Excerpts from Caste-based Discrimination
David Keane (2007)

The sacred literature of Hinduism falls roughly into two categories. The first is *shruti* which means 'hearing' and denotes that which has been revealed directly by God. This category comprises the four Vedas. The *Purusha Sukta* in the *Rig Veda* is the only Vedic passage which refers to the four castes by name. In all other contexts, the word *varna* is used, literally, 'colour'.

Nagarajan describes the *Purusha Sukta* as an 'interpolation',[1] in order to convey the idea that the hymn was a later addition to the Vedic texts to give divine sanction to what was essentially an unequal socio-economic division already in existence:

> The Vedic hymns had been composed before the *varna* scheme was implemented. The Vedic society was not organised on the basis of *varnas*. The *Purusha sukta* might have been a later interpolation intended to secure Vedic sanction for that scheme.

The four *varnas* correspond to an economic structure:

> When the import of the mystic allegory of *Rig Veda* X.90 is grasped, we find that it promotes the concept of a social order wherein only a small section would be required to engage in agrarian[2] work in order to maintain itself and the rest of the society ... the scheme by which three *varnas* were being maintained by the fourth.

Nagarajan questions the divinity of such an order: 'The interpolations [the *Purusha sukta*] were intended to assert Vedic and 'divine' sanction for a man- made classification.'

The Vedas are followed later by epic poems along with the *Puranas* and philosophical and legal writings, designated by the term *smrti* or 'memory', considered 'revelations only in a secondary or limited sense'. However, Muir notes that 'according to the Hindus, the teaching of the Puranas on any point is conclusive'. The two great epics of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are included in these 'revelations', and have been described as 'the cherished heritage of the whole Hindu world' and 'the basis of its thought and its moral and ethical ideas'.

Robert Lingat's study of the classical laws of India focused on the concept of *dharma*, or 'duty', which was traditionally studied as a complement to the rituals found in the Vedas. The theory of the *varnas* provided the authors of the *dharma-sutras* with a

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[1] the insertion of something of a different nature into something else
[2] relating to cultivated land or the cultivation of land.

framework within which they could lay down the precise duties of individuals according to their caste. They based their hierarchy of functions and duties on the hierarchy of social groups designated in the *Rig Veda*.

The link between the Vedas and the post-Vedic *dharma*-codifiers[3] was expressly highlighted by the influential Manu Vaivasvata, the seventh Manu[4], who alluded to the *Purusha sukta* in Book I verse 87 of his Code, the *Manusmrti*: 'To protect this whole creation the resplendent one determined separate works (*karmani*) for those produced from his mouth, arms, thighs and feet.' Lipner observes: 'again and again in Hindu texts, which seek to express normative socio-religious values or to preserve or reinstate Hindu *dharma*, this ancient Vedic verse is invoked.'

The distinction between *varna* and *jati* is relevant to the relationship between the Vedas and the codes of *dharma*. The *varnas* are not, properly speaking, castes. The *dharma-sutras* invariably use the word *jati* when they want to indicate the actual castes. Galanter defines a *jati* as:

> an endogamous[5] group bearing a common name and claiming a common origin, membership in which is hereditary, linked to one or more traditional occupations, imposing on its members certain obligations and restrictions in matters of social intercourse, and having more or less a determinate position in a hierarchical scale of ranks.

It is impossible to reduce the growth of castes in modern India to the simple framework of the theory found in the *Rig Veda*. While *varna* essentially represents a theoretical division of Hindu society, *jati* is a practical one.

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[3] Arrangers of laws or rules into a systematic code.
[4] Manu is a term found with various meanings in Hinduism. In early texts, it refers to the archetypal man, or to the first man.The Sanskrit term for 'human', मानव means 'of Manu' or 'children of Manu'
[5] Marrying within a specific social group, caste or ethnic group