

# Social Order and Varna Politics in Ancient India

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## Abstract

The quadruple division of society into brahmins (priests or teachers), kshatriyas (rulers or warriors), vaishyas (agriculturalists or merchants), and shudras (servants) is one of the most discussed, but equally decried and censured, institutions of ancient India. Though, the Manusmriti was centrally built around exalting this one theme, it cannot, however, own its copyright, as the idea was first stated, as formal division into four social classes, in two of the shlokas of the Purusha Sukta of the Rigveda (Rigveda, mandala 10.90, verse 11–12) thus: “When they divided Purusa how many portions did they make? What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet? The Brahman was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made. His thighs became the Vaishya, from his feet the Shudra was produced”. This means, the varna division was created out of the sacrifice of the primordial Purusha (the term purusha was used variously in ancient Hindu literature like, the cosmic being or self, consciousness, and universal principle. In Bhagavata Purana and Mahabharata, it was used as synonymous of the Lord Vishnu or Brahma), brahman from Purusha’s mouth, kshatriya from arms, vaishya from thighs and shudra from his feet (Manusmriti, 1.31).

**Key Words:** Mahabharata, guna, swabhava, Jaina, Buddhism, Aryans, Anaryans, Brahmadeva, Dharmashastra, Dharmasutra, Varnashramadharma, Rajan, Upavedas, Chaturvarnas, dwijas, Veda.

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Prior to Manusmriti, various Sanskrit texts frequently refer the concept of varna and discuss its socio-political consequences. The Shanti Parvan of the epic Mahabharata refers to the varna classes clearly. The Bhagavadgita assigns the authorship of the varna divisions to Krishna Vasudeva; in chapter 4 Krishna says, “the four-fold grouping (of people), a division based on duties and qualities, was created by Me” (4.13); the chapter 18, verses from 40 to 48 states the position of varna thus: There is no existent being either on earth, or in heaven among the Devas, who is free from these three Gunas born of prakriti nature (40); The duties of brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas, and shudras, O the scorcher of foes, are divided according to the Gunas born of their own nature, swabhava (41); The control of the mind and the senses, austerity, purity, forbearance, rectitude, knowledge, assimilated knowledge, and accepting the veracity of the Vedas, are the duties, born of nature, of a brahmana (42); Valour, self-confidence, resolve, adroitness, not running away from battle, generosity, and leadership are the naturally born duties and disposition of a kshatriya (43); Agriculture, cattle-tending and trade are the natural duties of a vaishya. The natural duty of a shudra is in the form of service

(44); Devoted each to his own duty, man attains the highest perfection. Listen to how one devoted to his own duty, finds success (45); From whom is the evolution of all beings, by whom all this is pervaded, worshipping Him with his own duty, a man attains perfection (46); One’s own duty or dharma, devoid of merit, is better than the duty or dharma of another well- performed. He who does the duty ordained by his own nature incurs no evil (47); One should not relinquish, O son of Kunti, the duty to which one is born, though defective, one should not give up, for, all undertakings are enveloped by evil, as fire by smoke (48).

Jaina writings contain a brief discussion of the system of varna practice, but far from acknowledging it as an

idea originated from the Rigveda or Purusha Sukta, it traces it to the legend (story) Bharata. A 9<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit poem, composed by Jinasena, a Digambara monk, named the *Adi Purana* (which deals with the life of Rishabhanatha, the first Tirthankara), approves the conjunctures associated with Bharata, and states that, those who are committed to ahimsa are referred to as deva-Brahmanas, or divine Brahmins. The story was that Bharata performed a test of non-violence or ‘ahimsa-test’ for his fellow beings, and declared that those members of his community who refused to harm or hurt any living being could be called as the priestly varna, and they were qualified to be referred to as dwija or twice born, i.e., brahmins. *Adi Purana* also mentions caste or jati, and argues that, apart from manushya jati, there is no other jati or human caste. The varna system originated on account of different professions; kshatriya ensued when Rishabh assumed the powers of a king and procured weapons to serve the society, and vaishya and shudra made their appearance due to different means of livelihood in which they specialized.

Though, Buddhism does not theorize the varna practices systematically, some early Buddhist Pali texts and the 4<sup>th</sup> discourse of the *Digha Nikaya*, called *Sonadandanta Sutta* (Eng. Trans. ‘to Sonadanda’), do sporadically carry references to varna system. The Pali texts depict the four varnas as brahmin, kshatriya, vessa (vaishya) and sudda (shudra). Peter Masefield, a Buddhist scholar and translator, in his book, *Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism* (USA: Routledge Publications, 2008, pp. 146-154), argued that, in principle, people in any varna could perform any profession; anyone, of any birth, could perform the priestly function. Many early Buddhist texts describe instances of brahmins appearing as farmers and identifying themselves in other professions. Even marrying outside the varna border was recognized and endogamy was not binding in ancient India. *Digha Nikaya* narrates a story of the dialogue between the

Samana Gotama of the Sakya clan (Gotama Buddha) and a learned brahmin called Sonadanda; Gotama Buddha asks, “The Brahmins, Gotama, declare him to be a Brahman who can accurately say “I am a Brahman” without being guilty of falsehood” for which, Sonadanda replies by citing five qualities of a brahmin, first, ‘a Brahman is well born on both sides, on the mother’s side and on the father’s side, of pure descent back through seven generations, with no slur put upon him, and no reproach, in respect of birth’, second, ‘he is a repeater (of the sacred words), knowing the mystic verses by heart, one who has mastered the Three Vedas, with the indices, the ritual, the phonology, and the exegesis, and the legends, learned in the phrases and in the grammar, versed in Lokayata sophistry, and in the theory of the signs on the body of a great man’, third, ‘he is handsome, pleasant to look upon, inspiring trust, gifted with great beauty of complexion, fair in colour, fine in presence, stately to behold, fourth, ‘he is virtuous, increased in virtue, gifted with virtue that has grown great, fifth, ‘he is learned and wise, the first, or it may be the second, among those who hold out the ladle’.

Buddha then asks Sonadanda, “is it possible to leave one out, and to declare the man who has the other four to be a Brahman, to be one who can accurately, and without falling into falsehood, claim to be a Brahman?” Brahmin Sonadanda then eliminates the first three stipulated qualities, as not necessary, of a brahmin, one by one- fair colour and looks, varna in which one was born, and the ability to recite mantra and do sacrifices as a requirement of being a Brahmin. Buddha asks again, “of these two things, oh Brahman, is it possible to leave one out, and to declare the man who has the other to be a Brahman, to be one who can rightly, and without falling into falsehood, claim to be a Brahman?” for which, Sonadanda responds, ‘there are two qualities, the elimination of

which, a brahmin loses his position as a brahmin, and the retention of those qualities are necessary to truthfully and without falling into falsehood identify a Brahmin', viz, "being virtuous and being learned and wise". It is impossible to reduce the requirement for being a brahmin any further because, Sonadanda argues, "for wisdom is purified by morality, and morality is purified by wisdom; where one is, the other is, the moral man has wisdom and the wise man has morality, and the combination of morality and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world".

### **Social Order or Varna and Caste in Manusmriti**

Basically, Manusmriti divides society or people into two groups- the Aryans and non- Aryans or Anaryans (etymologically, the term Arya stood for the noble, or ethically superior people and Anaryans or Anaryas for the ignoble or inferior ones. Ethnically they were two different groups of people). The non-Aryans were also called as Dasyu (Dasyu implies men of

low caste such as chandalas or kandalas (5.31). Manu says, "all those tribes in this world, which are excluded from (the community of) those born from the mouth, the arms, the thighs, and the feet (of Brahman), are called Dasyus, whether they speak the language of the Mlekkhas (barbarians) or that of the Aryans (10.45). Chapter 8, carries a reference for Dasyu which states that men belong to this category are ignoble and hence, cannot even be made witness in lawsuits (verse 61). Chapter 10, verse 32 mentions, Dasyu is a slave who subsists by snaring animals), and Mlechchhas (Mlekkhas) or barbarians. The term Dasyu also included the chandalas, svapakas etc. (in Atri-Smriti or Atri-Samhita, sage Atri states sakas, kambojas, yavanas, khasas, parasikas, natas, svapakas and other low castes as Mlechchhas, and argued that, receiving food or gifts from or keeping contact with them is forbidden). Neither in the night nor in the day-time can the non-Aryans enter into villages; Manu says, they were required to live in the forest. If a situation mandates them that they have to enter into a village, then should do so by wearing a particular dress or outfit.

The Aryans represent high caste, who had born from the mouth, the arms, the thighs, and the feet of Brahman. Manudharmashastra divides the Aryan race into two groups- dwijatis (high-origin or having two births) and ekajatis (low-origin or having only one birth). Dwijatis (dwijatih janmayasya) is a Sanskrit compound consisting of the terms dwi and jati (etan dwijatayo desan samstrayeran prayatnatah, 2.24; 10.4). Dwi denotes two, and jati (birth) implies varna, which together called twice-born or dwija (in twice born or two births, one is natural birth, and the other comes after the completion of twelve years when a boy of dwijatis is taught with virtues or samskaras by putting sacred thread on his shoulder, viz, upanayana. Usually, the term dwija is used in relation to or imply only brahmins). The brahmanas (gururagnirdwijatinam varnanam brahmano guruḥ), kshatriyas and vaishyas (men of either of the first three varnas) were referred to as dwijatis in Manusmriti. To quote Manu: "the brahmana, the kshatriya, and the vaishya castes (varna) are the twice-born ones, but the fourth, the shudra, has one birth only, there is no fifth (caste)" (10.4). The shudras were known as ekajatis. Ekajati (once born, viz, shudra) is also a Sanskrit compound containing of the terms, eka (once) and jati. Manu says, "brahmanah ksatriyo vaisyastrayo varna dwijatayah, caturtha ekajatistu sudro nstitu pancamah", (10.4; 8.270)

The life and vocations of the people was regulated by the Varnashramadharma, Manu says, 'He, the most resplendent one, assigned separate (duties and) occupations to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs

and feet' (1. 81, 87). Various varnas were expected to carry out the works strictly befallen to them sincerely and with full dedications because, "it is better (to discharge) one's own (appointed) duty incompletely than to perform completely that

of another; for he who lives according to the law of another (caste) is instantly excluded from his own" (10.97). Social order, based on varna divisions such as brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra, and outcastes (or untouchables, who were ostracized from the varna system due to their unrighteous or unethical actions of cross-varna mobility. They were the people born on account of inter-varna marriages or adultery, and marriages or relations outside the varna periphery (according to Atri and to Gautama the son of Utathya, he who weds a shudra woman becomes an outcast 3. 16). They were considered as mixed castes. Since it was a violation of the varna stipulations and hence, forbidden, they were relegated to the position below shudra varna in varna stratification), is extensively discussed in Manusmriti.

### **Brahmana**

The brahmins occupy the top position in the social order on account of their superior birth, lofty and gentle character, and intense longing for spirituality. They are the acharyas or gurus, dharmavadins, advisors, pandits, priests, judges, assessors, ministers and leaders of the dharma parishad. A brahmin could degrade himself by violating the rules applicable to his varna but capital punishment could not be inflicted upon him owing to his place in the varna. Manu depicts brahmin as born from the head of Brahmadeva and hence, enjoys superior status, impunities and additional privileges. The text dedicates 1,036 verses for explaining the laws for and expected virtues of brahmins. Some of the important statements that Manu makes regarding the brahmanas include: "A Brahmana who completely governs himself, though he knows the Savitri only, is better than he who knows the three Vedas, (but) does not control himself, eats all (sorts of) food, and sells all (sorts of goods)" (2.118); "A Brahmana must seek a means of subsistence which either causes no, or at least little pain (to others), and live (by that) except in times of distress" (4.2); "For the purpose of gaining bare subsistence, let him accumulate property by (following those) irreproachable occupations (which are prescribed for) his (caste), without (unduly) fatiguing his body" (4.3); "Let him never, for the sake of subsistence, follow the ways of the world; let him live the pure, straightforward, honest life of a Brahmana" (4.11); "He who desires happiness must strive after a perfectly contented disposition and control himself; for happiness has contentment for its root, the root of unhappiness is the contrary (disposition)" (4.12).

The term brahmana as synonymous with good and virtuous, however, was not first used by the Manusmriti. It, along with other three varnas, appear in various texts prior to Manu, such as Purusha Sukta of the Rigveda (Mandala 10), Shrauta Sutras (brahmana is mentioned in Vedic yajna rituals), the Puranas, Mahabharata, Bhagavadgita, the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastra texts, such as Gautama Dharmasutra, Apastamba Dharmasutra, Vasistha etc. The traits of the brahmana depicted in these texts are more or less identical; self-control, discipline, generous, gentle, liberal, not hurting others, compassion, patience, tranquility, auspicious disposition, absence of greed and desire, truthfulness, follow the rules of rituals, austerity, purity, intelligence, religious faith etc. were the fundamental qualities of a brahmin. Gautama Dharmasutra, for instance, lists eight characteristics (virtues) of a brahmin such as, being always truthful, teaching his art only to virtuous men,

following rules of ritual purification, studying Vedas with delight, not hurting any living creature, gentle but steadfast, self-control, kind, and liberal towards others. It says, “A (Brahmin) man who has performed the forty sacramental rites, but lacks eight virtues does not obtain union with or residence in the same world as Brahman. A man who may have performed just some rites, but possesses these eight virtues, on the other hand, does” (Gautama Dharmasutra 9.24-9.25).

For Manu, the traits of the brahmana described in the Dharmashastra texts prior to it, particularly, Gautama and Apastamba Dharmasutra, were axiomatic, and he explicitly states this: “by twice-born men belonging to any of these four orders, the tenfold law must be ever carefully obeyed. Contentment, forgiveness, self-control, abstention from unrighteously appropriating anything, obedience to the rules of purification, coercion of the organs, wisdom, knowledge of the supreme soul, truthfulness, and abstention from anger, form the tenfold law. Those brahmanas who thoroughly study the tenfold law, and after studying obey it, enter the highest state” (6. 91-93). The qualities imply the work he had to engage in for the welfare of the society, which include, according to Manu, studying the Vedas and shastras, teaching, conducting yajnas and yagas, officiating the rituals, and religious practices, showing right path, and accepting gifts, and also not involving in forbidden activities particularly such as producing or trading poison, weapons, meat, trapping birds etc. Manu states, “to brahmanas he assigned teaching and studying (the Vedas) sacrificing for their own benefit and for others, giving and accepting of alms” (1. 88).

Besides allotted duties, Manu suggests that a brahmin may, in the times of adversity, live by engaging himself in the occupations other than that meant for brahmins, such as that of agriculture, cattle herding, trade etc., if such activities do not involve violence or injuring the living beings. Since, agricultural activities cannot be carried out without injuring others at the microscopic level, Manusmriti argues, a brahmin should, as much as possible, steer clear of agriculture because plowing or digging the ground as part of the agricultural activity means slaughtering the creatures that live by the soil. He says, “But a Brahmana, or a Kshatriya, living by a Vaisya’s mode of subsistence, shall carefully avoid (the pursuit of) agriculture, (which causes) injury to many beings and depends on others. (Some) declare that agriculture is something excellent, (but) that means of subsistence is blamed by the virtuous; (for) the wooden (implement) with iron point injures the earth and (the beings) living in the earth” (10.83, 84). However, adds Manusmriti, even in the times of vicissitudes, a brahmin should avoid trading or producing water, poison, weapons, meat, soma, liquor, indigo, lac, perfumes, milk and milk products, condiments of all sorts, cooked food, stones, salt, cattle, molasses, captured animals or birds, beeswax, sesame seeds, grains or roots, dyed cloths and wool, oil, sugar, kusa-grass, beasts of the forest etc. because, by selling these forbidden commodities, “a brahmana assumes after seven nights the character of a Vaisya” (10. 86-94).

### **Kshatriya**

Kshatriyas are the kings and warriors in the varna system. They occupy the position after the brahmanas in the ranking of the varna hierarchy. Manu argues that since kshatriya takes birth from the shoulder of Brahmadeva (the aindraathanam), his natural duty was to fight and protect the country. Manu says, “the kshatriya he commanded to protect the people, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the Vedas), and to abstain from attaching himself to sensual pleasures” (1. 89). Further Manu argues, “among the several occupations the most commendable are, teaching the Vedas for a brahmana, protecting (the people) for a kshatriya, and trade for a

Vaisya” (10. 80). “His peculiar duty is conquest, and he must not turn back in danger” (10. 119). However, apart from the military function, his other common duties were studying military science and performance of sacrifices for the welfare of the subjects. He says, “from those versed in the three Vedas let him learn the threefold (sacred sciences), the primeval science of government, the science of dialectics, and the knowledge of the (supreme) soul; from the people (the theory of) the (various) trades and professions” (7. 43). Regarding kshatriyas the Manusmriti makes several important statements and few of them:

a) The duty of kshatriyas is to protect the castes and varna orders, and not to oppress the subjects. He says, “A kshatriya who has received according to the rule the sacrament prescribed by the Vedas, must duly protect this whole (world). For, when the creatures, being without a king, through fear dispersed in all directions, the Lord created a king for the protection of this whole (creation)” (7. 2-3, 35, 80). Fighting and honouring the brahmanas are the two varna functions of kshatriyas, “A king who, while he protects his people, is defied by (foes), be they equal in strength, or stronger, or weaker, must not shrink from battle, remembering the duty of kshatriyas. Not to turn back in battle, to

protect the people, to honour the brahmanas, is the best means for a king to secure happiness” (7. 87-88, 111-112, 142, 144; 8. 172, 303-309; 9. 253).

b) The duty of a kshatriya is to punish the wicked in accordance with type and the severity of the evil deeds. To quote Manu: “punishment alone governs all created beings, punishment alone protects them, punishment watches over them while they sleep; the wise declare punishment (to be identical with) the law. If (punishment) is properly inflicted after (due) consideration, it makes all people happy; but inflicted without consideration, it destroys everything. If the king did not, without tiring, inflict punishment on that worthy to be punished, the stronger would roast the weaker, like fish on a spit” (7. 18-20). He further states, “let the king exert himself to the utmost to punish thieves; for, if he punishes thieves, his fame grows and his kingdom prospers. That king, indeed, is very worthy of honour who ensures the safety (of his subjects) ...for by punishing the wicked and by favouring the virtuous, kings are constantly sanctified just as twice-born men by sacrifices” (8. 302-303, 310-311, 343-347).

c) The duty of a kshatriya is to keep vigilance on the fulfilment of varna obligations. Manu states, “neither a father, nor a teacher, nor a friend, nor a mother, nor a wife, nor a son, nor a domestic priest must be left unpunished by a king, if they do not keep within their duty” (8. 335).

d) The duty of a kshatriya is to protect the interest of the righteous people from the attacks of the unrighteous. He says, “A king who thus duly fulfils his duties in accordance with justice...shall use his utmost exertions to remove (those men who are noxious) thorns. By protecting those who live as (becomes) Aryans and by removing the thorns, kings, solely intent on guarding their subjects, reach heaven” (9. 251-253, 254-293, 312).

e) The duty of a kshatriya is to honour, support and offer gifts to learned brahmanas. The gift given to a virtuous, learned brahmana has no parallel on this earth. Manu argues, “let the king, after rising early in the morning, worship brahmanas who are well versed in the threefold sacred science and learned (in polity), and follow their advice. Let him daily worship aged brahmanas who know the Veda and are pure; for he who always worships aged men, is honoured even by rakshasas” (7. 37-38, 79). Further, “a gift to one who is not a

brahmana (yields) the ordinary (reward; a gift) to one who calls himself a brahmana, a double (reward); a gift to a well-read brahmana, a hundred-thousandfold (reward); (a gift) to one who knows the Veda and Angas (Vedaparaga, a reward) without end” (7. 85, 136, 145; 9. 313-323).

f) Maintaining humility, humbleness and following the moral qualities of a brahmana in his actions are the duties of kshatriyas. Manu opined, “let him, though he may already be modest, constantly learn modesty from them...through a want of humility Vena perished, likewise king Nahusha, Sudas, the son of Pigavana, Sumukha, and Nemi...by humility Prithu and Manu gained sovereignty, Kubera the position of the Lord of wealth, and the son of Gadhi the rank of a brahmana” (7. 39-42).

Like brahmanas, the kshatriyas can, in the times of adversity, also engage himself in the performance of duties which are actually meant for the vaishyas in normal times. He is permitted to live by an occupation which are prohibited for the brahmanas. After mentioning the works, from which the brahmanas must abstain, even at the time of adversity (10. 86-94), Manu says, “a kshatriya who has fallen into distress, may subsist by all these (means); but he must never arrogantly adopt the mode of life (prescribed for his) betters” (10. 95).

As in the case of a brahmana, the term kshatriya also first appears in the Vedic writings. The Purusha Sukta of the Rigveda uses the terms rajanya, rajan, raja etc. as synonymous to kshatriya (rajan was a tribal king and his position was not hereditary but elected by a tribal assembly called samiti. He protected the tribe and cattle and was assisted by a priest). The word kshatra, according to Turner, implies temporal authority, ‘ruling; or ruling order’, (Ralph Lilley Turner and Dorothy Rivers Turner, A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 189-190, retrieved, 2011). In one of the Upavedas called Brahmanas, specifically in Panchavimsha Brahmana (13. 4,7), the position of kshatriya appears differently, wherein, rajan was placed first, followed by brahmana and then vaishya; whereas, the Satapata Brahmana orders the varna as brahmana, vaishya, rajanya, and shudra. Probably, the order of brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra became popular after the composition of the Dharmasutras. Panini’s Astadyaya (II.2.34) states kshatriya below the brahman strata. It is also mentioned in the Shanti Parvan of the Mahabharata as a member of the military or second varna, (brahmananam ksatriyanattatah ksatriya ucyate). The Bhagavadgita defines the qualities of the kshatriya varna systematically and says, “for there is nothing greater to a kshatriya than a battle for the cause of dharma”, dharmyaddhi yuddhacchreyo nyat ksatriyasya na vidyate, (2. 31), and, in its last chapter thus: “sauryam tejo dhrtirdaksyam yuddhe capyapalayanam, danamisvarabhasca ksatram karma svabhavajam”- Valour, self-confidence, resolve, adroitness, not fleeing from the war and conflicts, donation to the society and protecting citizens and leadership are the natural born duties and disposition of a kshatriya (18. 43).

The Natyashastra of ancient Indian theatrologist and musicologist, Bharata Muni, in its twenty third chapter, states that the kshatriya should always be represented by a reddish yellow (gaura) colour when painting the limbs (angaracana). In Vaishnava dharma, the term kshatriya is referred to as the ruling class, which governs the world in accordance with the rules and regulations enacted by great brahmanas and saintly persons. The Nilamata Purana or Kasmira Mahatmya, a 6<sup>th</sup> century text argues that the ksatriyas were skilled in the use of all sorts of weapons. The Mahayana branch of Buddhism mentions kshatriya as kings and great ministers. It represents one of the seven destinations of rebirths in Kama dhatu, according to the 2nd century

Mahaprajnaparamitasastra (chapter xlix). It states “someone gives with a perfect intention and maintains morality: he is reborn in the families of the ksatriyas. The ksatriyas are the kings (rajan) and great ministers (mahamatya)”.

### **Vaishya**

Vaishya is classed third in the order of varna hierarchy, below the kshatriyas and above the shuras, and he, along with brahmana and kshatriya, claims dvija status, ‘twice born’, a second or spiritual birth. He was supposed to have sprung from the thighs or stomach, or the abdomen of Purusha (the supreme reality)-brahmanoasya mukhamasida bahu rajanyakriah, Uru tadasya yadvaishya padabhyam shudro ajayat- the brahmana originated from the mouth of the supreme entity, the kshatriyas from the arms, the vaishyas from the abdomen and the shudras from the feet (Rigveda 10.90.12, Yajurveda.31.11). Padma Purana states, ‘visatyasu pasubhyasca krsyadavarucih suchih, vedadhyayanasampannah sa vaisya iti samjnitah’. Hindu traditional writings say, “those who tend to produce food by agricultural methods, protect cows and other animals and engage in trade and commerce are called vaisyas, or merchants”. Their varna obligations include attending to agriculture, trade, business, cattle rearing, performing the upanayana (wearing and performing the sacred wool thread at the upanayana ceremony), study of the Vedas etc. They were to go on sea-voyages and expected to add to the prosperity of the country. Manu states, “the vaisya to tend cattle, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the Vedas), to trade, to lend money, and to cultivate land” (1. 90). During the time of emergency and adversity, however, he, just like the brahmanas and kshatriyas, can pursue duties which are naturally allotted to other varnas, particularly, the shudras. Manu says, “a vaisya who is unable to subsist by his own duties, may even maintain himself by a shudra’s mode of life, avoiding (however) acts forbidden (to him), and he should give it up, when he is able (to do so)” (10. 98).

Manusmriti makes the following important statements regarding the nature and functions of the vaishyas: “after a vaisya has received the sacraments and has taken a wife, he shall be always attentive to the business whereby he may subsist and to (that of) tending cattle. For when the Lord of creatures (Prajapati) created cattle, he made them over to the vaisya; to the brahmana, and to the king he entrusted all created beings. A vaisya must never (conceive this) wish, ‘I will not keep cattle’; and if a vaisya is willing (to keep them), they must never be kept by (men of) other (castes). (A vaisya) must know the respective value of gems, of pearls, of coral, of metals, of (cloth) made of thread, of perfumes, and of condiments. He must be acquainted with the (manner of) sowing of seeds, and of the good and bad qualities of fields, and he must perfectly know all measures and weights. Moreover, the excellence and defects of commodities, the advantages and disadvantages of (different) countries, the (probable) profit and loss on merchandise, and the means of properly rearing cattle. He must be acquainted with the wages of servants, with the various languages of men, with the manner of keeping goods, and (the rules of) purchase and sale. Let him exert himself to the utmost in order to increase his property in a righteous manner, and let him zealously give food to all created beings” (10. 326-333).

In other words, according to Manusmriti, the four-fold means of livelihood of vaishya are called vritti, and they include agriculture, commerce, rearing of cows, and money lending. The varnadharma of them includes, believing in Vedas and dharma, always being non-deceitful in the fulfilment of his duties, providing service to

brahmanas, achieving three goals of life i.e., dharma, artha, and moksha, devotion to God and teacher (preceptor), agriculture, love for rearing of cows, passion for charity and alertness.

### Shudra

Shudra is the lowest ranked of the chaturvarnas or four varna order, and claimed to have sprung forth from the feet (but for the sake of the prosperity of the worlds, he caused the brahmana, the kshatriya, the vaisya and the shudra to proceed from his mouth, his arms, his thighs, and his feet, 1. 31), (symbolizes dark: “elephants, horses, shudras and despicable barbarians...caused by (the quality of) darkness” 12. 43) of the primordial Purusha or the Lord Brahma, (padabhyam sudro ajayata, 1. 87). He is to occupy the position of physical labour and his varna duty is to render service to the three higher castes or twice-born groups of the hierarchy, i.e., the brahman, kshatriya and vaishya (ekameva tu sudrasya prabhuh karma samadisat, etesameva varnanam susrusamanasuyaya- one occupation only the lord prescribed to the shudra, to serve meekly even these (other) three castes, 1. 91). Manu argued, “but a

shudra, whether bought or unbought, he may compel to do servile work; for he was created by the Self-existent (Svayambhu) to be the slave of a brahmana. A shudra, though emancipated by his master, is not released from servitude; since that is innate in him, who can set him free from it?” (8. 413-414) He is not sufficiently intelligent to be a brahmana, ksatriya or vaisya, and hence, is required to serve the masters or work as artisan and labourer. Since he is less intelligent, and possess no samskara and virtue, he cannot comprehend the esoteric knowledge of the ancient scriptures, and hence, not entitled to perform the upanayana and the study of the Vedas. However, the members of this servile class could perform sraddhas without mantras, and if, exceptionally, possess faculty, involve in studying. Besides serving the three upper varnas, the shudras can also involve in, particularly in adverse time, the functions such as, sale and purchase of commodities like salt, honey, oil, curds, buttermilk, ghee milk and other but without deceit. However, sale of liquor and meat, consumption of prohibited food, unlawful relationship with women, and theft cause, Manu says, degradation of shudras.

The mythological origins of the shudra order are described in the Purusha Sukta of the Rig Veda, Mahabharata, Bhagavadgita, Puranas and later explained in the Manusmriti. The important statements of Manusmriti on shudra include:

- a) The duty of a shudra is to serve the three higher varnas, and the duty of a king is to “order a shudra to serve the twice-born castes” (8. 410). The king should “carefully compel vaisyas and shudras to perform the work (prescribed) for them; for if these two (castes) swerved from their duties, they would throw this whole world into confusion” (8. 418).
- b) “To serve brahmanas who are learned in the Vedas, householders, and famous (for virtue) is the highest duty of a shudra, which leads to beatitude. A shudra who is pure, the servant of his betters, gentle in his speech, and free from pride, and always seeks a refuge with brahmanas, attains in his next life a higher caste” (9. 334-335).
- c) “A shudra, being unable to find service with the twice-born and threatened with the loss of his sons and wife through hunger, may maintain himself by handicrafts. Let him follow those mechanical occupations and those various practical arts by following which the twice-born are best served” (10. 99-100; 121-129).

d) “A shudra cannot commit an offence, causing loss of caste (pataka), and he is not worthy to receive the sacraments; he has no right to (fulfil) the sacred law (of the Aryans, yet) there is no prohibition against (his fulfilling certain portions of) the law. Sudras who are desirous to gain merit, and know (their) duty, commit no sin, but gain praise, if they imitate the practice of virtuous men without reciting sacred texts. The more a (shudra), keeping himself free from envy, imitates the behaviour of the virtuous, the more he gains...this world and the next. No collection of wealth must be made by a shudra, even though he be able (to do it); for a shudra who has acquired wealth, gives pain to brahmanas” (10. 126-129).

e) “That kingdom where shudras are very numerous...soon entirely perishes, afflicted by famine and disease” (8. 22).

f) “A brahmana who subsists only by the name of his caste...may, at the king’s pleasure, interpret the law to him, but never a sudra. The kingdom of that monarch, who looks on while a sudra settles the law, will sink (low), like a cow in a morass” (8.20-21).

g) “Let him not allow a dead brahmana to be carried out by a sudra...for that burnt-offering which is defiled by a shudra’s touch is detrimental to (the deceased’s passage to) heaven” (5. 104).

h) “A brahmana who knows (the law) must not eat cooked food (given) by a sudra who performs no sraddhas; but, on failure of (other) means of subsistence, he may accept raw (grain), sufficient for one night” (4. 211, 223).

i) A shudra is not allowed to hear, learn, recite, or teach Vedas. Manu says, “he who instructs sudra pupils and he whose teacher is a sudra” (3. 156); “he who gains his subsistence from shudras” (3. 164) goes to hell; “let him recite (the texts) indistinctly, nor in the presence of shudras” (4. 99); “sudra has no business with sacrifice” (11. 13); “let him not dwell in a country where the rulers are shudras” (4.61).

j) “The foolish man who, after having eaten a sraddha, gives the leavings to a sudra, falls headlong into the kalasutra hell” (3. 249).

k) “Let him not give to a sudra advice, nor the remnants (of his meal), nor food offered to the gods; nor let him explain the sacred law (to such a man), nor impose (upon him) a penance. For he who explains the sacred law (to a sudra) or dictates to him a penance, will sink together with that (man) into the hell (called) asamvrita” (4. 80-81).

l) “A brahmana shall never beg from a sudra property for a sacrifice; for a sacrifice, having begged (it from such a man), after death is born (again) as a kandala” (11. 24).

m) “A brahmana may confidently seize the goods of (his) sudra (slave); for, as that (slave) can have no property, his master may take his possessions” (8. 417).

Besides, there are many other castes below shudras such as, chandalas, svapakas, vratyas, sutas (managers of horses and chariots), vaidehakas (servants of women), kshattris, pukkasas, and ugras (catchers and killers of animals who live in holes) ayogavas (carpenters), nishadas (hunters), dhigvavas (leather workers), venas (players of drums), margavas, karavaras, andhras, kunkus, medas, madgus (the slaughters of wild animals), pandusopakas,

ahindikas, sopakas, antyavasas, ambashthas (healers) etc. Manusmriti also states seven kinds of slaves-war slaves (captured in war), food slaves (slaves for food), purchased slaves, inherited slaves, and debt slaves etc. The

hereditary slaves could not change their status; and slaves were not allowed to possess property.

It may be noted here that, the varna settings in Manusmriti did not represent equality, it was based on superior-inferior relations. Brahmana and the duties accorded to him were of exemplarily superior than that of vaishyas and shudras. Manu explicitly states, “man is stated to be purer above the navel, hence the Self-existent (Svayambhu) has declared the purest (part) of him (to be) his mouth. As brahmana sprang from mouth, as he was the first-born...he is by right the lord of this whole creation...the very birth of a brahmana is an eternal incarnation of the sacred law...whatever exists in the world is the property of the brahmana...on account of the excellence of his origin...entitled to it all” (1. 91-100). Democracy and its fundamental ideals found absolutely no place in Manusmriti; it was basically written to panegyryze the exalted position ascribed already to the dwijas in the literature of the Vedic genre.

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