

# Brahmin Reading

## Who are they?

The Brahmin people are a prominent community spread across the whole of India. The Brahmin are the highest of the four Hindu castes, made up of priests and scholars of Vedic literature and their traditional occupation is to concern themselves with the spiritual guidance of the people, conduct rites at marriages, births, deaths and other auspicious occasions.

In practice the caste and the profession are not to be treated as one. All Brahmin are not priests. In fact, a majority of them are not and there is a striking range of diversities in terms of status and occupation among the Brahmin all over the country.

## Origin

The term Brahmin meant originally “one possessed of Brahman” – a mysterious magical force widely known to modern anthropologists by the Melanesian word mana. The name Brahmin was given to the first specially trained priest who superintended the sacrifice. By the end of the Rig Vedic period dating 1500-1000 BC, the term was used for all members of the priestly class. Within the order there were other divisions. The Brahmins of the later Vedic period dating 900-600 BC were divided into exogamous clans that restricted matrimonial choice and dictated ritual. This system, which was copied in part by other classes, has survived to the present day. Later the Brahmin formed many associate castes, linked together by endogamy and other common practices.

The Rig Veda is the oldest and perhaps the most sacred of all Hindu scriptures. It contains the mythological origin of the Brahmin which is most interesting. According to the “Hymn of the Primeval Man” in the Rig Veda, the god Prajapati (Lord of Beings), who is often identified with Brahma, the creator in the Hindu trinity – was sacrificed by his children. From this sacrifice the universe was produced, and the Brahmin originated from his mouth.

According to Hindu law and tradition, the spiritual and intellectual power of the Brahmin is strictly separate from the temporal power of the Kshatriya, the ruler or warrior class. However, over time, the two have maintained an alliance. The answer to the question ‘who is a Brahmin?’ emphasizes that character and spiritual inclination, rather than caste is what

makes a Brahmin. Despite this, Indian society continues to place a premium on the status at birth.

## What Are Their Lives Like?

The Brahmin's traditional occupation is that of a priest. Brahmins have a variety of occupations. In Orissa, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh, many Brahmin own land and practice agriculture, but an increasing number are also in white-collar jobs, government service, business, household industry and astrology. In Rajasthan, agriculture forms their primary occupation but a few are traders, bankers, sculptors of idols and makers of wooden seats for the idols. In Chandigarh the Brahmin are gradually diversifying into administration, teaching, business, and the legal profession.

Although the Brahmin can follow any profession or means of livelihood, no one except a Brahmin can be a socially accepted priest. This was the main reason why many opposed the decision by the BJP government to offer a university degree in Hindu priesthood. The wider community would never accept the services of a non-Brahmin or lower caste priest.

The Brahmin has always taken an active part in politics. During the British period, Brahmins were the first to respond to English education and the first to benefit from political and administrative power. Since India's independence in 1947 there has been large numbers of Cabinet Ministers, Chief Ministers, MPs and Members of the State Legislative Assemblies (MLAs). The first and longest-ruling Prime Minister of India, Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru was a Brahmin. The current Chief Minister of Uttaranchal is also a Brahmin.

Literacy levels among the Brahmin are very high as compared to those of other communities. They favor family planning and use modern medical facilities as well as traditional Ayurvedic remedies. The Brahmin is major beneficiaries of the federal government's development programmes and has used them to their profit.

The acceptable age for marriage for women is eighteen and older for men. Marriages are arranged by parents and monogamy is the norm. The ancestral property is inherited equally by sons only – the eldest son succeeding as head of the family. Interfamily alliances are based on socio-religious and economic cooperation.

Marriage symbols for women are the mangalsutra, which is a gold and black bead necklace. Wives smear vermilion powder (sindur) along the hair parting and wear toe rings. Payment of dowry is both in cash and goods. Divorce is rare and remarriage for widows is prohibited. Widowers however, are allowed to remarry.

Though the status of women is secondary to men, they have a relatively higher level of education and awareness than other women in Indian society. Brahmin women do not have to work and play a bigger role in ritual, social and religious spheres than women from other castes and communities. Many women have excelled in fields as diverse as social service, literature, theology and academics. Pandita Ramabai was a Brahmin woman who began work among oppressed Hindu widows after becoming a follower of Christ.

## What Are Their Beliefs?

The Brahmin people are Hindu and due to their privileged priestly position, are sought by others for religious guidance. As custodians of Hinduism they worship deities on a larger scale. Regional variations are present as prominence is given to a particular deity. For example among the Maithili Brahmin of Bihar worship of Shiva (destroyer of the Hindu trinity) is widespread, involving the daily worship of shivalingams (phallic symbols of Shiva).

Another major god is Vishnu, whose symbol – a black pebble from a certain river is found in every Brahmin home. Brahmin from the northeast like Tripura mostly worships the mother goddess Shakti. Kali and Durga (a ten-handed form of Kali who rides a tiger) are revered in West Bengal. Family and clan deities, along with village and regional deities are also worshiped.

The Brahmin strictly adheres to important life-cycle rituals based on the sacred texts though variations are seen from region to region. Birth and death pollution are observed for specified time periods. The dead are cremated and the ashes immersed in a river, preferably the holy Ganges at the sacred cities of Haridwar or Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh.

Some Brahmin of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are Roman Catholics whose conversion took place in late 19th century. Until recently they had continued to wear the Hindu sacred thread with a locket containing the pictures of the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ.

The Brahmin has an iconic status in Hindu society. They are generally intelligent, prosperous and influential. As guardians of religion and leaders of society, they influence social conduct and morality by the example they set.

Strictly speaking only Brahmins can be priests and as such they usually are the main and major component of Hindu priesthood. But many other castes also have “sacred specialists” or priests of their own who perform their community rituals. Their standing, however, is far below that of the Brahmin.

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