The Caste System

With the advent of Brahminism came the entrenchment of a new social order based on the teaching from the Rig Veda, which had decreed the division of the population into four distinct castes: Brahmin (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants, bureaucrats), and Shudras (menial workers). Subcastes, which eventually numbered in the hundreds, were based on skin color. Caste status was hereditary and intermarriage forbidden. There was no way to change one's caste status. The following two readings deal with this caste system.

The first reading in this section is from the Manu Smriti, (Lawbook of Manu) which was said to have been written around 200 C.E. by the sage Manu as a guide to the domestic, religious: and social duties for all Hindus. It describes the creation of the different castes or classes and how they are part of the universe which the deity created.

CONSIDER: The ways the various castes are distinguished; the connections between religious beliefs and the established social order.

But in the beginning he assigned their several names, actions, and conditions to all (created beings), even according to the words of the Veda.

He, the Lord, also created the class of the gods, who are endowed with life, and whose nature is action; and the subtle class of the Sādhyas, and the eternal sacrifice.

But from fire, wind, and the sun he drew forth the threefold eternal Veda, called Rik, Yajus, and Śāman, for the due performance of the sacrifice.

Time and the divisions of time, the lunar mansions and the planets, the rivers, the oceans, the mountains, plains, and uneven ground,

Austerity, speech, pleasure, desire, and anger, this whole creation he likewise produced, as he desired to call these beings into existence …

Whatever he assigned to each at the (first) creation, noxiousness or harmlessness, gentleness or ferocity, virtue or sin, truth or falsehood, that clung (afterwards) spontaneously to it.

As at the change of the seasons each season of its own accord assumes its distinctive marks, even so corporeal beings (resume in new births) their

(appointed) course of action.

But for the sake of the prosperity of the worlds, he created the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya, and the Shudra to proceed from his mouth, his arms, his thighs, and his feet …

To Brahmans he assigned teaching and studying (the Veda), sacrificing for their own benefit and for others, giving and accepting (of alms).

The Kshatriya he commanded to protect the people, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the Veda), and to abstain from attaching himself to sensual pleasures …

The Vaishya to tend cattle, to bestow gifts, to offer sacrifices, to study (the Veda), to trade, to lend money, and to cultivate land.

One occupation only the lord prescribed to the Shudra, to serve meekly even these (other) three castes.

Marriage and Sexual Activity

The Hindu caste system not only divided Indian society into various social orders, it proscribed the rules of marriage and sexual activity. This is revealed in the following two selections. The first is from the Manu Smriti (Lawbook of Manu) and focuses on the rules of marriage. The second is from the Kamasutra (300–600 C.E.), the standard work on sexual activity, and delineates rules of sexual activity. In each case, the rules apply only to men, as women are expected to be obedient and loyal.

CONSIDER: How marriage and sexual activity reflect the broader social order; the relative status of men and women in this society.

Let the twice-born man, having bathed, with the permission of his teacher and performed the stated ceremonies on his return home, marry a wife of the same caste, endowed with auspicious marks … In connecting himself with a wife, the ten following families are to be avoided however great or rich in kine, goats, sheep, gold, and grain. The family which neglects rites, which has no males, in which the Veda is not read, and the members of which have thick hair on the body, or have piles, or are afflicted with consumption, indigestion, epilepsy, white or black leprosy. Let him not marry a maiden with reddish hair or having a redundant member;
one who is sickly, nor one without hair or with excessive hair, nor a chatter-box or one who has red eyes. Nor one named after a star, a tree, or a river, nor one called after barbarians or a mountain, nor one named after a bird, a snake, or a slave, nor one with a name causing terror. Let him choose for his wife a maiden free from bodily defects, who has a pleasant name, who walks gracefully like a hamsa or elephant; whose hair is moderate, teeth small, and body soft …

For the first marriage of a twice-born man, a woman of the same caste is approved; but for those who through lust marry again the following females are to be preferred. A Sudra woman only must be the wife of a Sudra, she and a Vaishya, of a Vaishya; these two and a Kshatriya of a Kshatriya; those two and a Brahmini, of a Brahmin. Twice-born men, marrying, through folly, low caste women, soon degrade their families and children to the state of Shudra. A Brahmin who takes a Sudra woman to his bed, goes to the lower course; if he beget a child by her, he loses his Brahminhood …

Women are to be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire much prosperity … When women are miserable, that family quickly perishes; but when they do not grieve, that family ever prospers. Houses, cursed by women not honored, perish utterly as if destroyed by magic.

**The Kamasutra**

The practice of Kama by the men in the four castes with women of similar castes who are virgins in accordance with the rules of ancient texts is conducive to progeny, besides bringing them a good name and being accepted as legal and binding. However, marital relationship with a woman of higher caste, who has already been married once, is absolutely forbidden. Union with women who are of lower caste, or who are excommunicated, or with those once married and later deserted or widowed, or with courtesans, is neither commended nor condemned, since this relationship is entered into for mere pleasure …

Therefore Nayikas\(^1\) are of three kinds: the maiden, the woman once married and later deserted or widowed, and the courtesan … however, there is yet a fourth type of Nayika, Pakshiki: one who is already married to another, but who is resorted to for some special reason (i.e., other than the reasons of procreation or pleasure) …

Physical union with the following is strictly forbidden:

One who suffers from leprosy
- who is mentally deranged
- who is morally depraved
- who divulges secrets
- whose charms of youth have faded altogether
- who is very white
- who is very dark
- who emits foul smell
- who is a near relative
- who is a friend of one’s wife
- who is a recluse
- who is the wife of a friend
- who is the wife of a Brahmin
- who is the wife of a ruler

The followers of Babhravya opine that a woman who has had intimate relations with five men, becomes fit to resort to …

But Gonikaputra dissents from this view and urges that even if this is the case, that woman should not be resorted to if she happens to be the wife of a relative, of a friend, of a learned Brahmin, or of a king.

Friendship develops in nine different ways:

With one who has been a playmate in childhood,
- that engendered by mutual obligation,
- from similarity of temperament and habit, from being co-students,
- with one who knows the other’s lapses,
- with one who knows the other’s secrets,
- from mutual acknowledgment of each other’s lapses and secrets,
- with the child of the nurse,
- with one who is brought up together …

Thus a prudent man who has a large circle of friends, who performs his duties conscientiously and who is aware of the propriety of time and place, can win over a woman effortlessly, even though she be unapproachable.

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\(^1\) “Nayika” = Any woman fit to be enjoyed without sin, for either of the two purposes—procreation or pleasure.