

# The Hindu Class System

## Varna

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”:

<sup>11</sup> When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

<sup>12</sup> 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 Shatriyas, warriors and rulers. The thighs are the Vaishyas, skilled workers and farmers. The feet are the Shudras, servants.

Although people are expected to marry within their own caste, they have not always done so. Because of inter-caste marriages, *jatis*, subdivisions of castes, were established. If a couple within the three higher strata are 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 descendants become *Pariahs*, untouchables. Lowest on the social scale, the untouchables are considered 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 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 caste system, prohibiting its 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.

