

# INDIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE – Ancient Period

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## SOCIAL CLASSES/CASTE

### Overview

India's caste system is rightly seen as a distinctive feature of its society and culture. It can be defined as the hierarchical segmentation of society into groups whose membership is 1) determined by birth; 2) is permanent; 3) determines occupation; and 4) requires endogamy (marrying inside). The system of four overarching categories or *varnas* (Brahmin/priest, ksatriya/warrior, vaisya/merchant and sudra/servant) is both very ancient (described in the Vedas c. 1200 BCE) and extremely powerful even today. A fifth category of Untouchable/Harijan/Dalit emerged after the ancient period, probably toward the end of the first millennium BCE. The crucial group, however, is not one's *varna* but one's *jati*, or 'birth-group', which is what people refer to when they speak of a caste. Despite the rigidity of this system, it has built in flexibility, which has enabled Indian society to absorb new groups.

### Indus Valley Civilisation

**Egalitarian** The extreme uniformity of the IVC suggests that its society was more egalitarian than hierarchical. All the examples of uniformity—standardised bricks, houses, urban grid pattern, seals and measures—reflect a relatively classless society. In addition, artefacts are distributed throughout various occupational levels and are not concentrated in high-status residences or monuments. Important goods (semi-precious stones, copper and bronze ornaments, inscribed seals) are found in small hamlets as well as urban centres. The relative weakness of any ruling elite is further indicated by the nature of grave goods, in particular the absence of hoards.

**Groups** Despite the lack of a powerful elite, such as a hereditary monarchy or clan, differentiation based on wealth and power clearly existed. Indeed, the complex commercial and political organisation of the regional centres required a social structure of groups with different status and skills. From material remains, it has been suggested that the IVC consisted of eight distinct classes: artisans, labourers, land-owners, merchants, administrators (and their assistants), farmers, ritual leaders and political elites. These eight groups might be represented by the eight types of animals inscribed on the seals. Each of these groups had sub-groups, such as masons, potters, carpenters and jewellers among the artisans.

### Indo-Aryan Civilisation

**Varna** The Vedic literature of the Indo-Aryans provides the template for the Indian caste system by listing its four main categories (*varna*, or 'colour'):

1. Brahmin: priests and scholars
2. Ksatriya: rulers and warriors, including property owners
3. Vaisya: merchants and skilled artisans
4. Sudra: labourers and servants

**Twice-born** A critical distinction between these four categories is that the first three were considered 'twice-born' because they underwent an initiation ritual that formalised their role in society. This reinforced the low status of the fourth category, the *sudras*. It is significant, however, that the concept of 'twice-born' is not found in early Vedic texts and appeared only about 800-600 BCE.

**Untouchables** Untouchables were also not part of the original four-fold scheme. However, Vedic literature did mention groups inferior in rank to the *sudras* because of their supposed impurity. These included the *dasas* ('slaves'), who are described as having dark skin, broad, flat noses, speaking a strange language and practicing magic. Elsewhere in the literature, the stigma of impurity/untouchability is associated with people who come in contact with death, such as human corpses, dead animals and animal skins. Over time, these low status groups came

to be called *a-varna* ('out-castes'). Western writers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century coined the term 'Untouchable', Gandhi called them 'Harijan' ('children of God') and now they call themselves 'Dalit' ('broken').

**Jati** When Indians (or anyone else) speaks of 'caste', they usually refer to the dozens of sub-divisions within each of the five overarching categories (the four *varnas* + untouchables). These sub-groups are known as *jati* ('birth'). They are the group into which one is born and is expected to marry. There is great regional variation in the *jati* system. For instance, a specific *sudra* caste in one region, or even one village, may not exist in the adjoining region or village. On the other hand, there might be six or eight different *vaisya* castes (*jatis*) in the same village. The *jati* system has also allowed newcomers to be slotted into the overall social system by allotting them a new name.

### Classical Period

**Consolidation** Over the course of this long period, social interactions were increasingly constrained by caste rules. In part, this is explained by the influx of newcomers, from the northwest and from Central Asia, as well as by trade and by conquest. In order to maintain social cohesion, each new group had to be slotted into place in the complex social structure of the caste system. If they floated free, the entire system might drift into dangerous flexibility. As a result, marriage between castes became rare, and the number of permissible partners within one's caste narrowed, too. Hindu texts distinguish eight different types of marriage, according to the rules of endogamy and exogamy, or marriage inside caste but outside certain kin groups.

**Kings** An important exception to the hardening of caste rules was the acknowledgement that kings could be made from any social strata. Early texts insisted that kings must be *ksatriya* (warrior) by birth, but later texts accepted the reality that many Shaka, Kushana and Shunga rulers were not from the warrior caste. In effect, men could become kings by conquest rather than by ancestry.

**Merchants** Another group whose social status shifted in the classical period were merchants (*vaisya*). Benefitting from urbanism, trade and guilds, merchants grew steadily wealthier and began to exercise power in the political sphere. In the normative texts, however, these are low castes, just one rung above slaves and labourers (*sudra*). Indeed, many texts claim that merchants are *sudra* because of mixed ancestry. The important point here is that merchants did not change caste—they remained *vaisya*—but they gained new social standing. Class, not caste, was decisive.

**Buddhism** Buddhism created an alternative society with the establishment of a monastic order (*sangha*, 'association'). This community of monks and nuns and lay followers was governed by a formal set of rules announced in the earliest Buddhist texts. Although at first monks and nuns lived an itinerant life, by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, they were resident in large monasteries, which also served as centres of learning. Fortnightly meetings were convened in the monasteries, democratic rules for discussion were adopted and a treasury was set up to handle financial transactions, especially donations made by wealthy lay followers.