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To my sisters, Ninette and Delyse, who grace everyone with their love, and to my brother, Darryl, whose *darśana* immeasurably enriches my life.

3. There are a few general beliefs regarding cosmology that Hindus agree upon. What are some of these general beliefs, and why do you think they are agreed upon while other beliefs are contested?
4. Hindus have an elaborate conception of time. Give a detailed description of this concept, explaining where humanity is currently located within this notion of time.
5. Hinduism offers an assortment of explanations regarding the origin and nature of the universe. What are some of these explanations?
6. Define *karma*, *samsāra*, and reincarnation. Then discuss the concept of *mokṣa* giving a detailed explanation of its relationship to the three aforementioned concepts.

Further reading

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- O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger (ed.) (1980) *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
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3 *Hindu social organization and values*

In this chapter

The concept of alignment with the divine cosmic order was expanded upon and articulated in semi-authoritative texts, which prescribed righteous actions. Here we examine the contents of these codices and their notions of *dharma*. Injunctions on *dharma* were closely related to the stratification of Hindu society into its class and caste systems. These, in turn, were knitted with ideas of purity and impurity, as well as those dealing with propitiousness, with the intention of weaving together cosmic, social, and personal orders to provide for a harmonious existence.

Main topics covered

- *Dharma* and the Dharma Śāstras
- The four classes of Hindu society
- The caste system
- The Untouchables
- Purity and pollution
- Auspiciousness and inauspiciousness

Dharma and the Dharma Śāstras

Dharma derives from the Sanskrit root *dhr* (to support or uphold), and appears to develop in relationship to the Vedic conception of *ṛta*. Whereas *ṛta* affirmed the existence of an orderly creation, subject to patterns and orderly cycles, *dharma* developed into a notion of the way things should be if harmoniously aligned with *ṛta*. As such, *dharma* both articulates the way things are and prescribes how one should behave in relation to the cosmic order. In the *Ṛg Veda*, *dharma* refers to actions that should be undertaken to uphold the cosmic order. There is a sense that the gods are themselves dharmic, placing things in their proper place, such as the sun in its orderly movement through the sky, and making the seasons change, the rain fall,

and so on. Through self regulation and the regular performance of sacrifice the gods sustain the cosmic order. By the period of the Brāhmaṇas, priestly ritual action was promoted as the support of the cosmic order, and thus it became the cornerstone of *dharma*.

In time, *dharma* became closely aligned with *karma*, both as ritual action and as personal and social behavior in harmony with the cosmic order. Since the effects of *karma* are being experienced at all times, one is faced with the disturbing prospect of experiencing unpleasant effects from previous actions in previous lives, despite living a righteous life. The confusion that might result from such misfortunes could be disorienting. *Dharma* offers individuals a guide for righteous behavior in the midst of life's caprices. For instance, in the Hindu epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the hero and heroine, Rāma and Sītā, are faced with unforeseen predicaments, such as exile and abduction. They are renowned for their strict adherence to *dharma*, which leads Rāma to slay the demon Rāvaṇa, who abducted Sītā, and thus restore a cosmic balance in favor of righteousness.

The Kalpa Sūtras, one of the genres of literature classified as the Vedāṅgas (Limbs of the Veda), were the first to articulate the prescriptions for self-controlled and orderly behavior. Within these were prescriptions on household rituals and rites of passage (Gṛhya Sūtras), on small to large scale public rites (Śrauta Sūtras), on geometrical principles for building ritual altars (Śulva Sūtras), and on the rules for proper social behavior (Dharma Sūtras). These Kalpa Sūtras are attributed to sages such as Gautama and Āpastamba. In the centuries around the beginning of the Common Era, another genre of literature emerged. These are the Dharma Śāstras, which as their name suggests are treatises (*śāstra*) that deal specifically with *dharma*. There are several of these compendiums, but the most well known are the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* and the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* (*Laws of Manu*). These texts do not have the sacrosanct status of *śrūti* (revealed) literature, because they belong to the category of *smṛti* (remembered, traditional). In fact although *smṛti* typically includes the Vedāṅgas, the Epics, and the Purāṇas, it is often the Dharma Śāstras alone that are thought of as synonymous with the term. The *Laws of Manu* is thus sometimes called the *Manu Smṛti*. Despite their secondary status in the *śrūti/smṛti* distinction, the Dharma Śāstras have been enormously influential in shaping the values and behavior of Hindus. The Dharma Śāstras come to be regarded as legal codices or Law Books. However, because individual texts are at times contradictory in their content and there are variations in the prescriptions from one Śāstra to the next, interpretations of their rulings still rest in the hands of groups of Vedic scholars (*paṇḍita*).

The Dharma Śāstras lay out the specifics of social obligations for Hindus in a system known as *varṇāśramadharmā*. *Varṇa* refers to the various classes into which Hindu society is traditionally divided, while *aśrama* refers to the stages that demarcate a person's journey through life. These injunctions are complex because

the system attempts to incorporate variations based on gender, socio-economic circumstances, and so on in relationship to a conception of the cosmic reality within which human beings are located. The *Laws of Manu*, for instance, covers such topics as the creation, cosmic geography, the divisions of the Vedas, and the class system. It tells how to choose a wife, and how to perform post-cremation rituals. It discusses issues of purity and pollution, and what foods are fit to eat and what should be avoided. It prescribes rules for kings, and how they should conduct themselves in war. It has prescriptions for dealing with boundary disputes, loans, and punishing thieves. It deals with relationships between master and servant, husband and wife, king and subject, and one *varṇa* toward another. It discusses the duties of the *varṇas*, injunctions for women, and even discusses the law of *karma*.

It is evident that the rise of this literature was a response to tensions that had developed on the Indian subcontinent during that period. The *śramaṇa* movements had begun to challenge the authority of the Vedic world view, which was grounded in concerns about attaining fortunate rebirths by sustaining the cosmic order through sacrificial ritual. Furthermore, interactions with “outsiders” provoked concerns on issues such as intermarriage and differences in values. The Dharma Śāstras provide a codified attempt to articulate standards of conduct, to protect the status of the upper classes, and to effect compromises that incorporate newer religious values, such as renunciation, along with the traditional ones, such as social involvement.

The four classes of Hindu society

Hindu society is divided into four main classes (*varṇa*). The *Puruṣa Sūkta* hymn of the *Ṛg Veda* (X.90) tells of a giant cosmic being or person (*puruṣa*) who is sacrificed by the gods. From his head/mouth emerged the Brahmin (*brāhmaṇa*), from his arms the *rājanya*, from his thighs, the *vaiśya*, and from his feet the *śūdra*. This hymn thus provides a religious sanction for a purported divinely ordained distinction between the four main classes of Hindu society. The designated selections of body parts insinuate a hierarchy among the classes, placing the Brahmins or priestly *varṇa* at the top and the *śūdra* or servant *varṇa* at the bottom. The *rājanya*, or ruling class, are later on mostly referred to as the *kṣatriya*.

The stratification of Hindu society, already evident by the time of the Vedic *Samhitās*, is one of its most distinctive features. The divisions extend far beyond the four classes or *varṇas*, and consist of thousands of smaller groups, known as *jāti*s. This social structure is generally referred to as “the caste system” believed to derive from the term “*casta*” (breed, stock) used by the Portuguese. I am among those scholars who prefer to use the term “class” to designate *varṇa*, and “caste” for *jāti*. However, people also routinely talk about “the four castes” of Hindu society in reference to the *varṇa* system, and almost everyone refers to “the caste system” when discussing both *varṇa* and *jāti*. Furthermore, the term “class” is often used by social scientists to

designate socio-economic status, as in the "middle class," and so on. There is no firm correlation between socio-economic class and *varṇa* (class). Although many members of the lowest ranked *varṇas*, such as the *śūdras*, and those who are outside the *varṇa* classification system, such as Untouchables, often are low on the socio-economic class scale, there may be wealthy members of these groups. Similarly, members of the *vaiśya varṇa* may be very wealthy and wield political power, while certain groups of Brahmins may be relatively poor.

The word *varṇa* means "color," leading some scholars to speculate that the original division of the classes was related to a distinction based on skin complexion. The upper three *varṇas*, namely the Brahmin, *kṣatriya*, and *vaiśya*, are known as *dvija* or "twice-born," and enjoy privileges not available to the fourth and lowest class, the *śūdra*. The skin-complexion theory proposes that *dvija* classes were possibly the light-skinned Āryan colonizers of the subcontinent who subordinated the darker skinned "Dravidians," relegating them into the servant class. The *Laws of Manu* firmly promotes marriage within one's own *varṇa*, suggestive of efforts to prevent racial mixture. This is also evident much earlier in Āryan attitudes to the dark-skinned *Dasyus* and *Dāsas* mentioned in the Vedic *Samhitās*. However, intermingling of the groups had evidently already become commonplace by the Upaniṣadic period, and warriors (*kṣatriya*) such as Kṛṣṇa, and *ṛṣis* such as Vyāsa, who enjoy extremely high status even among orthodox Brahmins of the period, are described as having dark complexions. Nevertheless, there is to this day a cultural preference among many Hindus for lighter over darker skin.

The nature of the four *varṇas* of Hindu society and their social duties were progressively defined and codified through subsequent centuries and especially through the Dharma Śāstra literature. The *Laws of Manu*, for instance, lays down detailed prescriptions for the appropriate behavior for each of the *varṇas* at various stages of their lives. It places Brahmins at the uppermost position of the social structure and defines the duties of the other classes in relationship to the Brahmins. It even states that it is better to follow one's own *dharma* (*svadharma*) inadequately, than to do the *dharma* of another *varṇa* thoroughly, for this immediately disenfranchises persons from their own *varṇa*. According to *Manu*, Brahmins are the veritable embodiment of *dharma* itself, and worthy of attaining realization of Brahman. They are the highest class and have the protection and support of *dharma* as their fundamental duty. Originally, the term *brāhmaṇa* (Brahmin, in this book, to avoid confusion with similar terms) was applied to a specific class of priests who presided over Vedic rituals, but it eventually applied to all members of the priestly class. This is not to say that all Brahmins, even in the past, worked as priests, but that priestly functions could be performed only by members of that class. Brahmins were supposed to recite the Vedas and promulgate Vedic teachings, conduct rituals for themselves and on behalf of others, give and receive gifts, and generally embody a dharmic life style. The Dharma Śāstras hold Brahmins to a high code of ethical

and moral behavior. As such, regardless of what occupation they actually followed, members of the class were associated with a superior spiritual status.

According to *Manu*, *kṣatriyas* were expected to offer protection to people (especially Brahmins), to give gifts (especially to Brahmins), to commission sacrificial rituals (with the aid of Brahmin priests), to study the Veda (from Brahmin teachers), and to avoid attachments to sensual indulgences. They had the right to bear arms. *Vaiśyas* should tend cattle and cultivate land, trade, lend money, bestow gifts, offer sacrifices, and study the Vedas. *Śūdras* had but one prescribed duty, according to *Manu*, and that was to serve the upper three classes. In times of duress, if one could not maintain one's livelihood, Brahmins, *kṣatriyas*, and *vaiśyas* were permitted to take up the occupations of lower classes temporarily. However, there were certain caveats. For instance, Brahmins could not till the soil, lest they injure small creatures. If *śūdras* could not be gainfully employed by members of the twice-born classes, and were faced with the starvation of their families, they could produce handicrafts, and adopt such technical occupations through which the upper classes would best be served. If persons of low class nonetheless coveted and adopted the occupation of a higher class, *Manu* instructs that it was the king's duty to deprive them of their possessions and banish them from the land.

Manu describes the duties of a king in some detail. The king is very much designated as the enforcer of punishments should social dharmic prescriptions be breached. The king must himself embody a dharmic lifestyle to ensure the prosperity of his kingdom, because if he is seen as lax and adharmic the land will fall into ruin. He should be lenient towards Brahmins but severe with his enemies. He should worship Brahmins daily, upon awakening, and heed their advice. Of the various ministers that a king appoints, the senior-most should be a learned Brahmin with whom he consults on the most important issues of state. Gifts to others are meritorious, but gifts to Brahmins, especially to those most learned in the Vedas, are many times more beneficial.

It is worth recognizing that the extreme prescriptions in the Dharma Śāstra texts, such as the *Laws of Manu*, were not followed by all groups of Hindus. Only at particular periods of time, among particular communities, in particular regions, and on particular issues, would a particular Śāstra be treated as authoritative. Typically, groups of Brahmin scholars would gather to pronounce judgment on a situation and would cite the standards from the Śāstric literature with which they were familiar. However, although the Śāstric literature conveys an idealized notion that the four *varṇas* existed in a harmonious balance, with the Brahmins at the top, presiding over personal, familial, and social righteousness, offering political guidance, conferring rulership on kings, and so on, there are many regions of India, even today, where there were few, if any, Brahmins, or *kṣatriyas*. Hindu social reality did not and does not always conform to the idealized presentations in its scriptural literature.

Although the Brahmin class has mostly wielded power over the other *varṇas*, its authority has been consistently challenged by various segments of society. The heterodox *śramaṇa* movements, such as Buddhism and Jainism, questioned the spiritual status of Brahmins, whose only claim to religious authority was their family lineage. The founders of Buddhism and Jainism were reputedly princes and thus from the *kṣatriya* class. Yet, they were eventually accorded a status higher than any Brahmin, and even attracted members of the Brahmin *varṇa* as disciples. They did not endorse the class system, but actually allowed members from all classes to join their religious orders, and were thus subsequently categorized as promulgators of heterodox religions. Their teachings were particularly attractive to members of the merchant class, the *vaiśyas*, who were relegated to the sidelines in most of the preceding religious literature. The *kṣatriya* class also voiced dissent on other grounds. Kings did not always concede that their power to rule should be sanctioned by Brahmins. The tension between these two classes, in particular, is evident throughout Hindu literature and history. It reflects a perennial tension found in societies where "church" and "state" are separated. Recent scholarship has also begun to question the extent to which the lower classes in the past actually shared the orthodox perspective and values. Despite these dissents and tensions, the *varṇa* system is a crucial feature of the religiously supported structuring of Hindu society, evidently upheld to sustain the supremacy of the upper-classes and, in particular, the Brahmin *varṇa*.

The caste system

The true complexity of the Hindu caste system derives from the category of *jāti*, a word which translates as "birth group." Hindus often identify themselves according to family lineage (*gotra*), their village of origin (*grāma*), or their *jāti*. The *gotra* is a generally fictitious lineage association connected to semi-divine clan ancestors. There are thousands of *jātis*. *Jātis* most often designate an occupational category, such as a barber (Nai), or a potter (Kumhar), or farmer, but are far more subdivided than merely such designations. For instance, there are hundreds of agricultural (farmer) *jātis*. Small tribal groups may also be regarded as particular *jātis*, while larger tribal societies may be composed of subdivisions which are designated as *jātis*.

The system of *jātis* and *varṇas* coexist and overlap to a certain degree. For instance, certain *jātis* may claim to belong to particular *varṇas* although a particular *jāti*'s claim may not be supported by other groups. The *kāyastha* caste, for instance, which has numerous sub-*jātis*, such as the *khattri* (who are found in North India) and the *cheṭṭiār* (in South India), lays claim to Brahmin or to *kṣatriya varṇa* status, but are often classified as *vaiśyas* or even as *śūdras*, by other *jātis*. Actually, because of the elite status granted to the Brahmin, as well as to the *kṣatriya varṇas*, a status promoted by orthodox religious values, members of the vast majority of *jātis* would like to belong to those higher classes. Within a ten-year period in the early twentieth

century the Census of India reported that many *jātis* that had originally claimed to belong to the *kṣatriya* or *vaiśya varṇas* had subsequently claimed to belong to the Brahmin *varṇa*. Thus it is not easy or even desirable for scholars to assign the many thousands of Hindu *jātis* to the system of four *varṇas*. The claims for a certain status by a particular *jāti*, and the contestation of those claims by other *jātis*, can reveal much about the social, political, economic, and religious dynamics at work within that social group. Furthermore, there are *jātis*, such as leather workers (Camār) and those who cremate the dead (Dom), who are regarded by orthodox Brahmins as so "polluting" that they are not accepted as belonging to the four-fold *varṇa* system at all. They are *caṇḍālas*, belonging to a fifth category, also known as Untouchables.

An illustrative example of a *jāti* that has mostly managed to change its *varṇa* designation is the case of the Marathas. The Marathas were primarily agricultural workers in the region of what is now Maharashtra State. They were conventionally designated by the upper classes as belonging to very low *varṇas*, namely the *vaiśya* and *śūdra* classes. During the Mughal period in India the Marathas led a successful armed insurgency movement, carving out a large kingdom in central and north India. The famous Maratha leader, Shivaji Bhonsle, and subsequent Maratha rulers, who wished to be acknowledged as legitimate "kings," struggled with Brahmin authorities who would only consecrate members of a *kṣatriya varṇa* to such a position. The Peshwas, from Brahmin *jātis*, became the chief ministers and eventually rulers of the Maratha Empire. In the modern period, however, most Hindus know of the Maratha role in Indian history through their military exploits. This has led many Maratha *jātis* to make successful claims to *kṣatriya varṇa* status, based on the warrior profession of their ancestry. Thus *jāti* mobility within the *varṇa* system is possible. However, it is not individuals who can move between *jātis* or *varṇas* within a single lifetime. Entire *jātis* may move to different hierarchical rankings within a particular *varṇa*, or even move to different *varṇa* categories over periods of time spanning many generations.

Manu attempts to explain the origin of various *jātis* through successions of offspring resulting from inappropriate intermarriage between various *varṇas*. While unconvincing, it confirms the existence of a diversity of tribes, regions, and occupational divisions on the Indian subcontinent at the time that the Śāstra was composed, as well as evident intermingling among the *varṇas* for centuries.

Jātis are circumscribed in particular ways. Most typically, *jāti* refers to the group into which a Hindu is born, and from which he or she should traditionally choose a marriage partner. Hindu marriages are typically exogamous, meaning that one should marry a partner outside of one's close family lineage (*gotra*). Thus *jātis* typically include a number of family lineages (*gotra*) with whom marriage is permissible. Thus the *jāti* is a closed endogamous group. Hypergamous marriages, where a female weds a male from a *jāti* of higher rank, are permissible although discouraged. *Jāti* is almost akin to a self-imposed designation as a particular "species" or "kind," insinuating

that such activities as having sexual relations, eating the same foods together, or participating in particular religious rites with persons outside of one's *jāti* are not just undesirable, but actually go against the natural order. Members of the same *jāti* often share a common "family name," and speak the same language. *Jātis* may also live in a particular region, composed of hundreds of small villages. It is quite common for members of particular *jātis* to live in extended families, and cluster together in particular quarters of heterogeneously composed towns or villages. If one gazes at the city of Jodhpur, in Rajasthan, from the Mehrangarh fortress which overlooks it, one will see homes in sections of the city painted with a blue wash, traditionally used to designate the homes of the Brahmin *jātis*. However, nowadays other *varṇas* also use the same color.

Jātis are relatively closed communities, and thus define themselves in relationship to the "other" *jātis* with which they must interact, and interact often they must, particularly if their communal definition is based on a particular occupation, rather than on regional or tribal connections. In villages made up of members of a variety of *jātis*, there is often a general consensus reached on the hierarchical ranking among them, although even this is subject to contestation and disagreement. Typical villages may have from twenty to forty *jātis* represented. Any seemingly well established ranking in a particular village may, however, not hold for villages in different regions of the country with similar *jātis* represented. Thus *jāti* ranking is thoroughly situational. There may be villages with no Brahmins present, or where members of agricultural *jātis* dominate. Some villages may be dominated by a Brahmin *jāti* with virtually no representatives from the *kṣatriya* or *vaiśya varṇas*, while most of the other members of the village are regarded as belonging to the *śūdra varṇa* or are even classified as *caṇḍālas*. At village gatherings, where members of various *jātis* must interact and perhaps eat together, caste divisions are most evident. Efforts are made to separate the various groups or acknowledge their hierarchical status. Higher caste members may be seated on platforms or high chairs, while lower caste members may be seated on the ground. Food may be served at different times, and so on, in order to accommodate the concerns the upper castes, in particular, may have with issues of ritual purity and pollution.

Jāti divisions are far more telling about actual social distinctions among Hindus than the category of *varṇa*. For instance, there are hundreds of Brahmin *jātis*, each considering itself to be the purest. If one counts subdivisions of these *jātis* they number over a thousand. A brief examination of *jāti* among Brahmins may enable us to appreciate the complexity of the *jāti* system as a whole. Tradition has it that all Brahmins originate from about seven or eight families or lineages of *ṛṣis*. The actual names of these lineages (*gotra*) vary in different scriptural accounts, but they include the names of *ṛṣis* such as Bṛhgu, Atri, Vaṣiṣṭha, and Kaśyapa, credited with composing the Vedic Saṃhitās. Many *jātis* from the other twice-born *varṇas* also claim to belong to the same lineages. Other non-Brahmin *jātis* often trace the origin



Figure 3.1 Vagish Shastri, a Brahmin *paṇḍita* and founder of the Vāg-Yoga Institute, at work in his library (Banāras)

of their group to some legendary hero or mythic semi-divine or divine figure. Most Brahmins also identify themselves through different categories than their *gotras*. For instance, Brahmins may be classified according to the particular Vedic Samhitā to which they ascribe (e.g. *Ṛg Veda* or *Sama Veda* Brahmins). There are also groups of North and South Indian Brahmins with narrower regional affiliations. Among the North Indian Brahmins are the Kanya-kubja, who originated in Kanauj (modern-day Kanpur), and the Maithilā from Mithilā. Among the South Indian Brahmins are the Maharashtra and Malabar. These are further subdivided. For instance, the Chitpāvans and Sarasvata are subsets of Maharashtra Brahmins, and the Vārendras of Bengal derive from the Kanyākubja. Other Brahmins, such as those from Kashmir do not easily lend themselves to these categories. Furthermore, the recent political situation in Kashmir has led to the death, or migration of most of the Kashmiri

Brahmin priestly community to other regions, so their regional designation as Kashmiri Brahmins no longer corresponds to their actual place of residence. Such movements due to war or famine are very much a part of the history of India, and affected not just the Brahmin *jātis*.

Moreover, even among Brahmins who continue to work in their traditional roles as religious functionaries, there are wide variations. Some Brahmins memorize and recite Vedic scriptures at rituals. Others teach Sanskrit language and grammar, translate texts, and so on. Some specialize in the Vedic sciences that constitute the Vedāṅgas, such as astrology and medicine. Some Brahmins live as renunciators, shunning traditional religious establishments. Other Brahmin renunciators may belong to hermitages (*āśrama*) and teach philosophies of renunciation. Yet others work as temple priests or serve as functionaries at death rituals. Although all of these various Brahmin *jātis* belong to the same *varṇa*, there is a considerable amount of hierarchical jostling among them, which is particularly evident when marriage arrangements are concerned. Certain Brahmin *jātis* are generally agreed upon as being low in rank. For instance, temple and pilgrim priests, who have constant interactions with people from a wide range of *jātis*, are subject to constant ritual pollution through these contacts. They also accept gifts for their services, which further diminishes their purity. The Brahmins who study and teach the Vedas to members of the twice-born classes, and who do not exchange services for gifts, but only accept alms, hold themselves to have the highest rank. For these Brahmins, it would be highly inappropriate to allow their daughters to marry men from the lower Brahmin *jātis*. In fact, some scholars have noted that the *mahābrāhmaṇas*, the priests who preside over death rituals and thus accrue ritual pollution, are virtually treated like Untouchables by the upper *jātis*, although they belong to the Brahmin *varṇa*.

It would appear that those most closely related to the transcendent source of creation, such as liberated persons, who are regarded as having attained unity with it, enjoy the highest status. Slightly lower in the hierarchy are those who hold occupations closest to the source, such as Brahmins who recite the Vedas, which are believed to be sonic vibratory manifestations from the Absolute. One's status is related to where on the spectrum of the cycles of creation one's occupational activities are located. Thus those Brahmin *jātis* engaged in the performance of sacrificial rituals are ranked yet lower in the hierarchy, while the lowest are those who deal with the polluted remnants of life, decay and death, such as priests who preside over certain rites of passage, especially birth rituals, and, of course, funeral priests.

This stratification, which bases one's status in relation to a religious ontology (i.e. the nature of being or existence), extends to other non-Brahmin *jātis* as well, placing the latrine cleaner and leather worker at the bottom of the hierarchy. This ontic stratification, supported by Brahmin orthodoxy, overlaps with another stratification based on socio-economic power, which is supported by those, such as rulers and wealthy landowners, who wield it in particular social groups. While there are ongoing

tensions between these two status systems, they also mutually interact and support each other. Rulers commission rituals to enhance their authority and cohere the society governed, while religious specialists articulate the metaphysics and perform the appropriate rites that maintain the social structure and confer legitimacy on the rulers.

Even in the past, certain family members from a particular *jāti* may have taken up occupations that were different from their *jāti*'s traditional occupational designation. Such occupational diversification has become more common in modern times, and is supported by India's secular democracy. However, the centuries-old tradition of identifying persons with and through their *jāti* still leads many Hindus to regard a soldier who is from a washerman's *jāti* or a politician from an Untouchable *jāti* as inherently unfit for their jobs. A change in occupation does not change one's *jāti*, so it is misleading to define *jāti* exclusively along occupational lines. However, such occupational *jāti* designations are appropriate because particular members within that *jāti* probably still engage in those activities. Also, the *jāti* system does not remain exclusive to Hinduism in India. It is found among other religions on the subcontinent and even in places where Hinduism and these religions have migrated. Hierarchical rankings among *jātis*, exclusivity in approved marriages, and the like, are found within Christian, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, and Muslim communities in India, despite the egalitarian and "anti-caste" sentiments voiced within these religions.

The Untouchables

The word *caṇḍāla*, which means "fierce," is found in early scriptural references such as the Upaniṣads and Buddhist texts, where it refers to members of aboriginal tribes who dressed in animal skins and tree leaves that gave them a frightening appearance. *Caṇḍālas* were designated as outside the system of the four *varṇas*. Sometimes this group is known as *avarṇa* (without caste) or *pañcama* (the fifth [category]). Foreigners (*mleccha*), and the offspring from illegitimate inter-caste unions (e.g. a *śūdra* male and Brahmin female), who were banished from their caste groups, were also included in this category. The term "Untouchable" was eventually used to designate these people, who were "outside" the *varṇa* system, as well as members of a number of *jātis* that engaged in occupations regarded as the most ritually polluting. These include the Bhangis, who clean out the excrement from toilets, and the Camārs, who are leather workers. The ritual pollution associated with these groups is believed to transfer temporarily to the higher castes through contact. The highest Brahmin castes needed to maintain the highest level of ritual purity in order to perform worship rites to the gods. Contact with members of the polluting group would immediately diminish one's purity, requiring a series of actions to restore purity. Hence members of the highest castes tried to avoid contact with *caṇḍālas* entirely, leading *caṇḍālas* to have the designation of "Untouchable."

In certain regions *caṇḍalas* were required to live outside of towns and villages, and to signal their arrival within the town. *Manu* stipulates that they should dress in the clothes of the deceased, wear iron ornaments, and eat from broken dishes. The extent to which they were to be avoided went to extremes in various regions. For some high caste Hindus, touching the shadow or merely the sight of an Untouchable, or even contact with the wind wafting from their direction was deemed polluting and requiring ritual purification. Reform movements spurred by critiques from Muslims, Christians, and a modernizing Hindu population have led to efforts to restore the highly diminished status of these *jātis*. Mahatma Gandhi referred to them as Harijans (Children of God), although many now simply prefer the term Dalit, which means "oppressed." The Government of India, which has officially abolished Untouchability, uses the term "Scheduled Castes" and "Scheduled Tribes" in reference to them. They constituted more than a fifth of India's population. When combined with members of the *śūdra varṇa* and others who converted to non-Hindu religions, from 50–70 per cent of Indians are socially and economically underprivileged. Indian citizens found guilty of discrimination against members of these groups may now be prosecuted. Nevertheless, the stigmatization of the Dalit is deeply rooted in Hindu culture, supported by scriptural injunctions and religious practices that have endured for millennia.

Purity and pollution

Notions of ritual purity and ritual pollution play an extremely important role in Hinduism. Despite their shortcomings, the terms "ritual purity" and "ritual pollution/impurity" are used to differentiate these concepts from conventional ideas of the pure and the polluted. For instance, we might tend to think of ecosystems as polluted by toxic wastes or garbage, and uncontaminated water as pure, and so on. However, the notions of ritual pollution and purity relevant to our study of Hinduism are religious categories, and are not necessarily related to secular or scientific conceptions of clean and unclean, or hygienic and unhygienic. Thus while defecation does increase one's ritual pollution, and this can be rectified by washing, bathing, and donning clean clothes, it is also possible to enhance one's ritual purity by bathing in or sipping the waters of the river Gaṅgā in Banāras, which might, by all conventional scientific measures, be regarded as unhygienic and polluting.

Members of the uppermost castes assert their status by strictly adhering to various daily regimens to ensure purity and avoid pollution. Other castes adopt such behaviors as well to declare their own elevated status. For instance, upon arising in the morning, one is already in a state of moderate ritual pollution brought about by having been asleep. Bodily outflows are traditionally regarded as causes of ritual pollution. The outflows of urine, feces, snot, pus, saliva, semen, blood (especially menstrual), sweat, or tears are all sources of ritual pollution. So are hair- and nail-

clippings. The morning toilet thus further affects one's state of purity. However, a bath in flowing water and putting on clean clothes will restore one's state of purity. It is in this state that one is ready to worship the gods either at one's home shrine or in a temple. Eating breakfast will again decrease purity, but this can be restored by washing one's hands and gargling after the meal. There are pure (*śuddha*) and impure (*aśuddha*) foods and naturally the latter should be avoided. Meals should only be prepared in the proper manner, by equally pure persons, and only served by such. For many castes, the consumption of meat is terribly polluting and should be avoided at all costs. For others, certain types of meat are permissible. Beef is shunned by virtually all Hindus, since the cow is regarded as sacred. Alcohol is acceptable to certain groups and not to others. Since the day's activities can bring one in contact with members of lesser and thus more impure castes, another bath at midday is prescribed. Again, one should bath at sunset, don clean clothes, worship the gods and only then proceed to the evening meal. Flowing water, Gaṅgā water, and the products of the cow (e.g. milk, ghee, cow urine, and cow dung) are generally regarded as purifying. The degrees to which such prescriptions are followed, even by the uppermost castes, vary widely, because modern urban lifestyles do not easily permit individuals to bathe or eat home-cooked meals at noon. Nevertheless, these are only modifications based on necessity, which have not undermined the enduring importance of the categories of purity and pollution.

Case study: The Havik Brahmins of Mysore

Since ritual purity and impurity is also contingent on human interactions, examining a particular case study in some detail illustrates how it can actually play out. Because ritual purity and pollution derives from religious values, in which Brahmins have been the main arbiters, a Brahmin community's attitudes are especially instructive. Pollution is transmitted through contact with the more impure. Purity is not transmitted, but is maintained or achieved. The Havik Brahmins of the region of Sagar in the Malnad part of South India are a high caste consisting of about 200,000 members. Villages consist mainly of Havik Brahmins and members of lower classes, designated as *śūdras* or as Untouchables, with virtually no representatives from the *kṣatriya* and *vaiśya varṇas*. The *śūdra jātis* are themselves hierarchically ranked, as are the Untouchables. Havik Brahmins must inevitably interact with members of all *jātis*, including the Untouchables on certain occasions, and regularly with the *śūdra jātis*. Members of highly ranked *śūdra jātis* may work in Havik Brahmin homes as servants, causing nominal pollution through such interactions. Contact with Untouchables, however, can lead to greater degrees of impurity. The highly polarized divisions between upper and lower castes in this social group provide a simplified model through which one may appreciate purity/pollution relationships in Hindu society.

The Haviks have three general terms to designate categories of pure and polluted. *Maḍi* is "ritually pure," *mutṭuchetṭu* is "ritually impure," and *mailige* is one's everyday ritual status, which is neither the highest purity nor impure. Defiling acts can move the Havik Brahmin male from *mailige* to *mutṭuchetṭu*, and it takes special purifying acts to move him from either the *mutṭuchetṭu* or *mailige* states to *maḍi*, the state of highest purity. The gods may only be worshipped by a Havik Brahmin male in the purest state of *maḍi*. *Maḍi* can be achieved by taking a ritually cleansing bath, which will move him up from his normal condition of *mailige*. However, sleeping, eating, or touching another Havik Brahmin who is in the *mailige* state will automatically eliminate the state of *maḍi* and return him to *mailige*. Contact with any item touched by a menstruating woman or an Untouchable can place him in *mutṭuchetṭu*. There are various levels of *mutṭuchetṭu*, some so severe that they cannot be eliminated. There are levels of *maḍi* and *mailige* as well.

Ideally, the Havik Brahmin should bathe three times daily, in cold water, although a daily bath in warm water is more the norm. To enter the state of *maḍi*, the water should be drawn by another Brahmin who is not in *mutṭuchetṭu*, the full body should be washed, including the hair, and the cotton clothes subsequently worn should have been washed by a Brahmin in the *maḍi* state. The clothes should have made no contact with anyone else. *Maḍi* cotton holds its purity for three days if untouched, while silk is believed to be more impervious to pollution. The Havik Brahmin male in this state of purity can lose it if he even speaks to a *śūdra* en route to his place of worship.

Havik Brahmins only accept cooked food from members of their own caste, typically Havik women. The main meal, eaten in late morning or early afternoon, must be cooked and served by someone in *maḍi*. Since saliva is polluting, the food cannot be tasted by the cook, because a portion of it serves as the food offering to the gods conducted in worship rites before the main meal. A major worship rite is performed by one male member of the household, while the other male members perform minor rites. Food is eaten with the right hand, and served on a fresh banana leaf, which serves as a disposable plate. Eating places one in *mailige*, so Havik women typically wait until the men and children have eaten, and then, since they are still in *maḍi*, serve themselves but once. A husband should leave a little food on his plate as a sign of affection, and although in most other circumstances this would be highly polluting, the Havik wife eats off the same plate as her husband after he leaves.

Menstruating women are highly polluting, even more so than Untouchables, who are almost in a permanent state of *mutṭuchetṭu*. During their menstrual period which officially lasts five days, women are expected to reside "outside" the home, such as on the verandah or back porch. The woman is in temporary *mutṭuchetṭu*. She should not change clothes or comb her hair. She has a first bath after a few days, which restores her to *mailige*, but is only fully pure after the ritual bath on the last day. During her period she is freed from her household duties, and may spend most of her time

in conversation with other women in the household or neighborhood. She should avoid contact with any abodes of deities, not just temples and household shrines, but any sacred locale. Naked children do not transmit pollution, and so they may have contact with their mothers if necessary. Dried cow dung is often used to purify clothing and the polluted spaces inhabited by the menstruating woman. Contact with a menstruating woman puts the Havik Brahmin male into *mutṭuchetṭu*, and purification requires a ritual bath, pure clothes, and consuming the *pañcagavya*, a preparation made from the five products of the cow: milk, ghee, bile/yogurt, urine, and dung. The male's Sacred Thread also needs to be replaced by commissioning the appropriate ritualist.

Death brings pollution, primarily to all close relatives of the deceased, whose statuses become akin to that of an Untouchable. This pollution lasts until the completion of the death rites, which take about twelve days. The polluted members should avoid contact with deities and participation in sacred rituals. Necessary rites are postponed. Contact with these persons would put other Haviks into the state of *mutṭuchetṭu*, requiring bathing and pure clothes. The polluted members need to do the same, consume *pañcagavya*, and the males should change their sacred thread. The household shrine and gods need to be purified, and all clothing in the home needs to be washed. Birth brings a similar pollution to the mother and the members of the household which lasts about eleven days. The husband is in a *mutṭuchetṭu* state similar to an Untouchable and must observe practices, such as residing "outside" the home, similar to those of a menstruating woman.

Urine splashed on the feet is polluting, encouraging the practice of squatting while urinating. Water is necessary for purification after defecating, and the left hand is used for this and other contacts with polluting agents, rendering it unsuitable for eating. The left hand and left side are generally regarded as less pure than the right hand and right side. The use of toilet paper is considered impure. Leather is impure. Sexual relations with members of one's own caste put one into the state of *mailige*, but a lower than normal *mailige*, which requires a cleansing bath. Solar or lunar eclipses bring pollution, as do haircuts and clipping one's fingernails.

If Haviks take food from or have sexual relations with an Untouchable, they can be cast out of the *jāti*. The same acts with *śūdras* lead to a temporary isolation. These are rare occurrences, because they would also bring pollution to bear upon the perpetrator's family members. Furthermore, food sharing is uncommon because of the social norms that separate upper and lower castes, and sexual liaisons are difficult to prove. If a Havik widow has a child from someone other than her husband she would traditionally be cast out in a process initiated by her husband's family, whom she has defiled. Her child would belong to the fairly high-ranking Maleru caste, composed entirely of the illegitimate offspring of Havik widows.

Although Havik women can and must attain the pure state of *maḍi* to prepare food for their husbands and the gods, they are not regarded as pure enough to perform

the ritual worship of the high gods themselves. By touching her husband's arm or shoulder, a woman may derive the meritorious benefits from the rite. So the Havik male's state of *maḍi* is higher than that of Havik women. Despite this high standard of purity, Haviks may subordinate themselves to world-renouncers by touching or bathing their feet and eating from their plates, thus ascribing the renouncers with a divine status.

The hierarchies of purity and pollution extend even to the gods and other supernatural beings. Gods can be made *mutṭuchettu* in circumstances where they are worshipped by someone in such a state, or, for instance, if a menstruating woman should enter a temple compound. Defiled gods need to be purified through bathing, and the recitation of prayers or sacred verses (*mantra*). If defiled or ignored, or if they are simply hungry, deities may also become angry and cause trouble to human beings. And since *śūdras* are more often in impure states than Brahmins, it is often the indiscreet action of such lower caste individuals that are believed to incur divine wrath. If one is in an impure state, one is even more susceptible to an attack from an angry deity. Ritual purity acts as a kind of protective armor against the attacks of lesser spirits, who are mostly malevolent. Livestock, children and women are particularly susceptible to these attacks, and *śūdra* men more so than Brahmin males. The lower gods and goddesses, who might accept blood sacrifices, are more easily given over to anger than the higher, "Sanskritic" deities, who generally accept only vegetarian offerings. The high gods enjoy an aura of purity, and like Brahmin males cannot be easily defiled. However, should it happen, they are quickly restored to states of purity by priestly ministrations and will then act benevolently for the benefit of persons.

The preceding example of the Havik Brahmin villages highlights many of the features of the notions of purity and pollution. Similar ideas are held by other Brahmin *jātis* as well as by non-Brahmin *jātis*. Since all *jātis* strive for high hierarchical rank within their social milieus, one means of attaining such status is to emulate the standards of the highest castes of Brahmins. Of course, this is impossible in certain occupations, for a person who cremates the dead or makes leather sandals or washes polluted clothing or cleans out latrines is constantly encountering ritual impurity. However, members of certain other castes, particularly those typically designated as belonging to the *kṣatriya* or *vaiśya varṇas*, may well take up a lifestyle that mirrors that of a high-caste Brahmin. Nevertheless, since members of non-Brahmin *jātis* are intrinsically forbidden from performing the ritual worship of the high gods, their states of purity are never as high as that of the purest Brahmin male.

Auspiciousness and inauspiciousness

Another telling dimension of Hinduism is its concern with the categories of auspiciousness (*maṅgala, śubha, bhadra*) and inauspiciousness (*durmaṅgalya, aśubha*).

They derive from fundamental ideas of cosmology, and permeate all aspects of religious behavior and social interactions. One notes that the cosmological cycles of creation, the span of a human life, the seasonal changes in a year, and even the progress of a day are marked by periods of growth and creation, and periods of decay and destruction. Thus portions of time, in its daily, weekly, monthly, and annual cycles are categorized as auspicious or inauspicious. The night is generally more inauspicious than the day. Particular days of the week, such as Tuesday, ruled by the inauspicious heavenly power, Mars (Maṅgala), and Saturday ruled by Saturn (Śani), are less favorable than Monday and Thursday, ruled respectively by the Moon and Jupiter. The dark fortnight is less favorable than the bright or waxing half of the lunar month, just as the southern route of the sun determines the less auspicious half of the yearly cycle than its northern route (from the winter to the summer solstices) when the days grow longer. The so-called "bright half" of the year is like daytime for the gods, and the "dark half" (from the summer to the winter solstice) is like their night-time. Additionally, the effects of Rāhu and Ketu during eclipses are obvious inauspicious influences, and they, along with the other pernicious "planets" (*graha*), can even make particular phases within the normally auspicious periods problematic. The great god Viṣṇu is believed to sleep during the months of the rainy season, which is generally regarded as inauspicious for the celebration of marriages.

During inauspicious times, pernicious powers, such as the *graha* Śani (Saturn), have an enhanced capacity to inflict damage. These are also periods when ghosts, spirits, and other dangerous supernatural beings wander the earthly realms. However, inauspicious times do not absolutely indicate that one should refrain from any undertaking. On inauspicious days, such as Tuesday and Saturday, Hindus often visit temples, or make offerings at the shrines of the Navagrahas (Nine Heavenly Powers). These acts of worship are intended to override or limit the dangerous influences associated with those particular days. If there are alternative possibilities, it is considered undesirable, if not foolhardy, to begin a major undertaking, such as a long journey or an important religious ritual, or conduct a wedding during an inauspicious time of year or time of the day. Should some calamity befall a person, their disregard for some aspect of inauspiciousness may well be identified as a contributing factor.

Auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are somewhat malleable categories. While the general features that dictate favorable or unfavorable phases are built into the cyclical cadences of time itself, there are actions and events that nuance, or even invert, the implications of these periods. For instance, there is the intersection of favorable days with unfavorable influences by Rāhu and Ketu. Or there are unfavorable days during the favorable fortnight of the lunar cycle. Or there are favorable days, during a favorable fortnight, but in the inauspicious half of the annual cycle. In the course of one's life, one's horoscope might reveal an inauspicious period of years when Saturn

or Mars runs through significant lunar mansions, although these influences may be moderated by the activities of other auspicious planetary effects.

A telling illustration of the interplay of these categories is found in the well-known myth of the prince Rāma who needed the help of the Goddess Durgā before undertaking a war with the demon Rāvaṇa. However, the Goddess was routinely worshipped during an auspicious month in the spring, and was believed to sleep during the inauspicious autumn months, when Rāma had to wage war. Rāma, because of his great purity of spirit, in what is popularly known as an untimely awakening (*akāla bodhana*) decided to proceed with the worship. Durgā tested Rāma's piety, and when assured that he was sincere, granted his wish.

The autumn celebrations of Navarātra (Nine Nights) and the Durgā Pūjā, which re-enact Rāma's and other mythic victories, are enormously popular festivals throughout the Hindu world. They involve worship activities during the nights of the waxing fortnight in the month of Āśvina (September–October), near the autumn equinox, almost the middle of the "dark half" of the year, and virtually midnight in a god's day. Thus it is a period that is conventionally regarded as particularly dangerous because of the presence of evil spirits and demonic forces. By propitiating Durgā at this time of year, worshippers gain access to her strength and protection, because according to mythic accounts, she embodies a power capable of vanquishing all demonic forces. So the Navarātra has become an auspicious festival period within an inauspicious cycle of time, and recollects the power of the divine to vanquish the demonic. Even so, priests who perform the rites of Durgā worship will take care not to conduct crucial portions of the ritual during inauspicious periods during the nine-night cycle.

It is not just time and its cycles that dictate auspiciousness. People and places may be auspicious or inauspicious. Birth during an inauspicious planetary configuration, it is believed, may indeed lead a person to be the victim of unfortunate events throughout their lives. However, continual contact with impurity may also lead persons to be regarded as inauspicious. Thus, by extension, even the sight of an Untouchable may be regarded by high caste Brahmins as inauspicious. Since a wedding ceremony celebrates and hopes for marital happiness for a husband and wife in years to come, some Hindus consider a widow's presence at such rites as inauspicious. Even the Brahmin priests, the *mahābrāhmaṇas*, who preside over death rituals in Banāras are regarded as inauspicious. The dharmic behavior of a king (or in the modern context a political leader) is believed to be essential for the auspiciousness of the realm. If natural disasters, such as drought, famine, or disease, which are marks of inauspiciousness, befall a kingdom or nation, it would not be unusual to suspect the dharmic status of its rulers.

Key points in this chapter

- *Dharma* is an expression of how one should behave in rectitude with the cosmic order.
- The *Dharma Śāstras* are treatises dealing specifically with *dharma*.
- Hindu society is divided into four main classes (*varṇa*).
- Hindu society consists of thousands of smaller groups, known as *jātis*.
- The *Laws of Manu* contain prescriptions of appropriate behavior for each of the *varṇas*.
- Hindus often identify themselves according to family lineage (*gotra*), their village of origin (*grāma*), or their *jāti*.
- The term "Untouchable" refers to one who is outside the *varṇa* system.
- Notions of ritual purity and ritual pollution play an extremely important role in Hinduism.
- The *Havik Brahmins* illustrate how pollution is transmitted and purity maintained or achieved.
- Notions of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness permeate all aspects of Hindu society.

Discussion questions

1. What impact do you think the *Puruṣa Sūkta* hymn of the *Rg Veda* has had on Hindu religion and society?
2. How is status determined in Hindu society, and how do notions of status affect Hindu religion?
3. According to the *Havik Brahmins*, even the gods are susceptible to the hierarchies of purity and pollution. Why do you think this is so?
4. Discuss the hierarchical stratification of Hindu society and the content of the texts associated with it.
5. Discuss the role that notions of ritual purity and ritual pollution play in Hindu society. How do these notions relate to the *varṇa* system?
6. Hinduism is concerned with the categories of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness. Explain these categories, where they derived from, and the dimensions of society that they impact.

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