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The Varna System: Origin and Evolution

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The Varna System: Origin and Evolution

Varna is the Hindu scheme that groups society into four classes: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The word literally means colour. Jati is different. Jatis are the hundreds of real birth groups people belong to.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Meaning**Varna means colour.

02 **Hymn**Rigveda 10.90.

03 **Jati**Hundreds of groups.

04 **Ashrama**Four life stages.

Meaning and origin

1 What varna means

1.1 What does the word mean?

Varna literally means colour. In the absence of a better word, Europeans translated it as caste. New World Encyclopedia calls varna a theoretical construct.

1.2 What are the four varnas?

Hinduism groups society into four varnas. The Puranic story lists them as below.

The four varnas

Varna	Role in the story
Brahmin	Reciters of the Veda
Kshatriya	Bearers of arms; the warrior and ruling class
Vaishya	Merchants
Shudra	Manual labourers and artisans

Source: New World Encyclopedia (Caste system).

1.3 Does varna mean skin colour?

No. Wisdom Library says the four castes in the Sutra texts cannot be held apart by skin colour. So colour here is only the literal sense of the word.

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: Varna literally means colour. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: Europeans coined the word varna. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: newworldencyclopedia.org; wisdomlib.org

2 The twice-born

2.1 Who are the twice-born?

The three highest groups are called the twice-born. These are the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas.

2.2 Why twice-born?

They have gone through the sacred thread ceremony. It is called Upanayana. The ceremony is seen as a second birth.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: The sacred thread ceremony is seen as a second birth. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: Shudras are counted among the twice-born. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: newworldencyclopedia.org

3 The Purusha Sukta

3.1 Where does it appear?

The Purusha Sukta is hymn 10.90 of the Rigveda. It has great significance in Hindu social tradition.

3.2 Is it an early hymn?

Not among the earliest. The first and tenth mandalas of the Rigveda are the youngest. Mandala 10 is often in later language. Oberlies puts the youngest hymns in book 10 at about 1100 BCE.

3.3 How often are the four castes named?

Wisdom Library says the four castes, with the Shudra fourth, are mentioned once in the Rigveda. The place is X.90.12. Mandala 10 also holds the Nasadiya Sukta, hymn 10.129, which deals with creation.

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: The four castes are named only once in the Rigveda. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

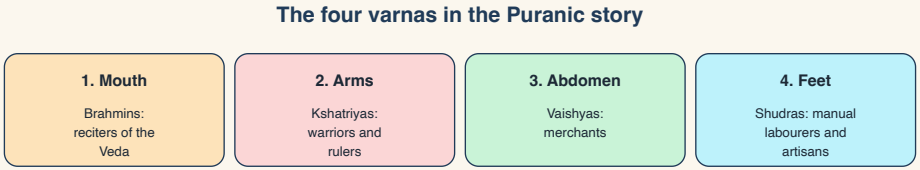
> **Quick check 6.** True or false: The Purusha Sukta is in the oldest part of the Rigveda. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: newworldencyclopedia.org

4 The body-part story

4.1 What does the story say?

The Puranic account says Lord Brahma made humans from parts of his body. Each part gave rise to one varna.



Body parts and varnas in the Puranic story.

4.2 Do all lists agree?

No. The Puranic story puts the Vaishyas at the abdomen. A passage in Wisdom Library lists the mouth, arms and thighs, without naming which varna each gave. So read each question carefully and check which text it follows.

4.3 Was the story questioned?

Yes. One passage in Wisdom Library asks a sharp question. How can sons born of the same body be of four different castes?

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: In the Puranic story, the Brahmins came from the mouth. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 8.** True or false: In the Puranic story, the Shudras came from the arms. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Varna, jati and law

5 Varna and jati

5.1 What is a jati?

Major castes were divided into hundreds of sub-castes. These are the jatis. Each jati has a traditional job. In one place, five hundred or more jatis may live side by side.

Varna and jati side by side

Point	Varna	Jati
Number	Four classes	Hundreds of sub-castes
What it is	A theoretical, textual scheme	The actual groups people belong to
Link to work	Roles in the story	A traditional trade goes with each jati
How you join	Described in the texts	You are born into it

Sources: New World Encyclopedia (Caste system) and Wisdom Library (Varna).

5.2 How strict was it?

People were born into their jati. Their jati set their work and way of life. Marriage inside the jati was strongly enforced.

5.3 Could people move?

New World Encyclopedia notes a great deal of mobility among Indian castes, other than the Brahmins.

Quick check 9. True or false: A person is born into a jati. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 10. True or false: Jati is the same as the four-fold varna scheme. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

6 The census and Dalits

6.1 How did the British use varna?

The British used varna as the basis for counting Hindus in the late-19th-century censuses. In 1901, people were asked to classify themselves. Or the enumerators did it. The choices were Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra.

6.2 Who sat outside the scheme?

A fifth and lowest class lay outside the caste system. It is called the Dalit, or Untouchables. The source says they were seen as untouchable because of their job functions.

6.3 What does the law say now?

B. R. Ambedkar, himself of low-caste origins, drafted the Indian Constitution. Caste discrimination is punishable by law and unconstitutional in India.

Quick check 11. True or false: The 1901 Census asked people to classify themselves by varna. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 12. True or false: Dalits are one of the four varnas. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Life stages

7 Ashrama and varnashrama

7.1 What is ashrama?

Ashrama means the four stages of an individual life. They are prescribed for twice-born Hindu males.

The four ashramas

Stage	Meaning	Length
Brahmacharya	Student life	25 years

Stage	Meaning	Length
Grihastha	Householder life, after marriage	25 years
Vanaprastha	Retirement; anchorite life	25 years
Sannyasa	Renunciate life; permanent seclusion	Rest of life

Source: New World Encyclopedia (Twice-born).

7.2 How is it tied to varna?

Varna, ashrama and the purusharthas are affiliated doctrines. The purusharthas are the four aims of life. Varnashrama dharma refers to the system of classes of social life and stages of individual life.

7.3 Does birth alone decide a Brahmin?

The Mahabharata gives another view. Yudhishthira said without hesitation that conduct alone makes one a Brahmin.

> **Quick check 13.** True or false: Ashrama covers the stages of an individual life. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 14.** True or false: Varna and ashrama mean the same thing. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam Practice

8 How exams test this

8.1 What traps repeat?

- **Meaning:** varna means colour; it is not skin colour.
- **Source:** Purusha Sukta, Rigveda 10.90.
- **Age:** Mandala 10 is among the youngest books.
- **Body parts:** mouth, arms, abdomen or thighs, feet.
- **Jati:** hundreds of groups, not four.
- **Varnashrama:** classes plus stages of life.

Remember this

- **Word:** varna means colour; there are four varnas.
- **Hymn:** Purusha Sukta, Rigveda 10.90, in a young mandala.
- **Jati:** hundreds of birth groups; varna is the four-fold scheme.
- **Varnashrama:** classes of society plus stages of life.

Explain it back: Say how varna differs from jati, and from ashrama.

Practice MCQs

1. The Purushasukta, which refers to the origin of caste, is found in the

A. Atharvaveda

B. Yajurveda

C. Rigveda

D. Samaveda

See answer ↓

2. Which Rigvedic hymn is the earliest text to describe the four varnas as born from a single cosmic being?

A. The Vivaha Sukta

B. The Purusha Sukta

C. The Devi Sukta

D. The Nasadiya Sukta

See answer ↓

3. According to the Purusha Sukta, from which part of the cosmic being Purusha did the Brahmins emerge?

A. The arms

B. The thighs

C. The mouth

D. The feet

See answer ↓

4. The Purusha Sukta hymn in the Rigveda's tenth book first names four groups, describing them as born from a cosmic being's mouth, arms, thighs, and feet.

Which group is said to be born from the feet?

A. Vaishya

B. Rajanya

C. Brahmana

D. Shudra

See answer ↓

5. The Purusha Sukta (Rigveda 10.90), which describes the varnas arising from a cosmic being's body, is generally considered:

A. The Rigveda's oldest hymn, composed before the family books

B. Part of Mandala 2, one of the family books

C. A later addition, found in Mandala 10 along with the Nasadiya Sukta

D. A Yajurveda hymn later borrowed into the Rigveda

See answer ↓

6. What distinguishes 'jati' from 'varna' in the historical evolution of this system?

A. They are simply two different words for the same exact thing

B. Jati is a Vedic term, and varna is a later Dharmashastra term

C. Jati refers only to occupations, and varna only to religious roles

D. Jati refers to the many actual hereditary groups; varna is the four-fold textual category

See answer ↓

7. How do the varna and ashrama systems differ, according to mainstream scholarship?

A. Varna is a Buddhist concept; ashrama is a purely Hindu one

B. Varna classifies society by class; ashrama organises an individual life by stage

C. They are the same system under two different names

D. Varna only applies to men, ashrama only to women

See answer ↓

8. The combined framework linking the varna system and the Ashrama system is traditionally known as what?

A. Rita dharma

B. Purushartha dharma

C. Varnashrama dharma

D. Kula dharma

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The correct answer is **Rigveda**. The Purusha sukta is hymn 10.90 of the Rigveda, and it matters a great deal in Hindu social tradition. Atharvaveda is wrong because the source ties it to the Arya and Shudra contrast, not to this hymn. Samaveda and Yajurveda are wrong because the sources name the Rigveda as the home of the Purusha sukta. Memory hook: Purusha sukta, Rigveda 10.90. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** The correct answer is **The Purusha Sukta**. The Rigveda mentions the four castes, with the Shudra fourth, only once, in hymn X.90, and that is the Purusha sukta. The Nasadiya Sukta is wrong because it is hymn 10.129 and deals with creation. The marriage hymns are 10.85, not 10.90, so the marriage-hymn option is wrong too. No saved source links the Devi Sukta to the four varnas. Memory hook: one hymn, one mention, four varnas. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** The correct answer is **The mouth**. In the Puranic story, Brahma made the Brahmins from his mouth, and they became reciters of the Veda. The arms are wrong because they gave the Kshatriyas, the warrior and ruling class. The feet are wrong because they gave the Shudras. The thighs are wrong. In the Wisdom Library list they follow the mouth and arms, and the Brahmins came from the mouth. Memory hook: mouth for the word, arms for the sword. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** The correct answer is **Shudra**. The Shudras were made from the feet and served the other castes, as the feet serve the body. Brahmin is wrong because that group came from the mouth. The warrior-class option is wrong because the Kshatriyas came from the arms. Vaishya is wrong because the Puranic story puts the merchants at the abdomen, and the Wisdom Library list names the thighs without naming a varna. Memory hook: the feet carry the body, and the Shudras carried the work. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The correct answer is **A later addition, found in Mandala 10 along with the Nasadiya Sukta**. The Purusha sukta is hymn 10.90. Mandala 10 is among the youngest books, often in later language. Oberlies puts the youngest hymns in book 10 at about 1100 BCE. The oldest-hymn option is wrong because book 10 is among the youngest. The Mandala 2 option is wrong because the hymn is 10.90, not in book 2. The Yajurveda option is wrong because the sources place the hymn in the Rigveda. Memory hook: Mandala 10 is young. ↑ Q5

6. **D.** The correct answer is **Jati refers to the many actual hereditary groups; varna is the four-fold textual category**. Jatis number in the hundreds. Five hundred or more can live in one place, and people are born into their jati. Varna is the four-part scheme. The Vedic-versus-Dharmashastra option is wrong because no saved source dates the terms this way. The Rigveda already mentions the four castes (X.90.12). The same-thing option is wrong because one is four classes and the other is hundreds of groups. The occupations-only option is wrong because some jatis are set by religion or language too. Memory hook: four varnas, hundreds of jatis. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** The correct answer is **Varna classifies society by class; ashrama organises an individual life by stage**. Varnashrama dharma covers both the classes of social life and the stages of individual life. Ashrama has four stages, from student life to renunciation. The same-system option is wrong because the sources list them as separate doctrines. The men-and-women option is wrong because the four stages are set for twice-born males, and varna covers all four classes. The Buddhist option is wrong because both belong to the Hindu context in these sources. Memory hook: varna is class, ashrama is stage. ↑ Q7
8. **C.** The correct answer is **Varnashrama dharma**. It is the system of classes of social life and stages of individual life in Hinduism. Purushartha dharma is wrong because the purusharthas are the four aims of life, a third doctrine. No saved source uses Rita dharma or Kula dharma for this framework. Memory hook: varna plus ashrama gives varnashrama. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** That is the literal sense of the Sanskrit word. ↑ 1
2. **False.** Varna is a Sanskrit word. Europeans translated it as caste. ↑ 2
3. **True.** That is why the three highest groups are called twice-born. ↑ 3
4. **False.** Only the three highest groups are twice-born. ↑ 4
5. **True.** The one place is X.90.12. ↑ 5
6. **False.** It is in Mandala 10, one of the youngest books. ↑ 6
7. **True.** They became the reciters of the Veda. ↑ 7
8. **False.** They came from the feet. The arms gave the Kshatriyas. ↑ 8
9. **True.** Birth fixed the jati, and the jati fixed work and lifestyle. ↑ 9
10. **False.** Varna has four classes. Jatis number in the hundreds. ↑ 10
11. **True.** The choices were Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra. ↑ 11

12. **False.** They sit outside the four, as a fifth class. ↑ 12

13. **True.** Varna covers classes; ashrama covers stages. ↑ 13

14. **False.** They are separate, linked doctrines. ↑ 14

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