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The Caste System in Ancient India

The Laws of Manu are a set of behavioral norms allegedly prescribed by India's mythical founding ruler, Manu. The treatise was probably written in the first or second century B.C. The following excerpt describes the various social classes in India and their prescribed duties.

THE LAWS OF MANU

For the sake of the preservation of this entire creation, Purusha, the exceedingly resplendent one (the Creator of the Universe), assigned separate duties to the classes, which had sprung forth from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet.

Teaching, studying, performing sacrificial rites, so too making others perform sacrificial rites, and giving away and receiving gifts – these he assigned to the brahmins.

Protection of the people, giving away of wealth, performance of sacrificial rites, study, and nonattachment to sensual pleasures – these are, in short, the duties of a kshatriya.

Tending of cattle, giving away of wealth, performance of sacrificial rites, study, trade and commerce, . . . and agriculture -- these are the occupations of a vaishya.

The Lord has prescribed only one occupation for a sudra; namely, service without malice of these other three classes.

Of created beings, those which are animate are best; of the animate, those which subsist by means of intellect; of the intelligent, men are the best; and of the men, the Brahmins are traditionally declared to be the best.

The code of conduct – prescribed by scriptures and ordained by sacred tradition – constitutes the highest dharma; hence a twice born person, conscious of his own Self, should always be scrupulous in respect of it.

1. According to the reading, what are the different castes that existed in Ancient India? Identify and describe the roles of each.

2. Why do you think the caste system was accepted in Indian society?
