
Dharmic Societies

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Primer 02

India's Societies & the Dharma Traditions

- **Audience** K–12 educators
- **Reading** 19 minutes
- **Free**

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Human Groupings in Ancient India

Ancient Indian societies have traditionally organized themselves through a variety of methods, with layers of ways of self-identifying as well as group membership. The methods of self-organizing were agreed to by the particular people group's elected representatives, and therefore cannot be generalized beyond that particular region or people group (tribe/tribal confederation/nation). There were, nevertheless, some common features.

A *vyakti* (/individual) was usually part of a *parivāra*, which consists of an immediate family and multigenerational blood relations. A *parivāra* was usually part of a *kula* (clan), an extended family or clan with shared ancestry and kinship, whether genetic or otherwise, including relations through marriage. Subclans are often named for any significant individual and their children, or smaller clans that ally with larger clans through treaty or partnership. Many *parivāras* and/or *kulas*, when they shared some kind of distinguishing social features, might form a *jāti* (tribe). The shared distinguishing features of a *jāti* might include any combination of commonly accepted origin stories, histories, worldviews, teachings, customs, spiritual traditions, language or dialects, trade or guild affiliation, occupation, profession, etc. While initially a tribe would have many internal variations due to it being composed from many clans, over time a tribe would trend towards synthesizing a more streamlined set of distinguishing features, while still making provisions for any dearly held clan traits to be accommodated. Many *kulas* and/or *jātis* would ally through treaty or marriage and form a *jana*, a clan/tribal confederation, usually with a commonly elected leader and a council made up of the leaders of the other clans. The geographical territory of a *jana* was called a *janapada*.

There were originally sixty-four major *janapadas* in ancient India (c. 1100-600 BCE), in addition to three great Tamil dynasties (the Cheras, Choḷas, and Paṇḍyas). These were mainly formed around

cities and connecting trade routes. Thousands of other settlements belonged to tribes that did not join the more expansive confederations.

As janas grew and further governance was required, an elder of each family would form an assembly (samiti). These assemblies selected a leader (rājñā) who had a sabhā, a small group of advisors consisting of purohitas, or chaplains and experts, and the senāni, guards. When a group of janas allied through treaty or marriage, their combined janapada territories were called a mahājanapada or tribal nation. There were sixteen mahājanapadas in ancient India (c. 600-400 BCE), each of them containing one or more urbanized areas serving as economic and administrative centers, and numerous villages or forest settlements wherein resided both Āryas (originally referring to 172 multiethnic tribes, a few of which formed confederations that led to influential janapadas and then the mahājanapadas) and those tribes and confederations choosing to remain independent from Ārya societies.

The forests, whether beyond or within the mahājanapadas' boundaries, were left autonomous if there were independent clans living there. These independent clans and clan federations maintained their own ancient territories, societies, and traditions. Beyond the mahājanapadas were many non-Ārya ancient Indian cultures. One of these, known as the Indus Valley Civilization, has been the focus of much discussion due to a plethora of archaeological studies conducted into their regions. There were, however, approximately 4,000 other people groups and their territories that have been routinely left out of the history of ancient India. This has led to a false dichotomization of ancient Indian history into that of the Āryas and a supposed homogenous Dravidian civilization of which the Indus Valley was an example. In fact, the mahājanapadas and the numerous kingdoms, territories, and realms of various tribal confederations, nations, and indeed civilizations like that of the Indus Valley should all be considered when discussing societies of ancient India.

As trade between societies increased, those that developed into prosperous cities (nagara) required administration. This led to oligarchic republics (gaṇasaṅgha) like the Vṛji and Malla republics. If based around a major city with a trading network, occasionally several mahājanapadas would ally through treaty or marriage and form a sāmrajya, a nation state or empire. Otherwise, if needs were met with limited trade or if a kula, jatī, or jana was self-sufficient, they could opt to function independently in the rural areas, forests, or hills they inhabited, away from the urban cities that were founded mainly on coastal lowlands or on the banks of navigable rivers. If these independent clans, tribes or their respective confederations were situated near or on trade routes or infrastructure such as ports, they would negotiate relationships with their more powerful neighbors. Otherwise the janapadas/mahājanapadas and other kingdoms respected those independent people groups' decision to enter into trade agreements, or maintain total autonomy. This structure lent itself to a broad, pluralistic society with great diversity within larger unified groups of people. It is also the reason for the survival (until West Asian and European colonial times) of distinct clan and tribe confederations which were later classified as and designated Backward or Criminal Castes and Tribes by the British Imperial administrators.

Gender and Sexuality

The ancient indigenous Indian medical science of Āyurveda, observed that although biological bodies are male, female, or intersex, the polar masculine and feminine heterosexuality is not the only sexual orientation possible. This variety is known as “third nature” (tṛtīyā prakṛti) and includes over forty-three different observed gender identities and sexual orientations. Various Hindu societies therefore evolved with men, women, and third nature scholars, soldiers, rulers, spiritual leaders, artists, tradespersons, workers, etc. Most Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and, later, Sikh societies mainstreamed heteronormativity while accepting those of a third nature, while some were specifically operated by and for third nature communities – these were mostly from the Hindu

Dharma traditions.

Household, Marriage & Family

A household consisted either of a self-reliant individual, or a unit. A householder unit generally was formed by people who were related either through blood or partnership. Common since ancient times, though less common today, independent households functioned similar to homesteaders in the US, in that they gained the majority of their necessities from the land they lived on and bartered for/purchased specialized items they could not produce. This self-reliance was a high ideal as it was labor-intensive and so the meeting of needs was not always guaranteed. Households participating in the broader society with their clan, tribe, or nation achieved self-reliance through their own land or an industry for which they acquired skills. In order to receive the benefits of living within a broader society, there was a common and ancient understanding that a portion of their commodities or income should be given to the administrators to finance projects and services that benefited that society.

The majority of ancient Indian societies considered two people who professed a loving connection to be partnered. Regulations only applied when children were born to a specific partnership, and the parental responsibilities shared by the parents. Some Indian societies were matriarchal, others patriarchal, others non-binary led, and others a negotiated or balanced combination. In all cases, as a society, each discussed and decided their own norms regarding households. Households could be formed by self-reliant individuals, a partnered pair or group, or the family resultant of a specific partnership.

In the entirety of Hindu history, marriage in a formal sense was typically the preserve of kings, queens, and administrators, as their offspring could become the next rulers and inheritance was of national consequence. Thus, the vast majority of Hindus (and Buddhists and Jains) in ancient India

instead formed relationships or unions on the basis of personal choice, sometimes informed by parents' guidance. These were also unions that would be blessed by the spiritual traditions. The later colonial requirement to have marriages that looked like Muslim and then Christian weddings, with a religious officiant and a contract, was imposed onto the royal Hindu weddings. These requirements were then forced upon the rest of Hindus, which made all legally recognized Hindu and Sikh weddings more of an arranged family affair rather than the formerly most common types of unions, and those advocated for by Hindu sources of knowledge, which were based on personal preference and liking. Since Indian Independence, many Hindu and Sikh communities have moved away from arranged marriages, which occurred with or without the couple's full consent, to approaches which reaffirm their individual choice in marriage, such as arranged introductions or pure self-choice marriages. Arranged introductions in some ways mirror more ancient Dharmic approaches to finding a partner if unable to do so oneself. Interestingly, those contemporary Hindus who reject even arranged introductions as being too "traditional" often do so without the knowledge of the colonial history of how arranged marriages came to be.

Occupations, Crafts, Trades, and Professions

Householders would generally become self-reliant and even prosperous through an occupation, craft or trade, profession, or any combination of these. An occupation refers to any work a person engages in to earn a living. A craft or trade typically involves skilled labor and requires specialized training. A profession requires extensive education, training, and adherence to certain agreed-upon standards. They may also involve apprenticeships or on-the-job training.

The occupation one engaged in played a vital role in shaping the lives of people, influencing not only their work but also their social interactions, family dynamics, and migration patterns. These occupations could also determine social roles within communities, depending on the priorities and

needs of the society or surrounding geography.

Work skills were usually acquired through the household or through apprenticeships. Some apprenticeships involved different levels of schooling in the craft or trade, while others involved learning on the job. Skills in a profession were also usually acquired through the household (if a family profession), or through formal schooling. If a professional teacher was instructing on a particular craft, trade, or profession, they would likely have firsthand knowledge of that work before or concurrently to acquiring professional teaching capabilities. Many crafts and trades became regarded as professions over time due to increasing complexity of the work or their value to a given society. The boundaries of these categories were context sensitive to a degree. Examples of occupations include agriculture, custodial work, or hospitality services. Crafts included pottery, textiles, or woodworking for example. Trades included metal work, carpentry, or stonework. Professions included doctor, administrator, tenured/commissioned artist, spiritual teacher, educator, researcher, etc.

Work, Trade, and Society

In every society, a division of labor develops as skills are passed on from one generation to the next. People groups develop specialization based on the needs of their society, the quality of available resources, and their skills in transforming resources into specific goods and services. Over time, they may become known for these goods and services as the complexity of production increases. This took place in the Indosphere as it did throughout the world. Access to a resource or product that was specific to the territory of a clan or tribe could also be negotiated through treaties and alliances. With the passage of time, trade increased within and between groups, though some remained more isolated and self-sufficient, either not prioritizing or not needing specialization or more demarcated divisions of labor.

In ancient India, for example, certain clans or tribes living closer to the mountains may have developed skills for mining Himalayan salt. As demand would grow, more people would be trained at mining to keep up with supplying it. As a specialized good or service became more lucrative, some clans and tribes would join that particular specialized trade, while others would choose to continue with their own work or specialized trades.

As groups grew and interacted and specific goods and services became more renowned through trade networks, supply chains, alliances, treaties, and even marriages between rulers/administrators developed and grew. With growing trade networks and alliances, more planning, execution, delegation, specialization, and analysis also became necessary to ensure efficient and effective interaction, cooperation, innovation, exchange of goods and services, logistics, governance, defense, etc. within and amongst groups.

In the ancient Indosphere (as in other societies across the globe), as clans and tribes formed confederate nations and trade networks grew even more, the nations' councils and leaders leveraged trade and the specialization of each clan and/or tribe for the benefit of the collective. The most prosperous trade-based clans and tribal nations generally developed ways of streamlining things, including developing raw materials (primary), manufacturing (secondary), services (tertiary), and education and training (quaternary) sectors of industry that were grouped in a variety of ways. People in these sectors (described by Vedic people as the *varṇas* – laborers, traders, defense and administrators, and scholars) shared best practices, training, human resources, evaluations, etc. This happened across similar industries. As a result, guilds in these various sectors developed naturally in these societies. Their relationship to the nation – taxation, logistics, infrastructure projects, etc. – was decided by the council of leaders/experts. These developments led to greater complexities and a need for a new group of intermediaries, such as administrative and compliance

guilds.

Only in those Hindu societies that consisted of a large population, usually from different tribes with their own spiritual traditions and cultures, did guilds play an important role. These guilds tended to be more restrictive and represented specific professions, e.g. doctors to administrators. They also looked at admission – just like a doctor trained in the Australian medical system must undergo extra training before being deemed competent in the American context, so too, guilds would determine how the skills of a doctor from a tribe that came from a humid region could apply in the common settlement in a dry region. This point is especially important considering that Hindus were trading across the whole of Asia and well into Europe and Africa from ancient to modern times.

The alternative method of integrating societies was through the spiritual traditions and developing a common framework which held space for the individuality of the tribe/clan. These could not be scaled in the manner that guilds were, but this alternative was more prevalent in Asia. The urbanized nations, as such, tended to prefer guilds, as the administration's directives and taxation were easier to implement.

Only one task was and is sex specific: though a male is involved in conception, females give birth and have the ability to breastfeed children. This does not mean, however, that the plethora of tasks or work that exists (or existed) is not performed by women. There simply may be a period of time in some women's lives when doing those other tasks may not be possible or preferred. Age and ability may also influence one's ability to perform certain work. Very young, elderly, and differently-abled people may not necessarily be able to do some tasks with the same efficiency of able-bodied, trained people. Though, with assistance, they could be supported to do so. Similarly, in ancient India and the Indosphere, age and gender were natural limiters of certain work. Additionally, a young person could be fit and healthy, but not yet have the skills required for the job, so the

duration of training and education were also times when a person could not be a fully productive member of the society – yet this was understood to be a good investment of time and resources, as through education they would become skilled members of society rather than unskilled laborers.

As clans and/or tribes came together, spiritual and cultural experts also naturally tended to coalesce together. Additionally, people who provided manual labor for either the industries or the spiritual and cultural enterprises also naturally grouped themselves together. Furthermore, as trades became specialized, defense of the clan became delegated to specialists who were physically and mentally best suited to this task.

Each clan and/or tribal nation in ancient India and Asia in general had their own organizational models. Many insular tribes have governance (elders), spiritual and cultural leaders or guides, defense, and manual labor groups, with people sometimes taking on multiple responsibilities. Some nations in ancient India simply allowed for the proliferation of different groups of people. Others, especially those that became *sāmrājyas*, needed to coordinate these groups over vast distances and a variety of clan and/or tribe cultures. Such *sāmrājyas*, particularly those nations that were based on a particular culture, deliberated on how their societies would be organized in line with the needs of the day.

The majority of ancient Āryan *sāmrājyas* (Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu, c. 300 BCE to 11th century CE), tribal confederations, and settlements of isolated clans, generally adopted a model in which those that governed were supported by the laborers, industries, defense guilds, and the spiritual and cultural experts per the needs of the people. People could move around in these various sectors on the grounds of their callings and talents (*guṇa-karma*). Clan identity did not tie a person to a specific sector, though given that much industrial training was passed on from parents to children or through apprenticeships, it was common for clans to become adept in a certain sector.

The sāmrajyas that were intent on either expanding in trade or territory, however, required more thought behind their organization. A few among the original sixteen mahājanapadas – not all – decided to codify regulation of their social sectors in order to augment their efficiency, and evidently, especially augment the ability to collect taxes and enact government initiatives easily. They assigned a chief skill or product to a given clan and organized them in groups known as jātis. While they may have originally been egalitarian in their approach, ubiquitously humans do develop possessiveness and prejudices based on the groups to which one belongs. Additionally, some of these codes, in reaction to the realities of the day, were very specific about how each sector and even clan should interact, reminiscent of Christian feudalism or the Muslim Arab land-ownership birth-based hierarchy. The chief type of Āryan culture that preferred this model of jāti-based social organization was that based on the Mīmāṃsaka spiritual tradition.

In sum, Hindu societies could be:

- Isolated settlements of a particular household, clan, tribe, or tribal confederations and thus specific to a particular region.
- Connected settlements of a variety of clans, tribes, tribal confederations who have limited their reach to a particular region in view of their self-reliance.
- Connected settlements of a variety of clans, tribes, tribal confederations who are pan-regional owing to their networks of trade. Some settled a natural geographic limit for their shared societies, all of which had pluralism embedded to respect the tribal confederation, tribe, clan, and even household-level diversity of culture or spiritual tradition. Others, particularly Mīmāṃsaka and Buddhist-ruled kingdoms, developed into empires and implemented a centrally codified, locally administered universal code.

Spiritual Functionaries

Hindus would turn to their parents or elders for life advice. If they were able to answer or guide the person, then they would, but if not, the person would be referred to experts. In the realm of spiritual issues, which for Hindus incorporate emotional, mental, intellectual factors as well, a person would be referred to the family's guru if they had one, or in the absence of one, an expert (paṇḍita) on spiritual teachings who would serve as a sort of navigator to direct the person to a guru that was best placed to assist.

Types of Hindu spiritual functionaries include:

- *Paṇḍita* – would be expected to have spent at least twelve years in general studies on topics ranging from history to philosophy and additional 2-3 years in discipline-specific studies (śāstrī) in subjects like mathematics, spirituality, and a wide variety of subjects. Though today paṇḍita refers to a spiritual expert, traditionally it was used to describe a person that had a post-śāstrī level expertise in any given discipline.
- *Ācārya* is a person who has done post-śāstrī further studies for at least another 2-3 years, and will likely be adept at related disciplines. Ācāryas are expected to have deep insight into the discipline they have studied. In the case of ācāryas of a spiritual tradition, they function as representatives of the traditions. They would also be expected to be or have qualifications similar to that of a guru (see below), while also knowing the gamut of traditional teachings and having expertise in the practices.
- *Guru* – spiritual guides consulted by many Hindus for mentorship and guidance in accordance with the specific spiritual tradition to which the guru belongs. Additionally, they may triage spiritual issues with the seeker, providing advice or answers to spiritual questions. The qualifications for a guru differ according to each tradition. In most traditions, the guru is adept in both the philosophy and practice of the tradition, and is capable at mentoring and

counseling seekers on the path. This eligibility is authorized by their own spiritual guide, and can require formal training (having paṇḍita-level knowledge and over eight years of mentored practice), or acquiring similar proficiency through self-cultivation. Additionally, in some traditions the guru transmits the potential for spiritual development handed down by their tradition to the seeker.

- *Purohita* – literally, ‘one who works for the betterment of the city’. Usually trained to a śāstrī level, they are competent in ceremonial observances for families and their homes, such as weddings, housewarmings, etc. They will have trained in the ceremonies of a shrine also, and can sometimes be found working in temples in the U.S., as temples here serve as cultural, learning, and spiritual centers for the community of a specific area in a way that Indian temples may not. Some purohitas may also be trained in spiritual care provision, similar to chaplains, and assist with spiritual care for issues that city residents may face.
- *Arcaka/Pūjārī* – these are specialists in caring for a shrine in accordance with the teachings of a given tradition, performing all shrine-based ceremonies with precision. Usually they would undergo at least śāstrī-level training in a traditional school, and are recognized by their own spiritual teacher, which recognition is then ratified/accepted by a council of elders or scholars of their particular tradition. The course of study varies somewhat between different Hindu traditions – Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, etc. Temples in the U.S. will usually have such functionaries, but where retaining a position is not possible, they may rely on visiting pūjārīs or even lay volunteers who have been given at least an initial training on the requirements of a specific temple or shrine.
- *Jyotiṣī* – in some Hindu Dharma traditions, astrology is a significant part of spiritual care provision. Aside from this, all Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist Dharma traditions calculate their

festivals based on a variety of calendars, the chief of which is the lunisolar calendar, and will consult with jyotiṣīs who have had at least a śāstrī-level training in a given subdiscipline of astrology.

- *Vaidya* – these are śāstrī-level educated and mentored traditional medicine doctors. A variety of ancient medical sciences have survived till today through passed down formal practitioners and healers, home remedies, and because of their recognition by allopathic medicine as successful in complementary therapies and, in some cases, as management for chronic ailments. Āyurveda is well regarded, but therapies according to Uzhichil systems and others developed to treat injuries in martial training like Kalaripayattu are seeing a resurgence.
- *Jhāṅkrī/Dhāmī/etc.* – known by many other names, these are oracles, mediums, and healers that have very ancient roots and have survived centuries of persecution in colonial regimes and remained somewhat intact. They are very common in ancient regional/tribal Hindu and Buddhist Dharma traditions and are consulted regularly to intercede or channel on behalf of individuals or whole communities. Even the Dalai Lama in Vajrayāna Tibetan Buddha Dharma tradition relies on the counsel not only of the scholars but also of the recognized oracles. Typically, in addition to being recognized as possessing the gift of mediumship from a young age, they would be guided by a mentor for over seven years in practices to increase and hone their abilities and skills. Many Hindu and Jain Dharma traditions place a lot more emphasis on philosophical explanations, and prefer practitioners to focus on self-cultivation, but some do respect the explanations and work of the oracles and mediums.
- *Sādhu, Sannyāsī, Bhikṣu, Vairāgī, Muni, Svāmī* – these are people who decide to engage in full-time spiritual pursuit and give up their material lives in order to do so. After years of being a brahmacārin – a trainee under instruction and mentorship of a reputed teacher of a given

lineage in a Dharma tradition – a person who desires to renounce worldly life may do so if deemed qualified and be admitted as a recognized full-time renunciate of that order of a given Dharma tradition. After this point, they live and practice in accordance with the guidelines of their tradition. There are many modes of living as a renunciate. Broadly, there are renunciates that live in hermitages, or solitary renunciates who are itinerant or of fixed residence; there are renunciates who teach others and those who engage solely in personal spiritual practice, etc. They are generally unmarried, and the only Hindu category of functionaries that are celibate. Buddhist and Jain Dharma traditions primarily function with these as the spiritual experts and the rest of society referred to as lay practitioners. Hindu Dharma traditions have place for *sādhus* etc., but not all of them.

- *Sādhaka* – simply, one who has undertaken to perform a spiritual practice, or series thereof under the guidance of their guru.
- *Śiṣya* – these are people who have pledged to follow the systematic teachings and practices of a specific Dharma tradition under the guidance of a qualified guru. *Sādhakas* generally focus on performing spiritual practices diligently, whilst a *śiṣya* may also focus on gaining more philosophical knowledge. They can be part-time or full-time practitioners. The majority are normal people who elect to take a specific spiritual teacher as their guru for guidance in life. The Sikh Dharma tradition/Sikhī takes its name from this phenomenon; Sikh is the Panjabi derivative of the Sanskrit word *śiṣya*, students of the 10 gurus of Sikhī.

Especially in Hindu traditions, any of these functionaries could (and may) be women, men, or non-binary, and can hail from South Asia or other countries. In Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain tradition, it is more common for their spiritual leaders to be men with a few traditions permitting women leaders also. Though Hindu gurus and *paṇḍitas* may be seen clothed predominantly in white, yellow or

saffron-colored traditional clothing, this depends on the tradition and can include blue, green, black, and other colors. They often wear ceremonial markings on their forehead and body.