

## ***Historical Evolution of Varna: A Schematic Representation***

This is designed exclusively for students to be able to understand that Varna as a category was evolving over time. Human history is seldom as schematically divisible into clear, different eras. The history of Varna-Jati is no different. There are significant regional variables, for instance, that cannot be accounted for in the table below.

Do keep in mind that “varna” or “caste” is an ideology, somewhat like race in the U.S., that seek to justify inequality. For an interesting take on this from a U.S. based scholar in 1960, see Gerald D. Berreman, “Caste in India and the United States” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Sep., 1960), pp. 120-127 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2773155>

### **So far in the course:**

| <b>Period</b>  | <b>Early Rig Vedic</b><br>~ 1500 BCE  | <b>Late Rig Vedic</b><br>~1000 BCE  | <b>Epic</b><br>~800BCE-400 CE   | <b>Heterodoxies</b><br>~600-300 BCE  | <b>“Classical”</b><br>~ 300-600 CE   |
|----------------|---|---|---|--|--|
| <b>Varna</b>   | Varna is used to distinguish between the Arya and the Dasa  | Varna now applied to distinguish between people WITHIN the Arya.  | Varna categories still somewhat fluid. Karna example. Drona example. Some evidence of dissonance between Brahmin and Kshatriya. | JATIS (occupational categories) come into the picture, fit loosely into VARNA. Heterodox ideas INDIFFERENT to Varna. Radical opposition only in monasteries. | DHARMASHASTRAS make rigid distinctions between Varnas. Appropriate Heterodox ideas. BASIS now purity-pollution. Mlechha/Untouchable. VARNASHRAM DHARMA.  |
| <b>Source</b>  | <a href="#">Hymn to Indra</a> from the Rig Veda   | The <a href="#">Purusa Hymn</a> is a JUSTIFICATION for inequality   | (Mahabharata)   | ( <a href="#">Buddhist Stories</a> )   | ( <a href="#">Manu Smriti</a> )  |
| <b>Context</b> | Nomadic people in lineage groups. Not much more than subsistence level economy. Fair amount of equality within lineage group. | Transitioning to settled life. Some surplus. Emerging inequalities. But varna categories still fluid. Son of Brahmin could be Kshatriya, etc. | Territorial states. Some economic growth. Agriculture replacing cattle herding. Kingship emerges                                | Polity and Economies become more complex. Greater division of labor. Trade, manufacture, agriculture more important. Most kings DO NOT patronize Brahmins.   | Brahmanical revival after a period of great mixing and Brahmanical decline. Expansion of commerce, agriculture, deforestation. Guptas’ origin? Patronize Brahmins and other Sanskrit scholars. |