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Q5(d)

Varnashrama and its contemporary relevance

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 2 · 10 marks · Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization

1.1 Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization-Prehistoric (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic), Protohistoric (Indus Civilization). Pre-Harappan, Harappan and post-Harappan cultures. Contributions of the tribal cultures to Indian civilization.

Core demand of the question

- State varna and ashrama as classical scheme
- Show how they organised ideal Hindu life
- **Examine contemporary relevance:** residual, transformed, contested
- Use law and lived caste, not only Manu

Revision summary

Varna is fourfold rank; ashrama is four life-stages; together they are a Brahmanical ideal.

Lived organisation is jati, with Sanskritisation toward varna images.

Law (Arts. 14-17, atrocities Act, personal-law judgments) breaks purity as public rule.

- **Ashrama is thin:** the householder remains, vanaprastha is rare.

Politics uses Savarna/Bahujan and Mandal lists, not Manu's chart as administration.

Introduction

Varnashrama is the paired ideal of **four varnas** and **four ashramas**. It is a Brahmanical design for a whole life and a whole society. Contemporary India does not live inside that design, but it still uses pieces of it in ritual, politics and family talk.

Body**The scheme**

Varna: Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, with those outside the four as a fifth social fact (today's Dalit history). **Ashrama:** brahmacharya, grihastha, vanaprastha, sannyasa. Texts (**Manu, Gita, Dharmasutras**) present duty by stage and by birth. Anthropology, from **Dumont** to **Béteille**, treats this as ideology: ranking by purity, with the householder as the real centre even when the sannyasi is praised.

Jati, not varna, is what villages actually marry. Srinivas's Sanskritisation is a jati climbing toward a varna image.

Contemporary relevance

- **Residual ritual:** Thread, shraddha, temple entry, and who cooks for whom still mime varna. Ashrama is weaker: few urban men become forest-dwellers; sannyasa is a vocation or a TV role, not a mass fourth stage.

- **Legal rupture:** The Constitution abolishes untouchability (**Art. 17**), equality (**14-16**), and **Indian Young Lawyers (Sabarimala)**, **Shayara Bano (triple talaq)**, and temple-entry histories show personal law and public worship under fundamental rights. **SC/ST Atrocities Act** criminalises some purity-enforcement.
- **Political afterlife:** Varna language returns as "Savarna" versus Bahujan, as Puri mutt politics, as demands that Hindus be one vote bank. Mandal used jati lists, not Manu's four.
- **Gender:** Ashrama assumed a male subject. Women's education, delayed marriage and paid work break brahmacharya-grihastha timing. **Karva Chauth** and **kanyadan** keep grihastha theatre alive.
- **Hindutva and reform:** One current wants a single Hindu without jati; lived marriage markets refuse. Another wants to restore varna as harmony; **Ambedkar's Annihilation** remains the counter-text.

Relevance is therefore **partial and contested**. The scheme still supplies words for rank and for a "complete life". It does not supply the organisational chart of the Republic, which runs on citizenship, lists and parties.

Flow diagram

Four varna -> Lived jati
 Four ashrama -> Grihastha centre
 Lived jati -> Constitution lists parties
 Grihastha centre -> Constitution lists parties

Conclusion

Varnashrama is an ideal grammar of birth and life-stage. Jati, class and the Constitution organise the present. The grammar survives in ritual and rhetoric, not as a working four-plus-four machine.

Facts & figures

Article 17

Abolishes untouchability and makes its practice an offence, a direct constitutional break with varna-purity as law.

Dumont

Read varna ideology as purity and hierarchy, with the renouncer as a structural outside; villages still centred on the householder.

Ambedkar

Rejected varna as a reformable order and argued for the annihilation of caste as a graded inequality.