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The Caste System of India

Imagine being told that you can never improve your place in society. It does not matter how hard you work or what you accomplish. Your place was decided when you were born.

Determined by Birth

For thousands of years on the Indian subcontinent, a person's social class was determined by birth. Historians later called this 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. Social rules defined how to behave within a caste and in the presence of people from other castes.

The caste system developed slowly over time from traditions that took shape as Indo-Aryan-speaking people began moving onto the subcontinent around 1500 BCE. Each caste had a clearly defined role. Members of each caste were obligated to look after one another, so each caste had its own support system. These traditions became closely connected with the Hindu religion.

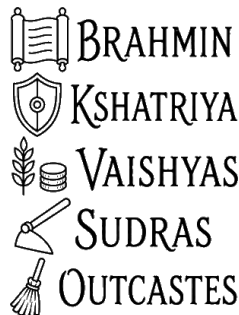
Kshatriya and Brahmin

The Kshatriya (kuh-SHOT-ree-yuh) were the ruling caste. They were warriors, rulers, and government leaders who made many of the everyday decisions in a village. But the Brahmin ranked above them.

The Brahmin were the priests and teachers who possessed knowledge that few other people had. They preserved ancient traditions and understood the calendar. The Brahmin also studied dharma, the laws that governed the universe, giving them the highest authority.

Vaishyas and Sudras

The Vaishyas (VY-shyas) were skilled farmers and merchants. They occasionally had leadership positions in local villages. The Sudras (SHOO-drahs) were laborers and servants. Members of the Sudras caste often worked on the farms of the people of higher castes.



Many Brahmin priests believed contact with lower castes would make them impure. Ancient laws restricted Sudras from hearing the sacred Vedas. One ancient law stated that if a Sudra intentionally listened to the Vedas, molten tin was to be poured into his ears.

Outcastes

Foreigners, people who did not respect dharma, people from isolated tribes, and people suffering from contagious diseases lived outside the caste system. People outside the caste system were sometimes treated as “untouchables” or “outcastes” and were traditionally regarded as unsuitable for personal relations with people who belonged to a caste. Many caste members were vegetarians, meaning that people who ate meat or fish were often not accepted into their society.

Untouchables did work that other castes considered unclean, including disposing of dead cattle, working with animal hides, and working as sweepers and washers. Other jobs brought them into contact with 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. Some were forced to work at night so they would not be seen.

From Harijan to Dalit

Mahatma Gandhi referred to the untouchables as Harijans, a term that means “children of God.” Today, many untouchables have rejected Gandhi’s term as demeaning. They prefer to call themselves Dalit, a word that can be translated as “oppressed.”

The Indian government has reserved some government jobs and seats in parliament for Dalits. Despite such measures, Dalits have fewer educational and employment opportunities than Indians from higher castes.

A Changing Caste System

The British gradually gained control of India and ruled most of the subcontinent until 1947. The British often viewed the caste system as rigid and unchanging.

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We now know that some people and groups were able to rise within the caste system, but this did not happen often.

The caste system became less rigid as the Indian people were exposed to outside ideas. Many Sudras and untouchables were attracted to Islam, which

taught that all believers were equal. The Indian Constitution has forbidden discrimination against Dalits since 1950, but discrimination and poverty remain problems. Despite these barriers, India elected a Dalit as president. K. R. Narayanan served in that position from 1997 to 2002.

Fill in the Blanks

The caste system divided Indian society into groups largely d__t__r__i__ed by b__r__h. Each caste had its own r__l__s. The Brahmin were p__i__s__s and t__a__h__rs who studied d__a__ma and held the highest a__t__o__i__y. The Kshatriya were w__r__i__rs and rulers. Vaishyas were s__i__l__d farmers and m__r__h__n__s, while S__d__as were laborers and servants. Some people lived o__t__i__e the caste system and were once known as u__t__u__h__bl__s. They often performed work considered u__c__e__n and could be e__c__u__ed from temples, s__h__o__s, and wells. Gandhi called these people H__r__j__ns, or “children of God,” but many people later rejected that name and preferred D__l__t, meaning “o__p__e__s__d.” India’s C__n__t__t__on has forbidden discrimination against Dalits since 1950, and the government has r__s__r__ed some jobs and seats in p__r__i__am__nt for the Dalit. However, caste d__s__r__m__n__ti__n and p__v__r__y remain problems in India today.

Answer in Complete Sentences

★1. Why do you think the Brahmin outranked the Kshatriya?

★2. Why were some people treated as outcastes rather than members of the lowest caste?

★3. Should the Indian government reserve jobs and seats in parliament for the Dalit? Defend your answer.

★ 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.