



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



## A study on the mythological references of the ancient Chaturvarnya system and social balance

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### Abstract

An ancient system of social stratification called the Chaturvarnya system, sometimes referred to as the caste system, has had a profound impact on the development of Indian society and culture for millennia. This research examines the mythical underpinnings of the Chaturvarnya system's development and justification as well as its effects on the harmony of society in ancient India.

The research tries to trace the legendary roots of the Chaturvarnya system through a thorough analysis of ancient scriptures, religious books, and epics including the Rigveda, Puranas, Manusmriti, Mahabharata, and Ramayana. The four varnas (classes)—Brahmins (priests and academics), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (laborers and service providers)—are assigned various societal responsibilities in these writings, which frequently include tales of divine origins. The study critically evaluates how the varnas and their responsibilities are portrayed in these mythological narratives.

**Keywords:** Chaturvarnya system; Historical analysis; Hierarchical system and spiritual development; Vedic literature, Indian civilization.

### 1. Introduction

The Chaturvarnya system, also referred to as the caste system, is a prehistoric social organization that has had a significant impact on India's political, economic, and cultural landscape for thousands of years. The Chaturvarnya system, which has its roots in legendary stories, divides society into four separate varnas, each with its own set of functions and obligations. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras are some of these varnas. Due to the system's long-lasting influence on Indian society, scholars have spent a great deal of time studying its roots and mythological allusions.

The oldest of the Vedas, the Rigveda, as well as the Puranas, which tell stories about creation and cosmology, contain mythological references to the Chaturvarnya system. The four varnas were frequently created by the divine order, according to these ancient texts, and their functions were divinely predetermined. For instance, Kshatriyas are portrayed as warriors and realm guardians, whereas Brahmins are seen as the priestly class charged with carrying out rites and safeguarding sacred information. Shudras are referred to as workers and service providers, but Vaishyas are given the roles of traders, farmers, and merchants.

The legendary stories that accompany the Chaturvarnya system have helped it gain societal acceptance and a sense of legitimacy. Despite numerous socio-political shifts over the course of centuries, the system's continuation has been strongly supported by the conviction that its roots are in divine will. These myths have played a significant role in establishing intercommunal connections, defining societal standards, and influencing people's goals and decisions.

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The idea of dharma, which stands for virtuous duty and moral obligation, is a fundamental part of the mythical foundations of the Chaturvarnya system. According to the mythology, each varna is expected to carry out its assigned tasks in accordance with its unique nature and abilities, which contributes to a harmonious and balanced community. However, the strict application of dharma, as understood from these myths, has been a source of controversy, sparking discussions about social mobility, gender roles, and how oppressed groups are treated within the system.

The purpose of this study is to investigate and examine the mythological allusions to the old Chaturvarnya system and their impact on preserving social harmony in ancient India. We seek to get a clearer knowledge of how these myths influenced social norms, power structures, and the allocation of resources within the Indian civilisation by exploring the historical narratives and societal ramifications. Additionally, a deeper understanding of the continuities and changes in Indian society can be gained through exploring these mythical foundations, which will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the mechanics of social balance in both the past and the present.

### *Objectives of the Study*

- To identify the ancient Chaturvarnya system's mythological allusions in significant Indian texts, such as the Rigveda, Puranas, Manusmriti, Mahabharata, and Ramayana.
- Understanding the four varnas' mandated roles and obligations while critically analyzing how they are portrayed in these mythical stories (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras).
- To research the social effects of these mythical allusions on the establishment and maintenance of the Chaturvarnya system in historic India.
- To investigate the meaning and applications of dharma within the Chaturvarnya system in order to preserve social harmony.

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## **2. Material and Method**

The research design for the study on "Mythological References of the Ancient Chaturvarnya System and Social Balance" will involve a multidisciplinary approach that includes historical analysis, textual examination, and sociological investigation. The study will be primarily qualitative in nature, aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the mythological narratives and their implications on social balance in ancient India. The research design can be summarized as follows.

Conduct a thorough research of the literature to compile scholarly articles, old texts, religious writings, and sociological studies pertinent to the Chaturvarnya system and its mythological allusions. A basis for creating research questions and identifying major topics will be provided by this review.

### **2.1. Textual Analysis**

Examine the mythological allusions of the Chaturvarnya system by analyzing primary sources such as the Rigveda, Puranas, Manusmriti, Mahabharata, and Ramayana. Extract pertinent passages and stories that describe the beginnings, functions, and responsibilities of the four varnas, then analyze how these texts present the idea of dharma.

### **2.2. Sociological investigation**

To learn more about the social effects of the Chaturvarnya system, speak with experts in Indian history, mythology, and sociology via interviews or focus groups. Examine the influences these mythical allusions had.

### **2.3. Limitations and Future Directions**

Identify any shortcomings in the study and suggest possible topics for more research to better comprehend the Chaturvarnya system and its intricate connection to social equilibrium.

The study uses this research design in an effort to provide insightful information about the historical, cultural, and sociological features of the Chaturvarnya system and how it affected societal harmony in ancient India and elsewhere.

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## **3. Literature Review**

A vast and varied range of viewpoints are presented in the literature on legendary allusions to the old Chaturvarnya system and its effect on societal harmony. The origins, rationale, and effects of the caste system in Indian society have

been studied by academics and researchers through the examination of several ancient writings and historical narratives. Here is a quick summary of the major ideas and conclusions from the published literature: Bailey, G. (2007).

The Puranas, the Rigveda, and other ancient texts have all been studied by a number of academics to determine the mythical roots of the Chaturvarnya system. To comprehend how the four varnas were envisioned as a core framework for societal structure, they have investigated creation stories, cosmology, and divine directives Rao, D. G. (2021).

The concept of dharma as it is portrayed in mythological references has been the subject of numerous research. Researchers have examined how dharma was viewed as each varna's justifiable obligation and how it was thought to contribute to social harmony and balance. Khamniungan, C. (2023).

**Social Hierarchy and Responsibilities:** The literature review focuses on how the early writings identified specific roles and responsibilities for each varna. Vaishyas were in charge of trade and commerce, Shudras of service and labor, Brahmins of religion and learning, Kshatriyas of government and defense. This strict hierarchy has come under scrutiny and discussion.

The institutionalization of the Chaturvarnya System has been studied by academics, who found that mythical references were essential to the caste system's development. They have looked at how these references affected a variety of facets of life, including marriage, employment, and social interactions, and how they were used to support and maintain societal divisions. Anil Nauriya. (2006).

**Social Mobility and Marginalized Communities:** Discussions on whether the Chaturvarnya system permitted for social mobility and if people could transcend their birth varna are revealed in the literature review. Additionally, researchers have looked at how Dalits and other underprivileged groups were handled inside this hierarchical system. Srivastava, V. K. (2015).

**Modern Relevance:** In recent years, researchers have looked at how these mythical allusions still have an impact on Indian society today. They have looked at how caste-based prejudice still exists and the difficulties in achieving social equality and balance. Ambedkar, B. R. & Rodrigues, V (2004)

Overall, the literature review highlights the topic's complexity, with academics utilizing a range of sources and research approaches to obtain a fuller understanding of the mythological allusions to the historic Chaturvarnya system and its intricate connection to India's social balance. The present amount of knowledge adds to a more thorough understanding of the historical and sociological aspects of the caste system in Indian society and serves as a platform for future study. Negi, N., Tamang R. Pande, (2016)

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#### **4. Mythological Ideology**

One of the most significant and beloved works of Hindu philosophy, the Bhagavad Gita, implicitly mentions the Chaturvarnya system. The Bhagavad Gita is a conversation between Prince Arjuna and Lord Krishna that takes place on Kurukshetra's battlefield right before the start of the epic war.

When describing the idea of the cycle of birth and reincarnation, Lord Krishna reveals the origin of the Chaturvarnya system in Chapter 4, Verse 13 of the Bhagavad Gita: I have created four classes of society according to the classification of modes of nature and the actions performed. Though I am the performer of the act of creation of Universe (as well as other actions), you should perceive Me, the Eternal God, as a non-doer. The reason is that having no concern for the fruits of action, I am not affected/involved by those actions. Accordingly, the one who knows Me in My essential reality, is also not bound by the actions. 4.13||

The Chaturvarnya system, which is based on the difference of people's characteristics (guna) and acts (karma), was developed by Lord Krishna, according to this scripture. This stanza places a strong emphasis on the caste system's heavenly origins and the idea that people are born into particular varnas based on their innate traits and deeds from previous lifetimes.

It is significant to note that neither the social ramifications of the Chaturvarnya system nor the exact tasks and responsibilities of each varna are covered in the Bhagavad Gita. The work largely concentrates on more general philosophical and ethical concepts, such as the idea of dharma, the route to enlightenment (moksha), and the essence of the self (atman).



(Source: [https://mauryavaad.blogspot.com/2021/07/blog-post\\_93.html](https://mauryavaad.blogspot.com/2021/07/blog-post_93.html))

Figure 1 Varna Vyavastha

- **Brahmanas:** The Brahmanas were priests who carried out rites and protected religious knowledge as part of their priestly responsibilities.
- **Kshatriya:** The Kshatriyas were in charge of maintaining law and order in society and performing administrative and military duties.
- **Vaishyas:** The Vaishyas were involved in trade, agriculture, and the raising of cattle, among other economic endeavors.
- **Shudras:** In society, the Shudras played supportive and helpful functions.
- The Rigveda, one of the earliest Hindu sacred books, contains the first mention of the Varna system. The hymns in this text refer to the many varnas and their social functions.
- Manusmriti, also referred to as the Laws of Manu, is an old legal treatise that has had a significant impact on Hindu culture. It gives in-depth explanations of the Varna system, social obligations, and liabilities connected to each varna.
- **Bhagavad Gita:** This significant Hindu text, which is a part of the Indian epic Mahabharata, talks about a variety of topics, including the Varna system and the responsibilities of people who belong to distinct varnas.
- The Arthashastra is an ancient Indian work on statecraft, economics, and military strategy that was authored by Chanakya (also known as Kautilya or Vishnugupta). It also offers insights on the social and economic structure of ancient India, notably the Varna system.
- **"The Essential Writings of BR Ambedkar":** Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a well-known social reformer and the designer of India's constitution, attacked the caste system (based on the Varna system) and its effects on society in great detail. His books offer a distinctive viewpoint on this legacy system.
- **Isabel Wilkerson's "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents"** This book explores caste systems in various cultures, making comparisons and analyzing their social repercussions. It does not just concentrate on the Varna system.
- **Shashi Tharoor's "The Hindu Way: An Introduction to Hinduism"** This book provides an overview of Hinduism's many facets, including the Varna system's historical background and context.

edited by Jan E. M. Houben, "The Oxford History of Hinduism: The World of the Veda": The early years of Hinduism, including the beginnings and growth of the Varna system, are covered in this volume, which is a part of the Oxford History of Hinduism series.

The three twice-born classes are the Brahmans (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors/rulers), and Vaishyas (merchants/farmers). Shudra, the fourth (class), is one and not (twice-born), though.

This verse highlights the division of society into three higher varnas (Brahmans, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas), who were regarded twice-born and had attended an initiation procedure known as Upanayana, which was an important milestone in their educational and spiritual development.

Shudra, the fourth varna listed, is not regarded as a twice-born varna. Shudras have historically been tasked with serving the other varnas and carrying out various labor- and service-related duties.

The caste system in India has developed into a more complicated and stratified social structure over time, despite the fact that these divisions were formerly a component of the ancient Varna system.

It's crucial to remember that while these divisions were a part of the conventional four varnas in the ancient Varna system, the caste system in modern-day India has developed into a more complex and stratified social structure with multiple castes and sub-castes. The caste system has also generated controversy and debate because of how it affects social hierarchy and inequality.

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## 5. Basic distinctions between the caste system and the varna system

The caste system and the varna system are antagonistic systems. They are so diametrically opposed that neither system can exist when the other is present. The following are their main distinctions:

In the varna system, a boy or girl or person can choose any varna after being born into any clan based on their interests, virtues, acts, and abilities, whereas in the caste system, a person can choose any caste as a result of the caste being determined by their parents. I am unable to accept my preferred caste.

In the varna system, merit, good actions, and attributes determine varna, whereas in the caste system, only birth determines caste. In contrast to the caste system, where birth is of the utmost importance, the varna system accords little significance to birth.

In the varna system, it is not required for the position and vocation to be inherited, although in the caste system, it is.

In the varna system, a person has a free and open opportunity to develop their intellectual, mental, and physical abilities, however in the caste system, this potential is still prohibited.

The first and biggest misunderstanding in comprehending Manu's or Vedic Varnavyavastha is that some people believe that Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra are by birth, whereas in fact they are not. Manu is accused of treating the upper varnas equally and despising the Shudras due to the misunderstanding that the varna is determined by birth. Such individuals are a result of the misperception that the varnas are hereditary. The varna system of Manu was, in fact, a system based on virtue, karma, merit.

The Dharmashastras refer to the first three varnas as being "twice born" and permit them to study the Vedas. The literature from the Vedic era does not contain any restrictions on who can study the Vedas.

Although Manusmriti classifies raising cattle as a Vaishya vocation, historical evidence demonstrates that Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Shudras also owned and bred cattle, and that their households' primary source of wealth was livestock. According to history professor and expert on social exclusion in the Indian subcontinent Ramnarayan Rawat, Chamars, who were classified as untouchables in 19th-century British records, also owned land and livestock and were engaged in active agriculture. Other instances include the Kosala rulers and the Kasi prince.

The Manusmriti is a highly schematic commentary on the varna system, according to anthropologist Tim Ingold, but it also offers "models rather than descriptions." According to Susan Bayly, the Manusmriti and other writings contributed to the development of the varna system by elevating Brahmin in the social order, but they did not "create the phenomenon of caste" in India. The big man's lips evolved into that of a Brahmin, or knowledgeable man. The Kshatriya, the powerful guy, is like his body's arms. Vaishya is a Sanskrit term that refers to a person who was given the ability to eat as his thigh and to serve as his feet.

The Purusha Sukta (Rigveda 10.90) provides a significant mythological allusion to the beginnings of the four varnas in the Rigveda. The four varnas are claimed to have erupted from the dismembered corpse of the Purusha (the Cosmic

Being) during a cosmic sacrifice, which is described in the text. This hymn uses the idea of divine creation to symbolically defend society's hierarchical structure.

**Upholding Social Order:** The idea of dharma places a strong emphasis on the necessity of upholding a disciplined and orderly community. Adherence to each person's dharma adds to the community's general harmony and stability. Respecting one another's roles and responsibilities helps people cooperate and prevent conflict.

**Karma and Rebirth:** The law of karma, which holds that one's deeds have repercussions in this life or in subsequent reincarnations, is closely related to dharma. Leaders, whether they be the Brahmin priests, Kshatriya rulers, or other esteemed members of society. By doing their dharma with sincerity and without selfish intentions, people amass good karma, which is said to lead to a more favorable rebirth.

### 5.1. Puranas

The Puranas, a sizable body of prehistoric Hindu literature, sometimes include myths and tales that relate different deities and celestial creatures to particular varnas. These books highlight each varna's duties and functions in society while delving into its divine roots.

### 5.2. Mythical Narratives

Brahmins are portrayed in a variety of mythological stories as smart, learned people with a deep understanding of the scriptures who are admired for their piety and dedication. They frequently appear as the king's trusted advisors and are crucial to the accomplishment of ceremonies and sacrifices.

### 5.3. Critical Analysis

Although the depiction of Brahmins highlights their superior intellect and spirituality, it also fosters a hierarchical and exclusive view of wisdom and knowledge. The social divide between Brahmins and other varnas, which led to unequal access to opportunities and education, may have been influenced by this notion.

**Restrictions on Education and Career Options:** The mythical-based caste system limited people's opportunities for education and career choices based on their caste, resulting in a lack of social and economic mobility. Brahmins were expected to be priests and scholars, Kshatriyas as warriors and rulers, Vaishyas as traders and farmers, and Shudras as laborers and servants.

### 5.4. Hindu caste system Sociology

Indian society is divided into multiple tiny groups known as castes under the caste system. Every social group has its own autonomy, and birth determines who belongs to it. Each caste has its own set of customs, rituals, and rules. The caste system has a hierarchy. The four primary castes are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras, with Brahmins at the top and Sudras at the bottom of the scale.

Each clan is divided into smaller divisions based on gotras. There are therefore four main castes, with a few smaller subgroups within each. The caste system in India enforces the endogamy custom. It allows its members to wed other people in the social group. A person's caste, which is decided at birth, does not change regardless of changes in their career, wealth, or degree of education. In India, the caste system also influences the type of employment available. The concepts of filth and cleanliness are the basis of the caste system. People who discriminate against "lower caste" people do so because they feel that they are inherently inferior to them due to their caste.

### 5.5. Standard Theory

According to this theory, the caste system was fashioned by God. It asserts that the varna system, in which the four varnas are claimed to have descended from Bramha's body, is the basis for the caste system. The Brahmins, who were largely teachers and intellectuals and descended from Brahma, were at the top of the social hierarchy. The Kshatriyas, or warriors and kings, sprung from his limbs.

The traders, or vaishyas, were created using his thighs. At the bottom were the Shudras, who sprung from Brahma's soles. As the mouth denotes its use for preaching, studying, etc., the arms serve as protection, the thighs are employed for work or business, and the feet signify its usage for service to others, the Shudras have an obligation to do so.

## 5.6. Theory of Race

Sanskrit's word for "caste" is "varna," which also means "color." The distinction between Brahmins, Kashtriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras under the chaturvarna system marked the beginning of caste stratification in Indian civilization. According to Indian sociologist D.N. Majumdar's book "Races and Culture in India," the caste system developed after the arrival of the Aryans. The distinctions between Arya and non-Aryans (Dasa), including their speech, religious practices, and physical traits, are heavily emphasized in Rig Vedic literature.

The Varna system, which was in existence during the Vedic era, was built on the division of labor and occupation. The three classes Brahma, Kshatra, and Vis are frequently mentioned in the Rig Veda. Brahma and Kshatra were used to represent the warrior-chief and poet-priest, respectively. Vis included everyone in the community. The word for the fourth class, the "Sudra," only appears once in the Rig Veda. Sudras were regarded as domestic servants.

## 5.7. Political Science

According to this view, the caste system was created by Brahmins as a smart way for them to rise to the top of society. Dr. Ghurye asserts that caste is an Indo-Aryan culture that originated in the Ganges region and spread to other parts of India as a Brahminic offspring. The Brahmins even incorporated the notion of the king's spiritual merit through the priest or purohit in an effort to win the king's favor.

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## 6. Conclusion

It is crucial to remember that the Chaturvarnya system evolved over time into one that was rigid, hierarchical, and focused on the inheritance of varnas and the treatment of people according to their place of birth. Due to this rigidity, there were societal inequities and inequalities that frequently deprived certain groups, such as Dalits, of their fundamental rights and opportunities.

By ensuring that each varna contributed their particular talents to society, the Chaturvarnya system, in theory, attempted to create social harmony and balance. It was believed that if everyone dutifully carried out their allotted tasks, society would run smoothly, much like a well-oiled machine.

In conclusion, the old Chaturvarnya system's mythical allusions served as a sacred foundation for its development and operation. Even though the system's goal was to maintain social harmony through a division of labor, its centuries-long execution produced a number of complexity and difficulties that are still the subject of discussion and criticism today. To comprehend how historical systems have impacted societies and to move toward today's social structures that are more inclusive and equitable, it is crucial to critically study historical systems.

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