 Source 1: The Ancient South Asian World “A Place for Everyone: Caste and Society”

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For centuries, the people of South Asia had been able to tell a lot about each other with a single glance. Men in white with a thread over their left shoulders were the “twice-born” Brahmins who did the thinking for everyone. Men in blood red, with our without the sacred thread, were the Kshatriya, the warriors and kings who did the fighting for everyone. Men in yellow were the Vaisya, the merchants who made wealth for everyone. And men in black were the Shudra, the workers who served everyone.

# Vocabulary Words

Code of Manu—Hindu law of men and women that told them how to behave with each other.

dharma—a person’s duty fulfilled by observing custom or law.

varna—one of the four social classes which include the Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Shudra.

karma— the belief that whatever you do comes back to you. For example, if you do [something](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=something) good, [something](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=something) good will happen to you.

But by 1 CE, this well-organized society was beginning to fall apart. How were you supposed to treat a Kushana? Or…people from Arabia, Egypt, Ethiopia, the Mediterranean, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, or China? And what were you supposed to do when you had a ruler like Kanishka or Ashoka who supported all kinds of religions? It was all turning into one big confusing mess. New languages, new gods, new ways of doing things—no wonder everyone was fighting all the time. How can you avoid misunderstandings and conflict if people don’t understand their place in society?

Some people thought that what South Asia needed was some good, old-fashioned rules…..

In the first century CE, the Brahmins began to refer to a text called the *Code of Manu*. It was supposed to be a record of the laws that the Creator, Brahma, gave to the first man….Manu. These laws were supposed to explain your *dharma* to you—your duty, your purpose…How did you know what you were supposed to be when you grew up? How did you decide the best way to use your time? How should you treat your friend?...

 The Code of Manu was very clear that the *varna* you belonged to decided a whole lot about your life. It said that Shudras existed only to serve the other three varnas. That didn’t mean that the Shudras weren’t important. They were. Society needed everyone….

The Code of Manu made it clear that people who were born into a caste should only marry people from the same caste and that they should not try to change their caste or move up in society.

If you were born a Shudra….[y]ou’d made a lot of mistakes in your last life resulting in bad *karma,* and now you had to pay your dues.

The upside was that if doing something bad could get you in trouble, doing something good could fix it. If you changed your behavior, your good karma meant that your next life would be a better one. A big part of making your next life a good one was following the rules of the life you were in.

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