



Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste

Brian K. Smith

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The first book to analyze why India's caste system has authoritatively endured for so long, this path-breaking text provides, for the first time anywhere, an exhaustive analysis of the historical predecessor to caste: the ancient Indian *varna* system as it was laid out in the Vedic literature. Presenting a revisionist overview of the way the religion of the Veda is to be understood, *Classifying the Universe* demonstrates that social classes were systematically reduplicated in taxonomies that organized the universe as a whole. The classification of society, in which some groups were accorded rights and privileges withheld from others, could thus be represented as part of a primordial and universally applicable order of things. Social hierarchy, argues the author, was in this way subtly but powerfully justified by recourse to other realms of the cosmos that were similarly ordered, and this essentially religious understanding of *varna* is the key to comprehending the Vedic world-view in all its complexity, and the persistence of its power in the social realm.

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