
Who is a Brahman?

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Introduction

In India, those who performed tasks of priests and teachers and were engaged in learning and preaching the scriptures, namely, *Vedas*, *Upnishads*, *Puranas*, *Bhagavadgita*, etc. were called Brahmins. On the other hand those who were rulers, administrators and warriors were called *Kshatriyas*. Those who were indulging in agriculture, husbandry and trade were called *Vaishyas* and those, who performed unskilled tasks for the society, were called *Shudras*. Over the past centuries, it has become a common belief that caste is by birth (*Jati*) or simply based on the nature of work one performs in the society. Division of castes on the basis of occupation and social status had been prevalent not only in India but also in the western world. However, the current belief that the caste system is by birth is really a misinterpretation of what our scriptures meant to convey to the society.

The Hindu scriptures talk of four *Varnas* or categories into which the entire society had been divided. Lord Krishna also talks about these four *Varnas* in the *Bhagavadgita*, which is known to us for more than 5,000 years ago. According to Lord Krishna these four *Varnas* are categorized by their distinctive *Gunas* or nature. *Gunas* are the natural characteristics with which one is born. *Gunas* are of three kinds - *Satoguna*, *Rajoguna* and *Tamoguna*. *Satoguna* consists of purity and truthfulness, *Rajoguna* is made up of passion, anger, etc. and *Tamoguna* consists of ignorance and laziness. Only the propensity of the aforesaid *Gunas* differs in people of different *Varnas*.

Later, more than these *Gunas*, it was the social practices in India that placed a person in a certain caste, according to his birth in a certain family, with a particular profession. As a result, among *Shudras* there are many sub-castes based on professions such as *Lohar* (blacksmith), *Barhai* (carpenter), *Sunar* (goldsmith), *Teli* (oilman), *Gwala* (milkman), *Dhobi* (washerman) and so on. In India the castes or sub-castes became watertight compartments, where marriages and even eating food would be done with people of the same caste only. In the west too professions were used as family names, such as, Goldsmith, Blacksmith, Cook, Priest, Carpenter, Baker,

etc. However, the profession did not become a rigid caste unlike in India.

A Brahman is one who studies the scriptures handed down by the seers or *Rishis* and is engaged in seeking Brahman, the Supreme Being (*Brahma janati sah Brahmanah*).

Characteristics of a Brahman

A true Brahman is one who possesses the following characteristics, as evident from one's nature, habits and interactions, and not simply by one's birth in a Brahman family:

1. He is interested in seeking wisdom through learning spiritual sciences and sharing the knowledge with the society, for the benefit of humanity at large and not for his selfish end.
2. He is always prayerful, peaceful and devoted to serve the society.
3. He is also truthful, kind and compassionate to everybody without discrimination.
4. He is not interested in amassing material wealth but true knowledge of the Self.
5. He lives a simple, pious and a disciplined life with humility. Meeting him becomes a sublime experience.
6. He lives on purely vegetarian meals.
7. He does not indulge in any kind of intoxication or smoking. Neither does he associate with those who use them.
8. He does not hurt or kill any living being unless that becomes necessary to save Dharma.
9. He lives in a very clean surrounding, bathes everyday in the morning and does his prayers regularly.
10. He observes *Tapa* (austerity) and *Japa* (chanting of mantras) and also performs *Yajna* (sacrifice as enjoined in the *Vedas*) on a regular basis. Studying scriptures is a part of his daily routine.
11. He commands respect in the society because of his knowledge and service to the society. Even the kings respected him.

Code of Conduct of a Brahman

1. Rise early in the morning before sunrise, take bath/shower and then perform *puja*
2. Always wear washed and clean clothes during a religious ceremony.
3. Always wear *yajnopavit* and chant the *Gayatri* mantra frequently.
4. Study the scriptures and teach them to fellow members of the society.
5. Eat only *satvika* and pure vegetarian meals.

6. Perform *sandhya-vandan*, *puja* and *arti* every evening.
7. Always have good thoughts in your mind.

Conclusion

Living a life and performing actions full of *Satoguna* and renouncing *Rajoguna* and *Tamoguna* are the true nature of a Brahman. A true Brahman is one who realizes Brahman, the Supreme Being residing as Atman within him.

वेद मंत्र

एकं सत् विप्राः बहुधा वदन्ति ।

The Truth is one, the learned call it by different names.
(*Rig Veda 1-89-1*)

आ नो भद्राः क्रतवे यन्तु विश्वताः ।

Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions.
(*Rig Veda 1-164-46*)

सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म ।

Everything is indeed Brahman.
(*Sama Veda 3-14-1*)

अयं आत्मा ब्रह्म ।

This Atman is Brahman.
(*Atharva Veda, Mandukya Upanishad 2*)

असतो मा सद्गमय । तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय । मृत्योर्माऽमृतं गमय ॥

Lead me from untruth to truth, from darkness to light and from death to immortality.
(*Yajur Veda 1-3-28*)

हिरण्यगर्भः समवर्तताग्रे, भूतस्य जातः पतिरेक आसीत् ।

स दाधार पृथिवीं द्यामुतेमां, कस्मै देवाय हविषा विधेम ॥

In the beginning there existed God, the source of light. He was the one Lord of all created beings.
He upholds this earth and the heavens. He is to whom we offer our prayers.

चिश्चानि देव सचितुर्दुरितानि परासुच ।

यद्भद्रं तन्न परासुच ॥

O Lord, O You the illuminator, do free us from sins. Please do bring to us what is auspicious.
(*Shukla Yajurveda, XXX, 3*)