

# Kshatriyas

## Overview

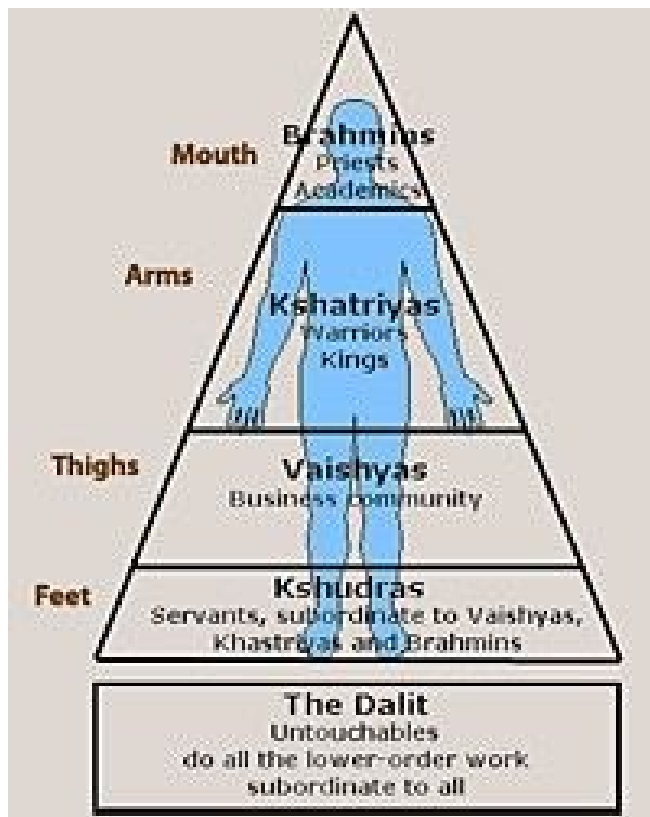
Kshatriyas is the second level in the social pyramid. Kshatriyas were the military and ruling class of the ancient Hindu society, who initially, achieved their class position on the merits of their aptitude (*guna*), conduct (*karma*), and nature (*swabhava*). However, over time, a Hindu's varna status became hereditary and rules surrounding class status were fixed in the Laws of Manu. Today, the Kshatriya varna includes a broad class of jati groups, differing considerably in status and function but united by their claims to rulership, the pursuit of war, or the possession of land.

It is notable that several key figures in Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism were Kshatriyas, indicating the power and prestige that this group once held in ancient Indian society. Indeed, the famous religious leaders Siddhartha Gautama aka The Buddha and Mahavira (as well as Lord Rama and Lord Krishna) all belonged to this social order. In addition to their religious impact, the Kshatriya class also played a very important role in the development of Indian political thought, penning key texts of political strategy such as the *Arthashastra*.

## History

The Rig Veda contains another Hindu story to explain the origins of the four classes of Hinduism. It is said that the universe began with the great sacrifice of the cosmic being Purusha. From its head (mouth) came the Brahmin class, and from its arms came the Kshatriya (warrior/ruling) class. Other classes came from its legs (Vaishyas) and feet (Shudras). As the warriors, the Kshatriyas protected Hindu society whereas the

Vaishyas pursued trade, while the Shudras performed menial chores of farming, labor, artisans, and all the jobs required of a society.



## Role in society

In ancient India, there was mobility between varnas, as people learned new skills and changed their actions and occupations. The nomadic tribes of ancient India did not have a fixed caste system. They initially assigned roles based on an individual's aptitude and ability. This was necessary in order to ensure the tribe's survival. The stronger members of the tribe became the warriors and were given higher status in society, as they were more important to the survival of the tribe at the time. As the tribes became more familiar with farming, they built up surpluses and settled. This more sedentary and

leisurely lifestyle shifted the people's focus to accumulating wealth and finding a meaning to life. Priests began to take the preeminent role in society as they ensured spiritual salvation. This led to society forming a more rigid social system, where one's position was determined by birth rather than merit. Thereafter, those in the more powerful classes enforced this caste system to remain in power, a pattern also exhibited by the nobles of Europe. During the Epic Age, people began to question these institutions.

Although the caste system was very fluid early on and an individual rose or fell depending on his own merit, historians generally agree that caste became hereditary around the time of the rise of Buddhism and Jainism based on archaeological, literary, and artistic evidence of the communities that existed in India. Gautama Buddha and Mahavira are two Kshatriya sages who made a lasting impression on the world. They did not believe in the preeminence of the Vedas and taught to the masses, not keeping spirituality to an elite few. Many of the ancient rulers such as Ashoka Maurya were ardent followers of this faith and promoted it throughout the Mauryan empire. This resulted in the decline in status of the Brahman order. Priests in all three faiths were the record keeper and as you will see in the coming examples there was a definite trend towards placing rulers in the Sudra varna if they did not follow Vedic teachings and maintain the prominence of the priestly order, losing their Kshatriya status.

While the term varna refers to the four broad different classes in society, the term jati refers to the different specific endogamous sections of the Hindu Society known as castes. Varna means "color" as well as "veil." In the context of color people have confused it to mean race but it actually represents the distinct qualities (guna) that the four functional classes possess in their hearts and minds. The four different qualities of human beings:

1. If a person possessed the qualities of purity, love, faith and detachment, seek true knowledge and have a spiritual temperament, they would be

represented by the color White (sattva = truthful). Those that belong to this color, belong to the Brahmin class.

2. If a person possessed the qualities of action, will, aggression, and energy, seek honor, power, status and have a martial and political temperament, they would be represented by the color Red (rajas = energetic). Those that belong to this color belong to the Kshatriya class.
3. If a person tried to seek communication, interchange, trade, business and possessed a commercial temperament they were represented by the color Yellow. They make up the Vaishya class.
4. For those individual in society who showed ignorance, inertia, and dullness, they were represented by the color Black (tamas = inert, solid). Those belonging to this color are thought to be dependent on the rest of the world for motivation and seek nothing as they exist in those of the servile disposition and make up the Shudra class.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Primary functions: Rulers and soldiers

In classical Hindu society, the two primary tasks of the Kshatriya varna were to govern the land and to wage war. The latter task was the responsibility of the *Raja* (King), who was instructed by the Hindu texts to rule by the *danda* (staff) and inflict punishment (and war) upon enemies of the kingdom. These Hindu kings often ruled justly following the ideals found in their holy scriptures to govern as a *Dharma-Raja* (Just Ruler), with the main duties being protection of his subjects and livestock.

These Kings also controlled large armies of other Kshatriyas who were employed as soldiers in pursuit of the Kingdom's protection, defence and expansion. However, these soldiers were not employees in a modern sense; rather they believed they were

destined for their role as fighters. For the most part, it was seen as their intrinsic duty (svadharma).