The Laws of Manu

The caste system that defined Indian society for hundreds of years is believed to have originated with the Aryans, who settled on the Indian subcontinent after 1500 BCE. The Aryans believed that an ideal society was defined by four social groups, or varnas: priests, warriors, commoners, and servants.

Originally, the varnas were defined primarily by a person's occupation and wealth. Over time, however, a person's social group came to be determined by birth rather than his or her economic position. In addition, as the Hindu set of beliefs developed in India, varnas became associated with religious purity.

The lowest caste—the Sudra—were believed to be the least pure. Some were even considered to be untouchables. As the caste system became more and more rooted in heredity and religion, it became nearly impossible for an individual to move from a lower group to a higher group.

Much of what we know today about the early caste system in India comes from the book of Hindu laws known as the Manu-smriti, or The Laws of Manu. According to Indian mythology, the laws were written by Manu, the world's first man and first king.

The legal code includes 12 chapters of both social and religious teachings. In particular, it defines the laws and moral obligations for each caste, including those concerning marriage, diet, and religious purification.