The Structure and Nature of the Traditional Indian Social System

Varnashrama, Purushartha, Karma, Rina and Rebirth

Indian society is characterised by **cultural plurality**—ethnic, linguistic, religious, regional, caste and class-based. Anthropologists have long noted that what distinguishes Indian society is not merely its diversity, but its ability to **sustain social continuity.**

This continuity has been ensured not primarily through political institutions or formal law, but through a **shared moral–cosmic worldview** rooted in Hindu philosophy.

Scholars such as **M. N. Srinivas, S. C. Dube, Louis Dumont, and McKim Marriott** emphasised that Indian society cannot be understood through Western categories of class. Rather, it must be analysed as a **moral system**, where social relations are organised around ideas of **dharma, karma, rebirth, rina, purushartha and moksha**.

1. The Moral Universe of Indian Society

To understand the traditional Indian social system, one must first enter a moral universe—a world where social relations, cosmic principles, individual conduct, and the very rhythm of time were all **imagined as part of an interconnected design**.

Unlike many societies where rules were created through political struggles or legal codes, the Indian social imagination rested on the belief that the **universe itself had a moral structure**, and that human society should reflect it.

David Mandelbaum, in his influential work *Society in India* (1970), argued that Indian social life believes that **cosmic order and social order reflect**

one another. According to Mandelbaum, institutions and life-cycle stages are not viewed merely as human arrangements, but as expressions of a **larger cosmic order**. This perspective helps explain why social rules and obligations in Indian society are experienced as **morally binding**, not simply as social conventions.

From Rita to Dharma

Early Vedic thought articulated the principle of **rita**, the cosmic rhythm that governed the universe. Rita symbolised regularity in natural phenomena such as the rising of the sun, the changing of seasons, the cycle of birth and death—but it also implied an ethical dimension. **To live in accordance with rita meant to live in harmony with the universe.**

Over time, rita was translated into **dharma**, a concept that brought cosmic order into the realm of human society. Dharma came to signify the moral principle that **sustains social life** and maintains balance between individual desires and collective well-being. Indological scholars have consistently pointed out that dharma was **not a fixed or universal law**. Instead, it was **contextual and role-specific**, varying according to:

- age and life stage,
- caste and occupation,
- gender and kinship position,
- religious and regional tradition.

This contextual nature of dharma is evident in classical texts, where **the duties of a king, a householder, a student, and a renouncer are different from each other**. It is also visible in everyday social practice.

Relational Morality

A major contribution to understanding India's moral universe comes from **McKim Marriott's "substantivist" or "transactional" view** of Indian

society. Marriott argued that Indian moral life is **relational rather than abstract**. Individuals are not perceived as autonomous moral agents with universal rights, but as **persons embedded in networks of ritual relationships**.

From this perspective, morality is not derived from universal principles of justice or equality. Instead, duty is determined by one's **location within social networks**—family, caste, lineage, ritual community, and life stage. What is moral for one person may not be moral for another, because moral expectations differ according to social position.

2. Varnashrama

The traditional Indian social system did not separate social organisation from moral life. Instead, it integrated both through the framework of **Varnashrama**, which combined **varna** (the ordering of social functions) with **ashrama** (the ordering of the human life course).

Early Indian texts conceptualised society not as an aggregate of individuals, but as an **organic whole**, in which every group and every stage of life performed functions essential to collective harmony.

This organic vision later attracted the attention of anthropologists such as **A. M. Hocart**, who argued that **hierarchy in traditional societies must be understood as ritual and symbolic**. For Hocart, social ranking reflected **degrees of ritual centrality**, not simply material power.

2.1 Varna: Classification and Hierarchy

Indian society is divided into numerous castes and sub-castes as noted by various scholars from time to time. For a very long period of time caste was represented as varna and both terms were used interchangeably. But over a period of time it has been realised that **both are not identical terms**.

S.C. Dube pointed out that Varna is not a functional unit in the case of Indian society but serves as a reference category. It acts as a "**classificatory device**" in which several jatis of ascribed ritual status are placed together in a hierarchical order.

Three Theories of the Origin of Varna System

First, it was believed that the **Aryan invasion into India led to four fold division** of Indian society. **Herbert Risley** proposed that Aryan society was divided into four groupings and this varna system was brought in India with them. As the word **'varna' means colour**, it was aimed to differentiate between fair skinned Aryans and dark skinned Dasas (the original inhabitants of India).

It implies that there were only two groups in Indian society – **Aryans and non-Aryans.** Later on Aryans got divided into three varna – Brahaman, Kshatria, Vaishya while Dasas became Shudra, the fourth varna.

The second is the divine theory of origin of Varna. As per **Purushashukta hymn of Rig Veda**, there are four orders of the society – the Brahaman, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra. All these originated from different body parts of the primeval being – the Purusha. The Brahmanas are believed to have originated from the mouth, Kshatriya from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs and Shudras from the feet of the Purusha.

This is the s**ymbolic descending order** of the four categories and closely **associated with their functions in the society**. **Brahmanas** – the priest involved in intellectual growth and spiritual needs of the society. **Kshatriya** – the rulers were concerned with the protection of the society. **Vaishya** – the merchants and landowners were involved in commerce and agriculture. **Shudras** – the artisans and servants were involved in all kinds of manual labour.

Each varna occupied a specific position in social hierarchy and engaged varna based division of labour. This system of varna was structured around the

principle of purity and pollution. **The first three varna were regarded as pure and "twice born"** while Shudra were considered backward.

The roots of untouchability were laid during post-vedic period. People involved in polluting professions like cleaning human and animal waste, animal hides and dealing with dead bodies were considered belonging to the lowest order called **Antyaja**. This fifth order was later on incorporated into the varna system and became the lowest rung of untouchables.

The third is the tri-guna theory of varna origin. Guna refers to the inherent quality of an individual. There are three basic guna which are found in the personality of each individual. But **only one guna becomes predominant** and thus becomes the marker of his personality. The three guna are – sattva guna, raja guna and tama guna.

1) **Sattva guna** – It refers to chastity, purity, devotion to knowledge and lack of attraction or attachment towards worldly things. It is believed to be predominant guna among Brahmins.

2) **Raja guna** – This guna refers to steadfastness to duty, commitment to truth and devotion to justice. It focuses on self-sacrifice for the larger interest of the society. This is considered to be the predominant character of the warrior class or Kshatriya.

3) **Tama guna** – It refers to obsession with worldly things and satisfaction of biological needs. It is considered to be the predominant guna among Vaishyas.

Interestingly, the four varna groupings did not enjoy any ascribed status during Vedic times. **Vishnu Purana states that everyone is born as Shudra**. It is only one's karma that entitles one to become a Brahmin or Khastriya or Vaishya. Therefore, it implies that **the varna system was not a closed system and inter-varna mobility was possible during Vedic times**. Moreover, Shudras were not untouchables but rather a conglomeration of artisan castes at that time.

Anthropological and historical studies show that the early symbolic idea of **varna** gradually became more rigid over time. **N. K. Bose**, in his work on Indian cultural history, particularly in *Culture and Society in India*, noted that early Indian society allowed a significant degree of **occupational mobility**. Individuals and groups could change roles, and social boundaries were relatively flexible.

Romila Thapar, in her historical analyses such as *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, shows that major transformations occurred during the early medieval period. The growth of **state formation, temple-centred economies, and land-grant systems** increased social stratification and gradually hardened varna distinctions, making social boundaries more rigid and enduring.

Varna in Practice

Village studies conducted by **S. C. Dube**, especially his ethnography *Indian Village* **(1955)**, and by other anthropologists show that although people often refer to **varna** while discussing moral order and social ranking, **everyday social life is organised mainly around jati**. Matters such as marriage, food relations, occupation, and daily interaction are regulated by jati rather than by the four varnas.

In this sense, varna functions largely as a **symbolic or ideological framework**. It provides a **moral language through which people interpret hierarchy and ritual status**.

This understanding was further developed in **Louis Dumont's** *Homo Hierarchicus* **(1970)**. Dumont argued that varna supplies the **ideological structure** within which the hierarchy of jatis is interpreted. According to him, the moral authority of varna rests on the principle of **purity and pollution**, with **Brahmins occupying the highest position** because of ritual purity.

2.2 Jati: The Lived Structure of Caste

While **varna** provides the ideological framework of Indian society, **jati** represents its lived social reality. Anthropologists agree that Indian society functioned not through the four varnas, but through **thousands of jatis** that governed everyday life. As noted by **André Béteille** and **S. C. Dube**, a jati is an **endogamous, hierarchically ranked, ascriptive and occupational social group**.

Jatis operate as **corporate groups**, shaping marriage rules, food practices, settlement patterns, ritual participation, and economic relations. Membership is **ascriptive**, fixed by birth, and reinforced through lifelong socialisation. Social order within jatis is maintained by **caste councils and elders**, whose decisions carry strong moral authority even without formal legal power.

The Jajmani System

Classic village studies such as **William and Charlotte Wiser's *Behind Mud Walls* (1930)**, **Oscar Lewis's *Village Life in Northern India* (1958)**, and **S. C. Dube's *Indian Village* (1955)** provides detailed accounts of the **Jajmani system**. These studies describe a network of **hereditary service relations** among castes within a village. Landowning and dominant castes functioned as **Jajmans (patrons)**, while artisan and service castes acted as **kameens (clients)**. Goods and services were exchanged through long-established customary arrangements closely linked to kinship ties and ritual status.

These ethnographic accounts show that caste relations were governed by **moral obligation and tradition**, rather than purely by market principles. However, interdependence did not imply equality. Dominant castes controlled land and resources, while service castes experienced restricted mobility. Thus, **jati operated as an institutionalised system of inequality**, maintained through custom and moral legitimacy rather than overt coercion.

Hierarchy, Occupation, and Purity

Ethnographic studies consistently link **jati hierarchy with occupation**. Castes engaged in priesthood, landholding, and governance ranked high, while those dealing with bodily substances, animal carcasses, or waste ranked low. This hierarchy was governed by the principle of **purity and pollution**, which regulated food sharing, physical contact, and spatial distance between castes.

Louis Dumont and the Moral Logic of Caste

Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* provides the most influential theoretical interpretation of caste. Dumont argued that caste is primarily a **system of moral values**, not simply economic or political inequality. According to him, hierarchy rests on the opposition between **purity and impurity**, with Brahmins at the top due to ritual purity and untouchables at the bottom.

Dynamic Perspectives on Jati

Later scholars such as **M. N. Srinivas** and **André Béteille** showed that caste relations are **dynamic**. Srinivas's concept of the **dominant caste** highlights the role of land ownership, numerical strength, and political power, sometimes overriding ritual rank. Béteille demonstrated how caste increasingly intersects with class and power, especially in modern India.

Difference Between Varna & Jati

Very often both the terms are used interchangeably. But the distinction between these two is of great importance to anthropological understanding of Indian social structure. Both represent forms of social stratification of Indian society.

The main distinction between the concepts of caste and varna:

1. There are four varnas but innumerable castes: The four fold varna model proposes **four varnas** namely Brahaman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. These four varna represented the division of Indian Hindu society into four fold. But there exists a large number of castes and sub-castes in India. **Mandal**

commission listed three thousand seven hundred and forty three**(3743) castes** in India as mentioned by Beteille (1996).

2. The Varna system is based on occupation while the caste system is based on birth: The varna system that existed during Vedic times was based on the occupation or **division of labour**. The membership to varna group was based on one's karma or occupation rather than birth. On the other hand, **membership to caste is ascribed in nature** i.e. determined by the birth of an individual in a particular caste.

3. Varna system is an open system but caste system is a closed system: The varna system was a more or less open system as it **provided ample opportunities to individuals to change their varna** on the basis of their profession. For example, a Kshatriya could become a Brahmin or vice-versa. There are examples of **Parshuram** who was a Brahmin by birth but became a Khstariya, **Vishwamitra** who was a Kshatriya but later on became a Brahmin and **Vedavyas** (author of Mahabharat) who belonged to Shudra, family of a fisherman but later on carried the task of a Brahmin. But the **caste system is considered as a closed system** because membership cannot be changed from one caste to another.

4. The Varna system has theological sanctions but the caste system does not have: As per the theory of divine origin of varna system, it has theological underpinnings of Hinduism. Lord Krishna also mentioned in the Bhagwad Gita about the creation of four varnas from four different body parts of the primeval being or Prajapati Brahma. On the contrary, **the caste system does not have any divine sanctions**. Caste system can be considered as the degenerated version of varna system over the centuries.

2.3 Ashramas

If **varna** organised society horizontally, **Ashrama** structured life **over time**. Together, they linked social roles with moral development. Classical Hindu

thought viewed human life as a journey through four stages—**Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa**—each associated with specific duties, discipline, and moral focus.

Anthropologists emphasise that ashrama was not a rigid description of actual life, but a **normative cultural model**. **David Mandelbaum** described it as the "**moral grammar of the life cycle**," offering society a meaningful way to understand growth, adulthood, ageing, and withdrawal from worldly ties.

Ashrama, Rites of Passage, and Liminality

The movement from one ashrama to another was traditionally marked by **ritual transitions**, which closely resemble what **Arnold van Gennep** called **rites of passage**. Van Gennep showed that all societies mark major life changes through rituals that involve three phases—**separation, transition, and incorporation**. Indian life-cycle rituals such as **Upanayana (initiation), marriage, and renunciation** clearly fit this pattern, signalling movement from one moral and social state to another.

Building on this, **Victor Turner** introduced the concept of **liminality**, referring to the **in-between phase during transitions** when individuals temporarily step outside their earlier social roles. In the Indian context, students during Brahmacharya, elders in the phase of Vanaprastha, and renouncers in Sannyasa can be seen as occupying **liminal positions**—socially respected yet partially detached from everyday economic and familial life.

Brahmacharya

The very first stage during which the boy undergoes Upanayan ceremony or sacred thread ceremony (**initiation rite**). Individuals belonging to upper caste or twice born castes (dwija) are allowed to go through sacred thread ceremony.

The Shudras or untouchables were not allowed to go through the same as they were not allowed to receive education traditionally. The chief duty of the individual is **to seek education and learning of Vedas**. The other duties

include living in residence of a teacher or gurukul, practicing celibacy, following a life of austerity and service. This Ashrama lasts usually **till 25 years of age**.

Grihastha

The second stage starts immediately after the Brahmacharya Ashrama. The individual undergoes a **marriage ceremony**. Marriage is a social institution that ensures perpetuation of family and group. The root word of Grihastha is 'Grih' meaning home. The responsibilities of a married life define the Grihastha Ashrama. Here he **fulfills his social relations and obligations** towards the men of his guna, kula, etc. His main focus is on **Artha and Kama** during this ashrama. The individual remain in this ashrama **till 50 years of age**

Vanaprastha

The third phase of life is Vanprastha Ashrama that begins at the age of 50 years. Here the individual **hands over his household responsibilities** to his children (adults now). The individual devotes his time to God and tries to bring his senses under control through **penance or tapasya**. The most important duty of the individual for this ashrama is to focus on **chastity and self-control**. If a person dies during this ashrama, his soul attains moksha.

Sannyasa

The last phase of human life **begins after 75 years**. He removes all of his worldly ties and **breaks off all the relations**. He is expected to devote his entire time for meditation and concentration towards Param Brahma. The main aim is to attain **salvation or moksha** in this ashrama.

Ashrama and Social Continuity

Anthropologically, the ashrama system resolved a fundamental social tension: how to reconcile **worldly engagement with spiritual liberation**. By assigning different values to different stages of life, Indian society allowed

individuals to pursue wealth, pleasure, duty, and liberation without collapsing into contradiction.

3. The Purusharthas

The theory of Purushartha determines the values ascribed to human actions and behaviour. It is a **measuring scale** to determine whether certain human actions are permissible or not in a particular society. The term 'Purushartha' is a composite Sanskrit term and composed of two separate words 'Purusha' + 'Artha'.

The word 'Purusha' denotes 'human being' and the word 'Artha' means 'objective of life'. So etymologically speaking the term 'Purushartha' implies **'meaning of human life' or 'object of human pursuit'**. It is a major key concept of the Hindu philosophy that guides human lives and provides meanings and aims to his purpose in life.

Unlike ethical systems that privilege material success alone or demand complete renunciation of the world, Purushartha presents a **balanced vision of human life**. It integrates moral duty, economic activity, emotional fulfillment, and spiritual liberation into a coherent, graded scheme of values.

Dharma: The Moral Foundation of Social Life

This is the first and foremost goal of human life. The term 'Dharma' is derived from Sanskrit root word 'Dhri' which means 'to hold together or to preserve'. So, the social significance of 'Dharma' is to **maintain social order and stability** as highlighted in various classical Hindu texts.

It is characterized by **righteousness and strict adherence to moral and religious values** by the individuals and society in general. It is meant for the welfare of the society by bringing the harmony between mundane and spiritual affairs of the individuals.

McKim Marriott's relational approach clarifies that dharma in India is not anchored in individual rights but in **reciprocal obligations**. Moral worth is judged by how well individuals fulfil duties appropriate to their social location. Thus, dharma provides the ethical yardstick against which other pursuits—artha, kama, and even moksha—are evaluated.

Artha

This is the second goal of human life. The word 'Artha' means the material and economic aspects of human life. It is characterized by focus on attainment of **economic values and prosperity** by human beings. As per the Hindu philosophy, fulfillment of economic and material needs is important in order to achieve the overall well being of an individual.

Artha is a broader concept as per Hinduism. It encompasses career, skill, wealth, prosperity and means of fulfilling the needs of life while following the principle of Dharma. **Artha is essential for the maintenance of dharma in the society**. As having means of wealth enables the individual to perform various duties to uphold dharma and maintain social harmony.

Kama

This is the third goal of human life. It is characterized by **gratification of bodily desires, pleasure and love**. It includes enjoying the worldly pleasures through the five senses – including sight, hear, taste, touch, and smell. Having acquired wealth and money through artha propels the man on the path of fulfillment of his desires through kama. It includes aesthetics, beautification, adornment, sensuality, passion, love.

Moksha

While dharma, artha, and kama bind individuals to social life, **Moksha** points beyond it. Moksha represents **liberation from suffering, ignorance, and the cycle of birth and rebirth**. The term moksha is derived from Sanskrit root

'muc' which means 'let go' or 'set free'. It is characterized by attainment of salvation, liberation and fulfillment of spiritual aspirations of human beings. It is meant for **self-realization and understanding the ultimate purpose of human life that is mukti** .

The release from sufferings involved in every birth form is known by the terms 'moksha'/ 'nirvana'/ 'mukti' as per the Hindu philosophy. Moksha is considered the most important purushartha. The remaining three are considered the only means to attain the end in itself which is the last pursuit of human life i.e. moksha.

Scholars have noted that moksha carries **counter-hierarchical potential**. Since liberation is ultimately a matter of spiritual realisation rather than birth or social rank, **it questions ritual and social hierarchy**.

Ethnographic interpretations of Bhakti communities show that devotion-based salvation **redefined spiritual authority**, making it accessible across caste boundaries. While Bhakti did not dismantle caste structurally, it profoundly reshaped the **moral imagination**, challenging the religious monopoly of elites.

Louis Dumont recognised this dimension when he observed that renouncers and devotees occupy positions simultaneously **outside and above social hierarchy**. Moksha thus introduces an internal critique within the social system itself.

Purushartha as a Coherent Moral Order

A fundamental tension exists between the active pursuit of **material wealth (Artha)** and **pleasure (Kama)** on one hand, and the ideal of **renunciation for spiritual liberation (Moksha)** on the other.

To address this tension, Indian thought emphasises the idea of **dharma-driven action performed without attachment to outcomes**, often described as *action with renunciation or action without attachment*.

Scholars highlight that when conflicts arise, **dharma takes precedence over artha and kama**, because without moral restraint, the pursuit of wealth and pleasure can lead to social imbalance, conflict, and moral decline.

In the ethical hierarchy of Purushartha, **Dharma stands first**, as it regulates all action. **Artha** follows, as material resources are necessary for sustaining life and social duties, and **Kama** is pursued within these moral limits. **Moksha** remains the ultimate goal, representing liberation from worldly attachments. Thus, the Purushartha framework seeks to **balance material desire and spiritual aspiration**, rather than rejecting either completely.

4. Karma: Moral Causation

The doctrine of **karma** is central to the traditional Indian understanding of social life and moral responsibility. In Indian philosophy, karma refers not simply to action, but to **intentional actions**—mental, verbal, and physical—that produce consequences over time and across lifetimes.

The theory of **karma** is based on the principle of **cause and effect** and provides a moral explanation of human life. It connects the **past, present, and future**, explaining how present conditions arise from earlier actions. Karma is closely linked with the doctrines of **rebirth** and **salvation (moksha)**. Rebirth refers to the continuous cycle through which living beings pass until liberation is achieved.

According to this doctrine, **good actions and intentions** lead to positive karma and future happiness, while **bad actions and intentions** result in negative karma and suffering. The effects of karma are not limited to a single lifetime. An individual may not experience the results of actions immediately, but these consequences unfold either later in the same life or in future births. This idea is often summarised in the phrase **"you reap what you sow."** In this sense, karma represents the accumulated results of actions across many lives.

A key question arises: if karma is continuous, how can one attain moksha and escape the cycle of birth and rebirth? Indian philosophy

answers this by distinguishing between **sakama karma** and **nishkama karma**. **Sakama karma** refers to actions performed with desire for specific results. Such actions, driven by attachment and expectation, bind individuals to the cycle of rebirth.

In contrast, **nishkama karma** refers to selfless action performed **without attachment to outcomes**. The *Bhagavad Gita* emphasises the importance of nishkama karma, describing it as **duty performed for its own sake**. Through such detached action, **individuals avoid accumulating binding karma**. Liberation or moksha is achieved through nishkama karma, as it frees the soul from the cycle of rebirth and leads to union of the individual soul (*atman*) with the supreme reality (*paramatman*).

Karma and Psychological Resilience

Modern anthropological and sociological interpretations emphasize that karma does not necessarily promote passivity or resignation. Through the concept of **nishkama karma**, articulated in the *Bhagavad Gita*, action without attachment to results becomes a path to moral freedom.

This idea has drawn significant attention from social scientists. **Srinivas** argued that nishkama karma offers a **coping mechanism** in contexts of uncertainty and inequality. By disconnecting moral worth from immediate outcomes, individuals are encouraged to continue ethical action even in the face of adversity.

Dalit Perspectives on Karma

While classical interpretations of **karma** often reinforced social hierarchy, **Dalit intellectual traditions** have critically reinterpreted the concept to challenge oppression. **Gail Omvedt**, in her studies of Dalit movements, shows that karma is no longer seen as a justification for suffering, but as a **moral critique of caste-based exploitation**.

Dalit thinkers argue that those who oppress and dehumanise others accumulate **negative karma**, whereas endurance, ethical struggle, and resistance generate **moral merit**. In this reinterpretation, karma becomes a language of **dignity, justice, and ethical resistance**, rather than passive acceptance of inequality.

Karma & Rebirth

The full significance of karma can only be understood in relation to **rebirth (punarjanma)**. Karma links past, present, and future lives into a single moral continuum. Actions not exhausted in one lifetime persist into the next, ensuring that moral accountability transcends death.

Anthropologists studying ritual, storytelling, and everyday discourse note that rebirth gives karma a **long temporal horizon**, reducing the urgency to settle all moral accounts within a single lifetime. This temporal expansion lends stability to social life while also sustaining hope.

5. Rebirth

The belief in **rebirth (punarjanma)** forms the temporal foundation of the traditional Indian moral universe. It extends human existence beyond a single lifetime and places individual lives within a **long moral trajectory** shaped by both past actions and future possibilities. Anthropologists understand rebirth not merely as a metaphysical belief, but as a **cultural theory of time, morality, and personhood**.

Rebirth as Moral Continuum

Anthropologically, rebirth transforms time into a **moral continuum**. Actions are judged not only by immediate outcomes, but by their long-term consequences across lives. This expanded sense of time allows Indian society to interpret suffering, inequality, and misfortune within a meaningful moral framework.

Louis Dumont, in *Homo Hierarchicus*, argued that **rebirth, together with karma, helps make social hierarchy morally intelligible within a**

holistic worldview. Inequality is understood not as permanent or absolute, but as **temporary positioning** within a longer moral journey of the soul. While this does not eliminate hierarchy, it reduces its finality by placing it within a cosmic cycle rather than a single historical moment.

6. Rina: Moral & Social Debts

The doctrine of **rina** occupies a central place in the moral architecture of traditional Indian society. While **karma** explains how actions generate consequences, and **dharma** prescribes proper conduct, rina explains **why humans are morally obligated in the first place**.

In classical Hindu thought, no individual is born autonomous. Human existence is made possible through the prior actions of others—divine forces, sages, ancestors, and society at large. Consequently, life begins not with freedom, but with **moral indebtedness**.

Classical texts identify three fundamental debts:

- **Deva-rina**: debt to the gods,
- **Rishi-rina**: debt to the sages and teachers,
- **Pitri-rina**: debt to ancestors.

Later traditions also recognise **Manushya-rina**, the debt to fellow human beings, further expanding the moral scope of obligation. Sociologists and anthropologists interpret these debts not merely as theological ideas, but as **institutionalised moral relationships** that structure ritual, kinship, education, and social reproduction.

Rina as a Moral Theory of Social Embeddedness

Long before modern sociology spoke of "embeddedness," the doctrine of rina articulated the insight that **the self is socially constituted**. Individuals are products of divine protection, transmitted knowledge, and ancestral sacrifice. **McKim Marriott's relational model of Indian society** resonates strongly

with this view, portraying persons as composites of social and moral transactions rather than self-contained individuals.

Pitri-Rina

Among the three debts, **pitri-rina** is the most socially visible and emotionally charged. It connects individuals to their lineage (*kula*, *vansha*) and anchors personal identity within an intergenerational framework.

Ethnographic studies of ancestor rituals in the **Gangetic belt**, particularly those conducted in regions such as Mithila and eastern Uttar Pradesh, show how rituals like **shraddha** function as acts of remembrance and moral repayment.

Deva-Rina and Rishi-Rina

Deva-rina, the debt to gods, underscores the belief that humans depend on cosmic forces for sustenance—rain, fertility, health, and protection. Ethnographic work in Himalayan and central Indian regions documents how seasonal rituals to local deities are understood as **acts of moral reciprocity** rather than mere worship. Such rituals integrate ecological practices, agricultural cycles, and communal labour into a framework of sacred obligation.

Rishi-rina, the debt to sages and teachers, highlights the moral responsibility toward **knowledge transmission**. Classical sociological interpretations emphasise that learning in India is not treated as private achievement but as **inherited wisdom**. Paying rishi-rina involves teaching, preserving tradition, and transmitting values to future generations.

Rina and the Centrality of the Grihastha

Among the four **ashramas**, only the **Grihastha (householder)** is considered capable of fully discharging all forms of **rina**. This idea is clearly stated in classical texts such as the **Manusmriti** and **Dharmashastra literature**, which describe the householder as the supporter of gods, ancestors, teachers, and society at large.

In anthropological scholarship, this centrality of the householder is analysed in **David Mandelbaum's civilizational study _Society in India_ (1970)**, where he argues that household life forms the **functional core of Indian society** because it sustains all other social roles and life stages.

The householder alone:

- performs ritual duties to gods and ancestors,

- supports teachers and ascetics through alms,

- produces descendants to maintain lineage,

- preserves family property and inheritance,

- and sustains economic production.

Thus, the doctrine of **rina** resolves the apparent tension between **renunciation and household life** by placing both within a system of **mutual dependence**. Renunciation may lead toward spiritual liberation, but household life remains essential for maintaining social, ritual, and moral continuity.

7. The Integrated Civilizational Framework

Taken together, these principles form an interlocking moral system:

- **Varna** → social classification

- **Jati** → lived social organisation

- **Āśrama** → life-cycle regulation

- **Purushārtha** → moral goals

- **Karma** → ethical causation

- **Rina** → obligation and continuity

- **Rebirth** → temporal extension

This system explains how Indian society historically combined **hierarchy with moral meaning**, **inequality with obligation**, and **tradition with adaptability**.