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The Subversive Source of the Hindu Householder

The linchpin of the classical Hindu system of *varṇāśrama* dharma (the system of classes and life-stages), especially as promulgated in the dharma texts, is the householder or *grhastha*. He is the focus of these texts, the person who keeps the community functioning economically and socially and who ensures its continuity by producing progeny to carry on its rites and customs in later generations. Since the dharma texts grow out of the Vedic milieu and, in particular, each of the early dharma sūtras in principle belongs to an individual Vedic śākhā, it has always been tacitly assumed, reasonably enough, that the *grhastha* also has his roots in Vedic. However, the lexical expression of this role, *grhastha*, is not found in any Vedic text, where other terms are used for approximately the same figure, and this lexical discontinuity hints at a conceptual discontinuity as well. This paper will examine the lexical source of the word and explore the implications of its surprising origins outside of the orthodox Hindu realm.