

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Caste System in Ancient India

---

About 3,600 years ago, a group of cattle herders from Central Asia settled into India. This group of people, called the Aryans, brought with them their beliefs, customs, and writing system (Sanskrit). They introduced a rigid caste structure that divided people into four classes.

Under this setup, Brahmins or priests made up the highest caste. They held a tremendous amount of power over everybody else. They were the only ones who could both study and teach the holy texts, known as the Vedas. They were also the only ones who could perform sacrifices and other religious rites. Because of their authority, people of other castes often gave them generous donations. By giving Brahmins (also spelled as Brahmins) valuable goods, people of other castes believed that they would be rewarded in their next life.

Next to the Brahmin class was the Kshatriya (pronounced "*shuh-TREE-uh*") class. It consisted of warriors and rulers. Kshatriyas' main duties were to govern and defend the country. Though they could learn the Vedas as Brahmins did, they could not teach the holy texts. As Kshatriyas were responsible for the national defense, they underwent extensive military training. They were the experts in archery, swordsmanship, and hand-to-hand combat.

The Aryans categorized farmers and merchants as their society's third caste, called the Vaishya (pronounced "*VYSH-yuh*"). Vaishyas were expected to tend cattle, to farm, or to trade. Like Kshatriyas, they could only learn, but not teach, the Vedas.

Beneath the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, and the Vaishya castes was the Shudra (also spelled as Sudra) caste. It represented the majority of the populace. People in this caste did menial, labor-intensive work. They took on the duties of servants, craftsmen, or laborers. Shudras received little informal education. They were not allowed to learn the Vedas, so they could not participate in the initiation ceremony that boys of the three upper castes were entitled to when they began learning the holy texts. The ancient Indians believed that a person who had the initiation ceremony was "twice-born." The first was, of course, the person's physical birth. The second was his spiritual birth. As Shudras could not learn the Vedas, they would never experience a spiritual birth. Thus, they had only one birth.

Though Shudras were the lowest of the four classes, they were still better off than the so-called outcastes. The outcastes, as the name suggests, were people who did not belong to any of the four castes. They did work that nobody else wanted to do. They swept the streets. They collected garbage. They cleaned up toilets. And they disposed of dead animals or humans. The outcastes could not live in cities or villages. They led a lonely, humiliated life. When they ate, they could only take meals from broken dishes. When they traveled, they needed



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

to move off the path if someone from a higher caste was approaching. When they entered a marketplace, they had to strike a piece of wood to announce their presence, so that other people could avoid them. The outcastes were not allowed to drink from a public well. They were not allowed to enter a temple. And they were not allowed to study. Given that they stirred fear and were despised everywhere they went, nobody in the ancient Indian society wanted to see, hear, or touch them. This group of people in India suffered the worst fate. They simply became known as the untouchables!

The Aryans' caste system came from local legends. When Brahma, the god of creation, made humans, his mouth became the Brahmins, his arms the Kshatriyas, his legs the Vaishyas, and his feet the Shudras. Tales aside, the caste system was a very important element in ancient India. It followed a specific set of guidelines (called the Laws of Manu) that dictated every person's behavior. The guidelines set rules from the type of jobs a person could hold to the type of foods a person could eat. According to the Laws of Manu, each caste was represented by a color. White was for the Brahmins, red for the Kshatriyas, yellow for the Vaishyas, and blue for the Shudras. Marrying someone within a person's own caste was norm. Marrying someone outside of a person's caste was rare, but possible. Children born from an inter-caste marriage needed to follow a different set of rules to determine what caste they belonged to.

The ancient Indians believed that each person had an eternal soul that could be reborn in a new body after death. While that person could never move from one caste to another in this life, he or she could be reborn to a different caste in the next life. If the person did a lot of good deeds (such as giving Brahmins generous donations) in this life, he or she would have the chance of being reborn to a higher caste in the next life. If the person did a lot of horrible things (such as committing a crime) in this life, he or she would risk being reborn to a lower caste in the next life.

The caste system had been prevalent in India's society for thousands of years. It was deeply embedded in the country's dominant religion, Hinduism. Though discriminations on the basis of a person's caste had already been outlawed in the 1900s, they still exist today. Because of this, the caste system has continued to be a sensitive issue in modern India. It is a topic better approached with extreme caution!

### Caste System in Ancient India

## Questions

---

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. How many castes were there in India?
- A. Four
  - B. Three
  - C. One
  - D. Two

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The untouchables worked as servants, craftsmen, and laborers.
- A. False
  - B. True
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. In ancient India, who were responsible for fending off intruders?
- A. Kshatriyas
  - B. Shudras
  - C. Untouchables
  - D. Brahmins
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Under India's current law, it is illegal to discriminate against an untouchable.
- A. True
  - B. False
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Which of the following colors would a Brahmin wear?
- A. Yellow
  - B. White
  - C. Orange
  - D. Red
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. According to legends, Brahma created Vaishyas from his \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. Mouth
  - B. Feet
  - C. Legs
  - D. Arms
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Which of the following about ancient India's caste system is correct?
- A. Priests were in a caste lower than rulers.
  - B. Both Brahmins and Kshatriyas could teach the Vedas.
  - C. Vaishyas were twice-born.
  - D. Inter-caste marriages could never happen.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Who introduced the caste system to India?
- A. The Chinese
  - B. The British
  - C. The Aryans
  - D. The Arabs
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Which of the following about the untouchables is NOT true?
- A. They could not eat meals from broken dishes.
  - B. They could not live in cities or villages.
  - C. They could not drink from a public well.
  - D. They could not go to a temple.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. In ancient India, who were responsible for exporting goods to other countries?
- A. Brahmins
  - B. Shudras
  - C. Vaishyas
  - D. Kshatriyas

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

Suppose you were a king in ancient India. You wanted to abolish the caste system. Draft a convincing speech to outline your reasoning.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Don't stop writing. Use a blank piece of paper to continue.