



Varna: The Hindu Caste System

The Hindu class system, varna, is rooted in the traditions of the Aryan people. The Brahmins, or high priests, determined a class order using Vedic hymns as testimony. Take, for example, this excerpt from the famous verse, “The Hymn of Man.”

“When they divided man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the warrior, his thighs the people, and from his feet the servants were born.” (Rig-Veda, 10.90 11,12)

Using the human body as a metaphor, this hymn divides society into four distinct classes, or castes, based on occupation. The mouth is the Brahmin, priest. The arms are the Shatryas, warriors and rulers. The thighs are the Vaishyas, skilled workers and farmers. The feet are Shudras, servants.

Although people are expected to marry within their own castes, they have not always done so. Because of their inter-caste marriages, jatis, subdivisions of castes, were established. If a couple within the three higher strata is mixed, their children represent a new caste below the vaishyas but above the Shudras. But if an individual from one of the three upper classes should wed a Shudra or a non-Hindu, the descendents become untouchables. Lowest on the social scale, the untouchables are considered the outcasts of society.

The system of jatis is complex and varied, depending greatly on region and history. Once a new jati is established, its members are again encouraged to marry within its ranks.

It is important to remember that the rank in the caste system is linked to dharma. By performing familial and social duties honestly, a Hindu strives to be born into a higher caste in his or her next incarnation. But the opposite is also true. If a member of an upper class is without virtue, he or she may be born a Shudra or Pariah.

Presently, the constitution of India does not recognize the ancient castes system, prohibiting social distinctions. Many Hindus believe the varna is unjust, separating the wealthy from the poor while providing no opportunity for betterment. Still, many of the system’s jatis still exist, especially in India’s countless villages.

Using the information from this reading, label the human figure to show where the various Hindu castes originated (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Sudras).

