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Q1(b)

Varna and Buddhism

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Anthropology GS 2 · 10 marks · Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization

1.1 Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization-Prehistoric (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic), Protohistoric (Indus Civilization). Pre-Harappan, Harappan and post-Harappan cultures. Contributions of the tribal cultures to Indian civilization.

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on Varna and Buddhism
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length of about 150 words

Revision summary

Varna is the four-fold Brahmanical rank by birth.

Buddhism treated it as a social label, not a bar to nirvana.

The **sangha** was open by conduct, as Ashokan dhamma also implied.

Patronage still carried rank into Buddhist society.

Ambedkar used that critique in the 1956 conversion.

Introduction

Varna is the four-fold ranking of Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra in Brahmanical texts. Buddhism did not delete those names, but it denied that birth-varna decides release.

Body**The Buddhist claim**

- Early suttas treat varna as a social label, not as a ritual essence. A person of any birth may join the **sangha** if conduct is sound.
- **The Buddha** used the language of Arya for the noble path, not for a closed birth estate.
- **Ashoka's** edicts praise dhamma and gifts to all sects. They do not rest the empire on varna purity.

Limit and afterlife

- Monasteries still drew patronage from kings and merchants, so rank did not vanish from Buddhist society.
- **B. R. Ambedkar** later read Buddhism as a public exit from caste, which is why **Navayana** conversion in 1956 used the older critique of birth-varna.
- **Irawati Karve** and Indological kinship work still show varna as a textual map that villages mix with jati. Buddhism attacked the map's soteriology more than it erased jati on the ground.

Flow diagram

Varna birth rank -> Buddhism denies soterial bar
Buddhism denies soterial bar -> Sangha open by conduct
Buddhism denies soterial bar -> Ambedkar Navayana

Conclusion

Buddhism kept the word varna but broke its monopoly over salvation. The sangha was open in principle; caste practice around the monastery was never fully abolished.

Facts & figures

Sangha

Monastic community that, in early texts, admitted members without a birth-varna test for ordination.

Ashoka

Mauryan emperor whose edicts spread dhamma without making varna the state creed.

Ambedkar

Read Buddhism as a reasoned exit from caste and led the 1956 conversion at Nagpur.

Navayana

Ambedkar's modern Buddhist path that keeps the anti-caste reading of the older critique.