer in Delhi University

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**Abstract:** The Vedic caste system can be described as the Indian version of racism and class-distinction based on birth. As to the order of the hierarchy, the ranking is determined by how much power and influence one can muster in political, economic, and social terms. When learning and religious influence dominates, the Brahmin ranks first. When mundane issues, i.e. political, social and monetary concerns dominate, the Vaishya and Shudra rank third and fourth in both versions. The four fold division of the society, a process which started at the end of the early vedic period, became an established fact in the later-vedic society. The Brahmanas, who were only one of the sixteen types of priests, became predominant and, due to the growth of the cult of sacrifice, rose considerably in importance. Sometimes the brahmanas and the kshatriyas confronted each other but it was also realized that the two should cooperate to rule over the rest of society. The higher varna were entitled to upanayana or investiture and the sudra varna was deprived of this as well as the recitation of the Gayatri mantra.

**Keywords:** Racism, Monopoly, Hierarchy, Priestcraft, Predominant, Sacrifices, Warrior, Irrelevant, Prosperity, Paramount, Hymns, Monarch, Rituals, Intonation, Intellectual, Fatalistic, Tradition, Intolerance, Chanting, Rigidity.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Varna means colour and complexion and refers to the four principle castes of Hinduism, viz. the fair skinned Aryan upper class Brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya and Sudra, the dark-skinned, non-aryan lower or servant class. Those who believe in the birth-based caste-system ever justify this hierarchical order as a natural division of labour which existed before, exists now, and will exist in future. They say it is nature's way of organizing social life. All forms of unjust and arbitrary religious and social discriminations adversely affect the political and economic aspects of people's lives. People are made to carry heavy loads of prejudices, bias for or against, others. The outcome of such an outlook and attitude can be, and are, very negative in terms of social, cultural and national life as a whole. When a caste or class distinction on the basis of birth, not merit and talent, arbitrarily controls all activities and occupations, it kills all incentive for progress and blocks the way to moral and spiritual development leading to human perfection.

## 2. KSHATRIYAS (THE WARRIOR CASTE)

"Kshatriyas" – warrior or ruling caste, the one who is well-born, who belongs to a noble family, a honourable lineage, a pure (unmixed) descent, a cultured class, a person of the Aryan race, a high caste, a ruler or king who secures and defends people's welfare. This is a long list of superlative attributes for one belonging to the warrior caste. The word ruler and royalty also describes the role of a king.

The roles kshatriyas play are varied, from that of a ruler to a warrior, a royal body guard, a soldier, and in between the various leadership positions they hold, e.g. from head of government, army, police and other public and private officers, down to attendants and door-keepers.

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Further, how the ruler deals with enemies and friends; the four ways of success in gaining an upper hand; the seven essential elements of governmental administration; the legislature, judicial and executive decision – making policy; the binding commands and orders; taxations, revenues, toll, levy and sources of state income; the four fold army consisting of elephant, horse, chariot and foot soldier divisions; various military formations of each division, and the array of troop dispositions; the four kind of weaponry, punitive measures, crimes, prisons, prisoners and captives; details of peace time prosperity, war time adversity, power, heroism, victory, defeat, flag, acts of killing and destruction, etc. it is amazing to note about the elaborate documentation of every object, thing or institution that concerns kshatriyas holding different positions.

### 3. BRAHMIN (SECTION ON THE PRIESTLY CASTE)

A Brahmin, belonging to the priestly caste, is described variously e.g. one who prefers the intellectual pursuit. He is one who knows and teaches the Vedas, vadic tradition, chanting etc. he conducts religious rituals, prayers, sacrifices etc. A Brahmin is 'twice born'(dvijo), i.e. born of his parents, and of his initiation as an ordained priest at the 'thread ceremony'. In these ways Brahmins have a monopoly over the religious tradition of the people and exercise religious authority.

There are four stages of brahmanic life, namely: 1) Religious pupil (brahmachari)

2) House-holder (grastha) who raises a family and has an occupation. 3) Hermit (vaanprastha) who lives in a forest retreat. 4) Ascetic (sanyaas) who has renounced worldly life. A house holder teaches and instruct only Brahmin pupils vedic lore and subjects related to brahmanic occupation. The pupils live with the teacher together with fellow students and perform all the household tasks of the family in lieu of education, boarding, lodging etc.

Apart from this there is another role known as a preceptor, who presides over important rituals like the various sacrifices. He act as the principle teacher to run Vedic Education. However, this social order undergoes changes when the Brahmins are not in a dominant position. For instance, kshatriyas are dominant

When secular leadership is preferred by people, they employ Brahmins just to conduct religious services, as evident in modern times. Since people from all four castes take to any occupation of their choice, mainly for economic reason, the fourfold caste-system also becomes irrelevant. In other words, the vedic system itself collapses when the fourfold caste and stage is no longer practical and useful.

### 4. VAISHYA GROUP (SECTION ON FARMER, TRADER, CRAFTSMEN, ANIMALHUSBANDRY)

The vaishyas, traditionally the third caste group, consists of the farmers, traders, cattle breeders and craftsmen. Members of this important caste-group are basically producers engaged in various fields of economic development. Thus the vaishyas control and wield economic productivity and power. This section deals with all articles connected with these different occupations. Yet these producers of wealth, prosperity and well being have been relegated to the third place by the vedic social system.

The first part of this section deals with the farmers, agricultural products, all essential implements and accessories, seeds, crops, plant diseases, herbs, domestic articles, granary etc. connected with farming.

The second part concerns those who make and supply the varieties of implements and articles, both for occupational and domestic use; that is, the black smiths, craftsmen, health care givers, utensil makers or suppliers; shed and house builders or construction persons.

The third part deals with traders, i.e. buyers, sellers, middlemen agents, suppliers, creditors, loan-givers and takers etc. this category is concerned with every possible products and producers, all commodities, tools, articles etc. as buyers and or sellers, creditors and debtors, loan takers and givers etc. thus, this caste or class creates wealth or the absence of it, prosperity or adversity. In short, this caste-group wields economic power.

Finances, commodities and products of all sectors of productivity became so specialized as to require experts who hailed from vaishyas community.

### **5. SHUDRAS (SECTION ON THE LOW CASTE GROUP)**

This section on the low caste group begins with the definition of who a low caste person is. According to vedic caste system the low caste is based on:

- 1) Low- birth which includes those of inter-caste or mixed parentage.
- 2) Lowly occupation

A mixed-blooded person is low-born, while one born of a regular caste group is well-born.

According to the brahmanic caste system, a marriage has to be within the caste, not outside of it. Any violation of this injunction is punishable by relegating the offspring into the lowest rank of the caste-hierarchy.

A low-born of mixed lineage includes 1) Those born of unknown parentage i.e of a harlot, a criminal or an outcaste, all of whom are socially degraded. 2) Those born of a slave, servant, untouchable. 3) Those born of tribals, the barbarian from the western lands.

The lowly occupations comprise widely varied classes of workers; such as, hereditarily professional's artisans, smiths, craftsmen handicraft producers, manual labourers, hunters, gamblers etc.

People whose skills and services are indispensable to build a civilized socio-cultural system, have all been relegated to the bottom rungs of the caste-ladder. Therefore it is reasonable to ask: if the bottom rungs are removed, how can the ladder be safely used to climb up or down? Similarly, without this vital section of the society, how can people ever prosper and enjoy a meaningful life-style.

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