

## Society in Ancient India

### I. Background

In traditional India, society was organized into hereditary social classes known as “castes”. Indians believed that each person was born into a particular social class based on behavior in a previous life. Membership in a caste was based on birth and lasted for one’s entire life. There was no “social mobility”, which is the ability to pass from one social class to another. One could not marry someone from another caste or move into another caste based upon one’s achievements. A person may, however, by acquiring good “karma” be born into a higher caste in the next life. There were four main castes in ancient Indian society.

### II. Social Hierarchy

#### 1. Brahmins

Brahmins were the priestly class who belonged to the highest caste. They were in charge of the religious ceremonies in Indian society. Brahmins made up approx. 1% of the population.

#### 2. Kshatriya

The Kshatriyas were the warrior class who ruled the government and did the fighting. Kshatriyas made up approx 9% of the population.

#### 3. Vaishyas

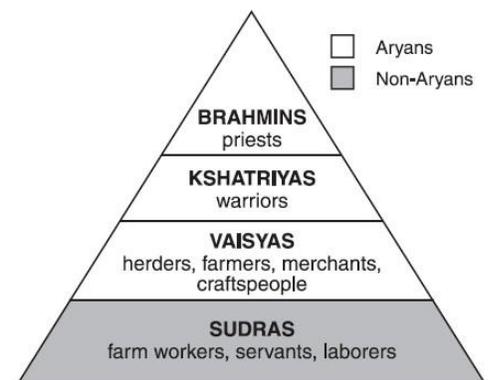
The Vaishyas were the commoner class such as artisans, merchants, and farmers. Vaishyas made up approx 10% of the population.

#### 4. Shudra

The Shudras were the laborers and servants who made up the bulk of the Indian population. Shudra made up approx 30% of the population.

#### 5. Untouchables

The “Untouchables” were at the lowest level of Indian society and considered so lowly as to be outside the caste system. They were a slave class consisting of prisoners of war and criminals. They were given work that no one else wanted to do, such as collecting garbage, sweeping the streets, and handling dead animals. The Untouchables were not considered human and their presence was considered harmful to members of other classes. Untouchables made up approx. 50% of the population.



Source: *Guide to the Essentials of World History*, Prentice Hall, 1999 (adapted)

### Questions to Answer

1. How was society organized in ancient India?
2. How were the Brahmins significant to Indian society?
3. How were the Kshatriya significant to Indian society?
4. How were the Untouchables significant to Indian society?