



**SNS COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY**  
**An Autonomous Institution**  
**Coimbatore-35**



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Approved by AICTE, New Delhi & Affiliated to Anna University, Chennai

**DEPARTMENT OF ELECTRONICS & COMMUNICATION ENGINEERING**

III YEAR/ VI SEMESTER

**19HST105 ESSENCE OF INDIAN TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE**

**UNIT I ANCIENT INDIA & STATE POLITY**  
**Varnāshrama System**



## Varnāshrama System



- Various texts talk of *varnāshrmadharmā* or the *dharma* of different classes and *dharma* in the different stages of life.
- In ancient India there was a common *dharma* for all members of society which must be followed by all equally.
- But at the same time there were different codes of conduct for different classes or varnas called *varna-dharma*.

### 1. VARNAS

- First reference of varna is seen in the Rig Veda. The tenth chapter of Rig-Veda called Purusasūkta mentions the organic theory of the origin of varnas according to which varnas originated from the different organs of the Prajāpati or the creator.
- Manu62 also mentions that God created various varnas from his various organs.
- He created Brahmins from his mouth, kshatriyas from his arms, vaishyas from his thighs and shudras from his legs.
- Though logically this explanation cannot be accepted but this clearly points out the varying significance of various varnas.
- A much significant feature of this varna system was that the top three varnas—brahmins, kshatriyas and vaishyas were described as dvija or twice born.
- Their first birth was natural birth. But they were considered to be born again at the time of the pious **yajñopavīta samskāra** when they were invested with the sacred thread and included into the Aryan society as its full fledged member.



- **Brahmins**

- Brahmins were at the top of varna hierarchy.
- They were believed to possess great spiritual powers. Thus they had a divine existence.
- In law, they claimed great privileges.
- Normally brahmins were exempt from execution, torture and corporal (physical) punishment.
- The main functions prescribed for brahmins were learning, teaching and priesthood.

- **Kshatriya**

- The second class was the ruling class described as kshatriya or rājanya.
- Kshatriyas represented heroism, courage and strength. They constituted the warrior class.
- The duty of kshatriyas was protection which had both internal and external aspects.
- External protection meant to protect the society from external invasion where as internal protection meant governance in peace and protection from anarchy.
- Kshatriyas had the right to possess arms.



- **Vaishyas**

- Vaishyas represented the trading and commercial class.
  - Though they were entitled to the services of the priesthood and to the ceremony of yajñopavīta, they were third in the social hierarchy.
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- According to Manu<sup>63</sup> the main task of the vaishya was to keep and maintain cattle. But it seems that later on vaishyas became economically a very important class of society.
  - The ideal vaishya possessed the expert knowledge of jewels, metals, cloth, threads, spices, perfumes etc.
  - In this sense vaishyas were the ancient Indian businessmen.
  - In Brahmanic literature, vaishyas are given few rights and humble status but Buddhist and Jaina literature mention many wealthy merchants living a luxurious life.



- **Shudras**

- Shudras were at the bottom of the social hierarchy.
- They pursued the task of serving the other three varnas. They were not twice born.
- They were deprived of various rights.
- They were in fact second class citizens, on the fringes of Aryan society.
- Shudras were of two types— 'not excluded' or anirvāsita and 'excluded' or nirvāsita.

The distinction was made on the basis of the customs of the shudra group and the profession followed by the members of the group. Anirvāsita shudras were the part of Indian varna system where as nirvāsita shudras were quite outside the pale of Hindu society and virtually indistinguishable from the level of people known as untouchables.

- Manu65 prescribes the same punishment for killing a shudra by a brahmin as for killing a cat or dog.





- **Untouchables**

- A large number of people were deprived of all human rights. Having any contact with them might lead to the fall from grace by a normal Hindu.
- They were untouchables. Sometimes they are regarded as the excluded shudras whereas sometimes they are called the '**fifth class**' (**pancham varna**).
- Probably, they were the initial tribes who were defeated by the Aryans.
- Most important of these groups was the **Chāndāla**.
- They were not allowed to live in the Aryan towns or villages.
- Their chief means of livelihood were the carrying and cremation of corpses and execution of criminals who were awarded the death penalty.
- According to the law books of ancient India, Chāndālas should be dressed in the garments of the corpses they cremated, should eat his food from broken vessels and should wear only those ornaments which were made of iron.
- Later on the four varnas were divided into various subcategories called **Caste**.



# THANK YOU