

Course Name- B.A.L.L.B.IVth sem

Subject- Sociology

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Topic- Varna Ashrama Dharma

Varna

Varna is a fundamental concept underlying the Hindu society. In fact, it is not a social arrangement or segregation; it is rather a statement of how any society is arranged. It does not say society should be classified into classes, it says what classes or kinds of people exist in any society.

There are four varnas, based on the functions people perform in any society.

Brahma

One belonging to this varna is called a Brahmana. His function is to learn, share and preserve the eternal knowledge of the race (in our case, the Veda). It is often mistaken that Brahmana is the one with spiritual realization - his function is scholarship more than realization. Realization is a result of following one's Varna dharma (simply put, doing properly what one does, and a Brahmana may also attain realization). And in Sanatana Dharma, every person is bound to get spiritual realization and liberation, if he properly does what he does. This is irrespective of his Varna.

There are specializations in this varna, such as those taking to priesthood, those taking to just learning and teaching the Veda, those taking to learning and teaching specific Darsanas or Vedangas, etc.

- Knowledge is classified into many kinds, to serve many purposes. Of this the study of Veda, is done only by a dwija (Brahmana/ Kshatriya/ Vaisya). This is for the purpose to be served by the Veda for the society, and also because of the training required to pursue the study. Most of the times there is no compulsion on who should do the study, but there is a compulsion on what is the prerequisite to such study. Veda being swara specific and also based on mantra sastra, pursuing it needs special training from childhood and also needs an extremely disciplined lifestyle throughout. This is the reason that most people do not show interest to take this up. But the knowledge is not denied to any class, though this particular mode of learning is - the Vedic wisdom is available through texts like the Puranas and other smritis. Through these, the vedic word is not known - its essence/meaning is known.
- The smritis and sastras can be studied by person of any varna, based on the purpose and on the occupation. They could also be studied irrespective of occupation, provided one has the interest and has the academic qualification.
- Because of the function that he does, a Brahmana is said to be of satwik nature.

- Kshatra
- Kshatriya is the one who belongs to Kshatra varna. This is the martial class and forms the military defense and administration of the society. A kshatriya's functions are to rule and protect the society. They also learn all forms of knowledge.
- Because of the knowledge gained a khatriya is of satwik nature, and because of the martial aspect he is of rajasic nature. Thus he is satwik-rajasic.
- Vaisya
- Vaisya is the productive class of the society, and his primary functions are trading and business. Making the society prosperous is their primary function. A Vaisya generates wealth, and distributes it for the social well-being.
- Since artha is the predominant purushartha for a Vaisya, he is usually of rajasic-tamasic nature.
- Sudra
- Sudra is the service/artisan class and covers most of the occupations, like engineering, agriculture, mining, metal work etc.
- Based on these temperaments and functions, the smritis outline dharma for each of these varnas, their duty towards their profession and their role in the society.

Varna and Social Health

- How healthy the society is, depends on how well the people belonging to these four varnas are performing their functions. The society is healthy, prosperous, strong and free, if all the four varnas prosper in their respective functions.
- If Vaisya varna is suffering or weak, the society will be financially weak, and may lose financial independence as a society. If Kshatra varna weakens, the society will be militarily and politically weak, and will lose political independence. If the Sudra varna weakens, it will lose its existence as a society. If the Brahma varna weakens, the society will lose its synthetic (rejuvenating ability) strength, its spiritual identity and intellectual independence.
- Weakness of any of the section can be used by the enemies to get hold of the entire society. Also, each varna controls certain aspects in the society. The society will lose its independence and control in those aspects, if that varna weakens.
- Depending on the kind of control an enemy wants to gain on another society, he tries to weaken those aspects in the enemy society so he can start establishing his control. For example:

- The Islamic aggressors have targeted and weakened the Kshatra Varna, since the control they wanted was more physical. The British have targeted the Brahma varna more, because they wanted a total control over the society and wanted our society to serve their needs - so they wanted to demolish the intellectual class. That is the reason we lost intellectual synthesis and independence along with political independence.
- Though it is not very relevant to talk of foreign attacks here, it explains how the strength and weakness of different varnas affects the society. Therefore we should understand that for the society to be strong, each of these varnas should be strong, and each of these must fulfill what their functions are, for the society to be peaceful, independent and prosperous.
- Also within the society, the development will be skewed if any of the varna performs its functions improperly and another varna performs its functions better. This results in a handicap in the development over time. For instance, if Brahma varna does not prosper and Sudra varna prospers, the society lacks direction in its evolution. If vice versa happens, the immediate wealth is also lost. There should be a fine balance and mutual respect among these varnas in order that the society really prospers.
- History has ample proof to say that the society tried to restore balance when it is lost, through people of other varnas taking to those professions that were suffering. For instance non-Kshatriyas took to fighting when the Kshatra varna was weakened by Islamic invasions. This is just one example, there were occasions when each of varnas was weakened and others strengthened them.

Social Mobility

- In the Hindu society there are many jatis (kula/caste). Jati is an endogamous cultural unit. A set of jatis are grouped to each Varna. So mobility is of multiple types. Mobility could be at individual, group or jati level.

For an individual:

1. Change of Varna: An individual with his merit, he can move to another Varna. This depends on the merit of the individual, the eligibility to pursue the function of a Varna, the teacher he seeks and so on. Examples:

- Many rishis born as non-dvijas, Sudras like Vidura taking up ministries.
- Many persons with study or yoga becoming teachers today
- Many brahmins losing their varna because of not practicing their varna dharma

2. Change of jati: Through inter-jati marriage an individual can move from one jati to another. This has some regulations. In a patriarchy, a woman moves to the jati of her husband. In matriarchy, it is the other way round. There are very few matriarchic societies in India, like in Kerala. This however does not change the varna/function of the individual. Examples:

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- All inter-jati marriages.

For a group: An entire group of individuals could move to another Varna, because of the role they play in a social situation. Examples: Many non-Kshatriya jatis becoming Kshatriya jatis as they took up military defense during Muslim invasions.

Ashramas

Ashrama dharma is fundamental to the Hindu society. It divides man's life into four stages and specifies what one should do in each of the stages. Historically, it was only few Brahmanas who were found to make it through all the four ashramas. Kshatriyas of yore, used to make it to vanaprastha. Vanaprastha was even more a rare case in Vaisyas.

Brahmacarya

In this stage, one does academic learning. He should go to a guru and learn what is prescribed for him. After some basic education he would move to some specialization based on his interest and performance. This is a stage of learning and celibacy (Rules in Manusmriti 2.173-249). Upanayana or initiation should happen at 5-16 years of age (Manu 2.36-40). Upon completion of study, one should take up grhastha ashrama

Grhastha

- Grhastha ashrama is the center stage; it is the phase where a person contributes most to the society. For this reason, the Kalpa Sutras devote an entire book Grihya Sutras, for the householder. He sustains the society, financially and otherwise (Manu 6.89-90). Unless in exceptional cases, one is not permitted to bypass this ashrama.
- One is supposed to base his pursuits on Dharma, and fulfill his desires. This is a stage of fulfillment. Both purusharthas, Artha and Kama, are to be served here, based on Dharma, the first purushartha. This ensures the fourth, which is Moksha.
- Grhastha should perform five sacrifices every day (panca maha yajnas), to please gods, rishis, departed fathers, fellow men, and other living creatures. One is said to be indebted to all these. One's debts towards his departed fathers are cleared at the end of this ashrama. One is also prescribed eight activities a day, which can be classified into worshipping and pursuing profession/occupation (Manusmriti chapters 3-5).
- Having lived half his life, one should take up vanaprastha ashrama

Vanaprastha

- At this stage one gives his property to his heirs or donates it, goes into seclusion, and does penance. One becomes inward looking. He still contributes with his experience, through advising and teaching. Having fulfilled his desires in the previous ashrama, one is expected to win over senses and sensuous pleasures. Thus his work is also more dispassionate and detached, as he does not seek any specific result from the work. It will be for the benefit of society alone. Though one is supposed to celibate, he is not required to renounce or live alone. One can take his wife or live with any other person. One is also permitted to earn his livelihood though not to save/accumulate. But unless there is a specific need, he does not enter the city - usually people needing a vanaprasthi's advice go to him instead of him visiting people.
- One still has debts towards rishis and gods at this stage, and does teaching as well as performs sacrifices to propitiate the devatas. His primary debt towards pitris is cleared as he obtains progeny and raises them in grhastha ashrama, though he continues giving oblations to pitris during vanaprastha

Sanyasa

- In this stage one renounces the world and detaches from his social and family relations. One should not earn in this stage, or have any material possession of his own. Whatever few attachments he has with his relations or social ambitions are also given up. Man does all work purely for moksha at this stage. Technically, a sanyasi has no debts, and lives only as long as his karmaphala remains.
- In general, Brahmacarya and Grhastha ashramas are seen as Pravritti dharma. Vanaprastha and Sanyasa are nivritti dharma for man