



Brahmins
(priests)



Kshatriyas
(warriors and
rulers)



Vaishyas
(farmers,
merchants
and
artisans)



Shudras
(labourers)



Outcastes
or Harijans
(polluted
labourers)

Hindu Castes

Caste (Varna) based on Birth, Work and Duty, and Karma

Born	Class	Colour	Yoga
Twice	Brahmins	White	Jnanayoga
<i>Priests and Teachers (Purest)</i>			
Twice	Kshatriyas	Red	Karmayoga
<i>Warriors and Rulers</i>			
Twice	Vaishyas	Brown	Bhaktiyoga
<i>Farmers, Merchants, Artisans</i>			
Once	Shudras	Black	Bhaktiyoga
<i>Labourers</i>			
Outcastes	Tamas		Bhaktiyoga
<i>Labourers (Most polluted) clearing dead animals, leather, human and animal waste</i>			

Think of Mahatma Gandhi, sometimes affectionately called Bapu. We know that Mahatma means great soul (and Bapu means father - of the Indian nation) but Gandhi means greengrocer. This indicates that Gandhi was in the Vaishyas caste.

In the Bhagavad Gita (Chapter 18)

41. The works of the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras are different, in harmony with the three powers of their born nature.
42. The works of the Brahmin are peace, self-harmony, austerity, and purity; loving-forgiveness and righteousness; vision and wisdom and faith.
43. These are the works of a Kshatriya: a heroic mind, inner fire, constancy, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity and noble leadership.
44. Trade, agriculture and the rearing of cattle is the work of a Vaishya. And the work of the Shudra is service.

[*Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Juan Mascaró, chapter 18, Penguin Books, 1962]

There are then thousands of subcastes in India, for support and administration.

Caste has existed in India on the basis of work and duty, and through these Karma is pursued. The aim is not to achieve everlasting life, as in Christianity, but to end the cycle of rebirth. Only Brahmins can end the cycle of rebirth. Others must pursue

their yoga towards improving their moral standing in order to achieve a more successful rebirth. Caste is therefore determined at birth.

Although it can be argued that caste had a benefit in the distribution of work in the past, the consensus became in modern times that it is discriminatory. It is illegal in India to discriminate on the basis of caste, however, just as many people in the UK are racist and it is against the law, so in India caste discrimination takes place outside the confines of religion. It can still very much determine the suitability of a marriage partner.

The colours associated with caste **are** related to race. Hinduism began when Aryans came from the north and mixed with the local population east of the River Indus. This is when the first holy books were written. These northern people were lighter skinned than the original local people. Notice how higher castes have lighter colours. For hundreds of years caste could not be determined by skin colour. Nevertheless, this traditional association of lighter colour with higher caste is one reason why caste is so difficult to defend today, and indeed many will not defend caste.

Being twice born is **not** the same as the Christian "born again" idea. It means that boys in those highest three castes go through a ritual of receiving a sacred thread. For Brahmins this happens at 8 years old, for Kshatriyas this happens at 11 years old, and for Vaishyas this happens at 12 years old. The equivalent for girls is marriage when they receive the thread.

The twice born then enter four ashramas of stages of life. The first is brahmacharya of being a **student** when boys find a Brahmin guru and learn obedience, respect, non-violence and celibacy. The second stage is garhastya, which is the **householder** stage. This is when men carry out their caste work and duties to improve their karma. Women are wives and mothers to improve their karma. The third stage is vanaprastya, or nicely called **Forest Dweller**, when there are grandchildren and when the children can look after themselves. The grandparents are able to go into the forest (!) and become religious hermits. They have a little dharma to perform but consider liberation. The fourth stage is the sanyassin, or **wanderer**, where the wife must leave the forest and return home. He renounces the world and is regarded as dead by the family, in a temple he is not a worshipper but an object of worship. The gods are only householders, so the human sanyassin is above the gods.

48% of Hindus are in the first three castes and twice born.

Karma means religious duty carried out through the allocated task. For the Brahmin it means religious, for the Kshatriya it means bravery and decision making, for the shudra it means cheerful work to the best of their ability.