



**Abstract:** *Hinduism (Sanatan Dharm) provides social life guidance. The four main Varns (classes) i.e., Brahman, Khashtri, Vaish, and Shudr suggest an ethics for all the main human activities in society. But the Brahmins often misconstrued the true meaning of this class system and considered them superior in society. They oppressed the Shudras caused them much suffering. Many Hindu thinkers and writers have conceded these historical facts. They have tried to remind Hindus of their true values and social responsibility. Modern Hindu thinkers have been inspired by the classics of Sanatan Dharm, such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayan. These classics articulate the social values of human beings, according to Sanatan Dharm. The Dharm never lets anybody down based on Varn, caste, creed, blood, or profession. Shri Prabhupada, Swami Vivekanand, Dr. Ambedkar all are modern authors whose thinking has developed these values into a social philosophy.*

**Key Words:** Sanatan Dharm, Four-fold Social Class System, Brahman, Khashtri, Vaish, and Shudr, Hindu Classics, Modern Social Philosophy, Untouchability

## Introduction

*Sanatan Dharm*, broadly recognized as Hinduism, is a complete code of life. This encompasses all aspects of life and offers an all-embracing philosophy. It gives teachings of *Dheraj* (tolerance), *Ahinsa* (non-violence), *Aadar* (respect), *Daan* (charity), *Praem* (love), *Sewa* (services), unity, brotherhood, purity, austerity, self-control, forbearance, hospitality, generosity, etc. The *Dharm* is universal and addresses all human situations, and as such, its scope cannot be restricted to a specific community or region. It attaches importance to all the living entities on the basis of the philosophy of soul, which equally permeates in all the bodies. It calls for sticking to the path of morality even at the expense of someone's life. Do not give up righteousness for the sake of some material gain. It gives an impressive and dynamic system of four-fold social class system known as *Varns* i.e. *Brahman*, *Khashtri*, *Vaish*, and *Shudra*. This is the system in society that has been implemented by *Sanatan Dharm* to run society peacefully, smoothly, harmoniously, and successfully (Malik, 2005). But the so-called *Brahman* played a supercilious role in this context. He exploited the *Shudr* by keeping them off the religion and the society. They have been met out inhuman treatment and called untouchables. The *Dharm* does not allow

untouchability. Therefore, the system of *Varns* has been introduced to enable the people to recognize mutual rights and obligations in a civilization. Harm arises out of human egoism, which must be avoided in the interest of social peace. The people of other religions misinterpret the concept of *the Varn* system that the Hinduism divides human beings into a caste system, which creates discrimination in the society among the people. While in fact, there is a vivid difference between *Varn* and caste. The *Ramayan*, the main book of *Sanatan Dharm*, teaches how to spend life, what is the importance of fulfilling promises, what are duties as well as rights of the individuals in a society. Some modern Hindu thinkers like Abhay Charan Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Swami Vivekanand, M. K. Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, etc., have expressed the theme of the *Varn* system in its real sagacity in the light of the *Dharm* to the uplift living standard of the downtrodden *Shudras*.

## *Varn Aashram Dharm* (Four-fold Social Class System)

In the *Vedic* literature, four *Varns* have been introduced: the *Brahman*, the *Khashtri*, the *Vaish*, and the *Shudra* (Ingold, 1994). In fact, they are not

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castes. The human society the world over is divided into these four classes. Swami Shivananda speaks out that the fourfold social classification is for securing a happy, peaceful, and loving union and fellowship in the society. "The members of society are interdependent, and their welfare is sought through their social classification relative to the qualities and the actions corresponding to them [*Guna-karma-vibhaga*]" (Shivananda, 1999).

The four classes include the intelligent class, the mercantile class, the productive class, and the labourer class. This classification is based on one's work, profession, and qualification (Jaini, 2000). One has no claim to any particular class by birth. This is just for the growth of society in a healthy state. It also leads society to earn the pleasure of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. This institutional function of human society is known as the system of *Vamāśrama-dharma*, which is quite natural for civilized life. *Vamāśrama* has been instituted to realize the Absolute Truth (John, 2009).

The *Vam* system lessens agony and reduces dissonance in the society. But generally, it is misinterpreted as one causing division in society through a caste system. Therefore, it is a dire need of the present era to make the concept of *Vam*s clear as to whether or not it is a protagonist of a tightly-compartmentalized caste system. Always hereditary, caste is determined by birth in a family. But *Vam* is on the basis of the profession and characteristics of a person. It is not meant for the domination of one class over another. The system of *Vamāśrama* institution has all along been misused by selfish people to gain predominance over the down-trodden. But the saner people know well that the system is destined for smooth social interaction and self-realization.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, main book of *Sanatan Dharm*, *Bhagwan Shri Krishna* lets us know about qualities of a *Brahman* says:

**शमो दमस्तपः शौचं क्षान्तिरार्जवमेव च ।**

**ज्ञानं विज्ञानमास्तिक्यं ब्रह्मकर्म स्वभावजम्**

"Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religiousness—these are the natural qualities by which the *Brāhmaṇas* work." (Ch.18, Text 42)

Those persons are called *Brahman* as are pious, bear good moral character, perform rituals, teach others or seek knowledge. Also, those who are wise and peaceful, and avoid violence and deal with all matters of life honestly are categorized as *Brahman*. Therefore, they are the head and brain of the social body. The text neither calls them superior

one from others nor to hate or detach anybody from the religious practices. It rather gives a lesson of tolerance.

The second main class is *Khashtri*, whose natural qualities are narrated in the *Bhagavad Gita* as,

**शौर्यं तेजो धृतिर्दाक्ष्यं युद्धे चाप्यपलायनम् ।**

**दानमीश्वरभावश्च क्षात्रं कर्म स्वभावजम्**

"Heroism, power, determination, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity, and leadership are the natural qualities of work for the *kṣatriyas*." (Ch.18, Text 43)

*Khashtri* are a brave lot of the society who work for protection and defence of the country, provide security to the citizens, take part in battles, and perform leadership roles. They also administer justice through an effective administration. Even they sacrifice their life for the defense of their subjects and to uphold righteousness. Their ultimate goal is to provide the public with a peaceful and safe environment.

The features of the *Vaish* and the *Shudra* described in the *Bhagavad Gita* are as follows:

**कृषिगौरक्ष्यवाणिज्यं वैश्यकर्म स्वभावजम् ।**

**परिचर्यात्मकं कर्म शूद्रस्यापि स्वभावजम्**

"Farming, cow protection and business are the natural work for the *vaśyas*, and for the *śūdras* there is labour and service to other." (Ch.18, Text 44)

According to the *Vedic* literature, a person related to the profession of farming, business, and trade is *Vaish*. He also looks after the cows and protects them from genocide because they provide food to humans and plough the fields, which in turn yield crops for consumption by living beings. *Shudras* are those who serve the whole of humankind. To serve humanity is taken as the most superior act by all the religions. While explaining a text of the *Bhāgavatam* [1:18:45], *Shrila Prabhupada* advocates the *Vam* system (class system), summed up as "The qualitative *Vam* system and the orders of life are scientifically planned by the Lord. The perfect way of life gives all sorts of instruction in things both material and spiritual. The *Vedic* way of life does not allow any man to be like the monkeys and dogs" (Prabhupada, 1997).

The pages of history reveal that the so-called *Brahman* had been imposing severe punishments if someone amongst the *Shudras* heard verses of the *Vedic* texts. *Sanatan Dharm* does not permit to violate the living entities. It is based on moral values. It focuses on *Dheraj* (tolerance) and *Ahinsa* (non-violence). The *Mahabharat*, a famous book in the

Vedic literature, says, अहिंसा परमो धर्मः [*Ahinsa Paramo Dharm*] ([Chapple, 1990](#)). It means “non-violence is the highest moral virtue”. Shri Swami Shivanand says, “To give happiness to others is right; to spread misery and pain to others is wrong” ([Shivananda, 1999](#)).

### Social Discrimination with the *Shudras* and Untouchability

Studies have to face social discrimination. They are considered untouchable. All human beings are equal in the eyes of the Creator, but everyone has a distinct social status on the basis of their actions ([Hiltebeitel, 2011](#)). As ‘rendering services to others’ has paramount importance in all the religions, the *Shudra* has a prominent position. Thus the so-called *Brahmans* thinking that the *Shudras* should not achieve a distinct status, declared themselves superior and oppressed the *Shudras*. Even they kept them off the religion, knowledge, and education. They tried to keep them illiterate and untouchable so that they may not attain parity with them [*Brahmans*]. This is despite the fact that there is no such thing in *Sanatan Dharm* and the *Vedic* literature.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Bhagwan* (God) says that all these *Vams* are created by Him:

**चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः ।**

**तस्य कर्तारमपि मां विद्ध्यकर्तारमव्ययम्**

“According to the three modes of material nature and the work associated with them, the four divisions of human society are created by Me. And although I am the creator of this system, you should know that I am yet the non-doer, being unchangeable.” [Ch.4, Text 13]

To elevate men from the animal status, the four *Vams* are created by the Lord for the systematic development of *Krishna* consciousness so that they may progress spiritually and achieve the Supreme Lord ultimately. The tendency of a particular man towards work is determined by the modes of material nature which he has acquired ([Hiltebeitel, 2011](#)).

According to the *Vedic* literature, every person can become perfect by means of qualities of work that he/she performs ([Jaini, 2000](#)). In this regard, the *Bhagavad Gita* explains the theme as:

**यतः प्रवृत्तिर्भूतानां येन सर्वमिदं ततम् ।**

**स्वकर्मणा तमभ्यर्च्य सिद्धिं विन्दति मानवः**

“By worship of the Lord, who is the source of all beings and who is all-pervading, a man can attain perfection through performing his own work.” [Ch.18, Text 46]

The spiritualism set up by *Sanatan Dharm* illustrates that all the living entities are part and parcel of God. Every living entity emanates from the Supreme Lord. Therefore, no one is superior on the basis of wealth, resources, caste or family. In the eyes of *Krishna* (God), everyone may attain perfection on account of his good deeds. The perfection and salvation is not only the property or fate of a *Brahman*, but every individual may have it if he/she fulfill the duties prescribed by *Vams*.

### Reality behind *Vams*

In simple words, the philosophy of *Vam* system may be understood as follows: people who are teaching or studying in our educational institutions, or performing rituals in religious institutions, are *Brahmans*; those who are defending borders are *Khashtri*; farmers, traders, businessmen, mercantile class are *Vaish*; and the stratum providing services to human beings is *Shudr*. For instance, officers working in the offices are rendering services to all the social classes. A teacher, a student, a soldier, a policeman, a farmer, a trader, a shopkeeper, a sweeper, or even a cobbler may approach an officer for a redress of his/ her grievances. That officer is bound to provide the services according to the nature of his/ her job. Thus the officer is a *Shudra*. The officer may be a Deputy Commissioner, a Commissioner, a Secretary, or even a Chief Secretary. Are they inferior to other classes? Or are they untouchables? No one is superior to or inferior to others on the basis of profession.

### Is *Vam* a Caste?

A caste is by birth, while *Vam* is based on qualities, qualification, and profession. A caste is definitely hereditary. But in the case of *Vam*, the situation is quite different. A *Vam* can be changed ([Prabhupada, 1997](#)), but caste is unchangeable. Persons belonging to the same family may fit in all different *Vams*. If one out of them becomes a teacher or a priest, he/ she will be *Brahman*, the one who joins army will be *Khashtri*; one who starts his/ her own business falls in the category of *Vaish*, and someone who becomes a civil servant and serves the humanity will be *Shudr*. Therefore, it is evident that no one, by birth, is the *Brahman*, the *Khashtri*, the *Vaish*, or the *Shudr*. The identification is made only on behalf of profession, qualities, qualification, and characteristics.

According to the *Bhaagvatam Puraan*,

सूत उवाच

अहो वयं जन्मभृतोऽद्य हास्म

वृद्धानुवृत्त्यापि विलोमजाताः ।

दौष्कृत्यमाधिं विधुनोति शीघ्रं

महत्तमानामभिधानयोगः

"*Shri Suut Gosvami said: O God, although we are born in a mixed caste, we are still promoted in birthright simply by serving and following the great who are advanced in knowledge. Even by conversing with such great souls, one can without delay cleanse oneself of all qualifications resulting from lower births.*" (Canto 1, Ch.18, Text 18)

*Prabhupada*, in purport of the above, said text writes, "*Suut Gosvami* did not take his birth in a *Brahman* family. He was born in a family of mixed caste, or an uncultured low family. But because of higher association, like *Shri Shukadev Gosvami* (a saint) and the great *rishis* of *Naimishaaranya*, certainly the disqualification of inferior birth was washed off. Lord *Shri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu* (an incarnation) followed this principle in pursuance of the *Vedic* usages, and by His transcendental association, He elevated many lowborn, or those disqualified by birth or action, to the status of devotional service and established them in the position of *Aachariyas*, or authorities. He clearly stated that any man, whatever he may be, whether a *Brahman* or *Shudra* by birth, or a householder or mendicant in the order of society, if he is conversant with the science of *Krishna*, he can be accepted as an *Acharya* or *guru*, a spiritual master" ([Prabhupada, 1997](#)). This verse definitely proves that *Shrila Shukdev Gosvami* did not refuse to teach *Suut Gosvami* about the transcendental science, nor did the sages of *Naimisaaranya* refuse to hear lessons from him because of his inferior birth.

This shows that thousands of years ago there was no bar to learning or preaching the transcendental science because of inferior birth. The rigidity of the so-called caste system in Hindu society was penetrated within only one or two hundred years ago when the number of disqualified people in the families of higher castes, increased.

### Modern Hindu Thinkers and *Varns*

Many Hindu thinkers and religious philosophers have played a significant role in highlighting social responsibility in *Sanatan Dharm*. They struggled to introduce the basic real teachings of the *Vedic* literature. They condemned untouchability and set bare the facts of *Sanatan Dharm*, and explained the true knowledge of the religion.

#### Abhay Charan Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977) is a modern Hindu preacher, spiritual master, thinker, and philosopher ([Jones, 2007](#)). He is the founder *Acharya* of the International Society for

Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) ([Ekstrand & Bryant, 2004](#)). He said,

"*We are not introducing caste system, that any rascal born in a Brahman family, he becomes a Brahman. We don't accept that. A man who is first-class trained up to become a Brahman, we accept him. It doesn't matter whether he is India or Europe, or America. It doesn't matter. We are trying to introduce this system. That is mentioned in the Bhagavad Gita*" (Conversation between Sandy Nixon and Prabhupada, 1975).

He laid emphasis on the non-discriminatory character of *Krishna* Consciousness. According to him, a devotee engaged in *Krishna* Consciousness, is more than *Brahman*. He says that *Varns* is not a caste system, but in actual fact, they are on certain qualities. Anyone can qualify as a *Brahman* if he follows the path of devotional service under the guidance of a *bona fide* spiritual master. Any lowborn person can purify him/herself by the guidance of a pure devotee of the Lord, for the Lord is extraordinarily powerful ([Prabhupada, 1969](#)).

When he started to preach in India, so-called *Brahmans* created great hurdles for him, so much so they tortured him physically because he had been preaching all classes of the society. He advised all the people to chant the holy names of *Krishna* (Lord), recite the *Vedic* literature, and perform all the rituals. Everyone was allowed by him to go to the temples for religious practices. Yet the people who were considered the untouchable and degraded them as *Shudra*; became a disciple of *Prabhupada* and started to preach the *Bhagavad Gita* and other *Vedic* Literature. He made the religion easy for everyone. But the so-called *Brahmans* could not tolerate it. They prevented *Prabhupada* from preaching or giving the *Vedic* knowledge to the *Shudra* or labour class. When he was facing many problems in spreading the holy names of *Krishna* (God), he left India and went to New York in 1965. He started preaching spiritual wisdom of *Sanatan Dharm* there. As he was a highly qualified person, he translated the *Vedic* literature from *Sanskrit* to English. Initially, he got the *Bhagavad Gita* printed there in America and distributed it among the general public as well as educational institutes there ([Shinn, 1987](#)). A large number of Americans were initiated by him and became his disciple. They further started to practice *Sanatan Dharm*. Those disciples of *Prabhupada* also came to India and preached the *Vedic* literature without any discrimination of social classes or strata.

#### Swami Vivekanand

[Swami Vivekanand \(1863-1902\)](#) was a Hindu spiritualist, disciple of Ramakrishna. He belonged to

an aristocratic family of Calcutta. He believed that all living entities are part of the divine; therefore pleasure of God lies in rendering services to humankind. His teachings focused on human development ([Vivekanand & Lokeswarananda, 1996](#)). He introduced the philosophy of the *Vedic* literature in its true sense to India as well as to the Western world. Through the teachings of the *Vedas*, he raised interfaith awareness ([Clarke, 2006](#)). He negated the inhumane caste practice. According to him, the basic idea of the *Varn* or class system is "each is great in his/her own place." Swami Vivekanand further opined about the system that every person contributes to the whole of society, and every contribution should be an act of worship ([Markham & Lohr, 2009](#)). He generated public consciousness. He taught to love others beyond caste, nation or religion. He opined that the poor might not be suppressed. Therefore, he said, "*Freedom is the first condition of growth. What you do not make free can never grow.*"

### **Vivekanand Swami Teaches**

*"It is infinite; religion is infinite, none can go beyond it, and whatever you do sincerely is good for you. Even the least thing well done brings marvelous results; therefore, let everyone do what little he can. If the fisherman thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better fisherman; if the student thinks he is the Spirit, he will be a better lawyer, and so on, and the result will be that the castes will remain forever. It is in the nature of society to form itself into groups, and what will go will be these privileges. Caste is a natural order; I can perform one duty in social life, and you another; you can govern a country, and I can mend a pair of old shoes, but that is no reason why you are greater than I, for can you mend my shoes? Can I govern the country? I am clever in mending shoes, you are clever in reading Vedas, but that is no reason why you should trample on my head.*

*They should be knocked on the head. If you teach Vedanta to the fisherman, he will say, I am as good a man like you; I am a fisherman, you are a philosopher, but I have the same God in me as you have in you. And that is what we want, no privilege for any one, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that the divine is within, and everyone will work out his own salvation..."* ([Budhanandra, 1970](#)).

Swami Vivekanand worked a great deal to prove that all mankind is part and parcel of God. Discrimination on the basis of birth should end. Nobody should be deemed upper or lower on account of his/her profession. Everyone should be loved and regarded. No one is superior or inferior,

but his/her deeds and attitude may elevate his/her stature.

### **Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi**

Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi was much inspired by Sufism. He believed in humanity and brotherhood, especially having compassion with the poor and the distressed ([Chatterjee, 2005](#)). He always opposed untouchability. He favored that the thought that all the *Varns* could befriend to each other even can marry ([Jaffrelot, 2005](#)). He launched a campaign in 1932 in favour of the untouchables and named them *Harijans* ([Coward, 2003](#)). *Hari* means God, and *jans* means people, i.e., the people of God. He was a clear-headed person in the context of religions. He had comparative studies of religions; therefore, he always respected all religions. He was well acquainted with comparative studies of religions, therefore he always respected all the religions ([Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015](#)). The universal teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* had a great influence on his life ([Richard, 2014](#)). Owing that, he loved all the living entities beyond religion, caste, or social status ([Ghose, 1991](#)).

### **Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar**

[B. R. Ambedkar \(1891-1956\)](#) is also a modern Hindu Thinker and politician. He was an Indian jurist as well as a social reformer ([Coward, 2003](#)). As he belonged to a family considered untouchable, he had been receiving discriminatory treatment from society and the so-called high-castes ([Keer, 1971](#)). Therefore, he contributed his part for the uplift of the downtrodden. He worked considerably for the oppressed. He raised issues related to the untouchable community. In 1920, he issued a weekly publication in Bombay, namely *Maaknayak* (means Leader of the silent) ([Jaffrelot, 2005](#)). He also encountered the old law books which discuss discrimination among humankind. He said, "If I find the constitution being misused, I shall be the first one to burn it." He forwarded recommendations for the Constitution of India for the protection of fundamental rights of the Dalits ([Ambedkar, 1979](#)). He also struggled for the allocation of special quota in jobs for women and the Dalits ([Constituent Assembly Debates Clause Wise Discussion of the Draft Constitution, 1949](#)).

The people, in this mundane world, having fewer material resources and low income, are always ill-treated by the so-called high class. The poor are considered as ones belonging to low castes; notwithstanding, money is not a standard to judge between high or low caste. Although all the religions reject discrimination on the basis of castes yet, they have to face hatred and physical and material insecurity ([Jodhka, 2008](#)). Ambedkar emphasized that the *Shudras* are also part of other *Varns*, but

*Brahmans* degraded them socially (Bryant, 2001). He, in 1923, laid the foundation of Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha to improve the education and economy of the oppressed. He knew that it was the finance that compelled the poor to bear humiliation at the hands of the wealthy people. The Shudra are not different stratum than the others (Sharma, 2005). Therefore, he struggled to maintain their educational and economic conditions and worked for the annihilation of caste discrimination. Even he focused on their representation in the legislature.

### Conclusion

Thus the four *Varṇas* in *Sanatan Dharm* are based on the characteristics and the skill set of an individual, without prejudice to the consideration of any

superiority attached to any *Varṇa per se*. No one is superior or inferior except for those who earn high moral status through developing excellent qualities and performing commendable acts. One is superior if one has lofty morals, and one is inferior if one's morals are abominable. This system of complementary qualities and skills is essential for a well-organized society. The self-styled *Brahmans* have misinterpreted and misused *Varṇa Aashram Dharm* (4-fold class system) to grind their own axe. This evil practice has caused much suffering to the low-income class in the sub-continent. Modern Hindu thinkers have highlighted and lambasted this evil practice. They have called for fulfilling the social responsibility envisaged by *Sanatan Dharm*, which attaches equal importance to all living entities.

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