The Aryans and the Caste System

About 1500 BC, powerful nomadic warriors known as Aryans began to appear in northern India. Their skill on horseback allowed the Aryans to conquer the native people and to expand south into the subcontinent. The Aryans spoke Sanskrit, a language that is similar to what is spoken in Europe, but unlike the Dravidian languages spoken in India before the Aryan invasion. The similarities with European languages suggest the Aryans may have migrated to India from Central Asia, but we cannot be sure because the writings of the Aryans do not suggest they came from somewhere else.

The Aryans wrote songs and stories about their gods. The stories were called the Vedas. The Vedas were handed down by word of mouth for hundreds of years until about 500 BC, when the Aryans learned to write. The Rig Veda is a collection of more than 1000 songs that survives to this day. The influence of these stores is why the period of Indian history lasting from about 1500 BC to 322 BC is known as the Vedic Age.

About 1000 BC, the Aryans discovered iron ore in the Ganges River Valley. The Aryans used the iron to build strong plows to grow crops. They also used iron weapons to control the Dravidian people and to impose a rigid social structure called the caste system.

Caste members lived, ate, married, and worked with their own group. A person born into one caste rarely changed castes or mixed with members of other castes.

At the top of the caste system were the Brahmin and the Kshatriya (KUH SHAT REE YUHZ). The Brahmin were the priests, teachers, and judges who understood dharma. Dharma were the spiritual laws that the people of ancient India believed governed the universe. The Brahman often lived apart from the rest of society in temples. The Kshatriya were the warrior caste who made everyday decisions and ran the government. The Kshatriya had most of the power in everyday life, but their decisions could be overruled by the Brahmin.

The Vaishya were skilled farmers and merchants. They occasionally had leadership positions in local villages. The unskilled workers were of the Sudras caste. Members of the Sudras caste often worked on the farms of people of higher castes.

Foreigners, lawbreakers, people from isolated tribes, and people suffering from contagious diseases were called the untouchables or “outcastes.” Members of this caste were traditionally regarded as unsuitable for personal relations with people in the caste system. These “untouchables” had jobs or habits that involved “polluting activities” such as having a job that involved ending a life. Caste members were vegetarians, so people who ate meat or fish were not accepted into their society.

Untouchables were hired to do work that members of the caste system would not do. These jobs included killing or disposing of dead cattle or working with their hides. The untouchables also worked as sweepers, washers, or in other jobs that required contact with human emissions such as sweat, urine, or feces.

Untouchables were often forbidden to enter temples, schools and wells where caste members drew water. In some parts of India, even the sight of untouchables was thought to be polluting. The untouchables were often forced to sleep during the day and work at night. The caste system became less rigid as the Indian people were exposed to outside ideas. Many untouchables left their rigid social structure by converting to Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity.

Gandhi referred to the untouchables as the Harijan, a term that means “blessed” because Gandhi believed the Harijan were blessed by their suffering. In modern usage, Gandhi’s term has been rejected as demeaning. The Harijan prefer call themselves the Dalit, a term that can be translated as “oppressed.” The Indian government has provided the Dalit with specific employment privileges, and granted them special representation in the Indian parliament. Despite such measures, the Dalit continue to have fewer educational and employment opportunities than Indians whose families belonged to the caste system.

The British controlled part or all of the Indian subcontinent from 1612 to 1947. The British thought that caste members believed they would have to live out their lives in a particular caste in order to be reborn into a higher caste. We now know that some Indian people did have an opportunity to join higher castes, but this didn’t happen very often.

Discrimination against the Dalit has been forbidden by the Indian Constitution since 1950 but many of India’s 160 million Dalit continue to live in poverty. Indian people with family names associated with the Dalit often face prejudice, though, the Indian people elected a Dalit to the presidency. K. R. Narayanan served in that position from 1997 to 2002.

*This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.
The Aryans were n__m__d__c horsemen first appeared in n__r__h__rn India about 1000 years before the C.m__ on E_.a. The stories and songs of the A_y__n gods were collected a volume called the R____ V______. The Rig Veda is written in S__n__k__t, the language of the Aryans. Sanskrit is related to E__r__pe_n languages, but *ar_h__e__l__g__sts have not yet found a connection between the A_y__ns and other cultures.

The Aryans used their knowledge of i____n weapons to impose a r__g__d social structure called the c__s__e system. Caste members generally l_v__d, ate, w__rk__d and m_r__i__d within their own groups. The Brahman were the p__i__s__s and j__d__es at the t__p of the caste system. The Brahmin lived apart from the rest of Indian societies in t_m__l__s where they studied d__ar__a. Dharma were the s__i__i__u__l laws the ancient Indians believed g__v__r__ned the u__i__er__e. The everyday activities of Indian society were controlled by the Kshatriya w__r__i__rs. Skilled laborers composed the V__i__h__a caste, while *u_s__i__l__d laborers belonged to the Sudras caste.

The u_t__u__h__bl__s were people not allowed into the caste system. The untouchables were forced to work in dirty and unsafe environments and do jobs the members of the castes were unwilling to do. Gandhi called the untouchables the H__ r__j__n, but the preferred term today is Dalit, a term that means o__p__e__s__d. The caste system has been illegal in India for more than ____ years, but many of India's 160 million Dalit continue to live in p__v__r__y.

**Answer in complete sentences**

1. What was the caste system?

2. Why is 1500BC to 322BC known as the Vedic Age of Indian history?

3. Why do you think the Brahmin were more important in Indian society than the Kshatriya?

4. Why were some people not allowed to join the caste system?

5. What statement in the text suggests that the Dalit face less discrimination today than in the past?

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