

Name _____

THE CASTE SYSTEM

In ancient India, society was organized so that each specialized job was performed by a specific group, or caste. The interdependence of all of the various castes was recognized, and each one was considered necessary to the society as a whole.

In the earliest known mention of caste, perhaps dating from about 1000 B.C.E., the metaphor (symbol) of the human body was used to describe Indian society. This metaphor stresses the idea of hierarchy as well as that of interdependence. The *brahman*, or priestly, caste represents society's head; the *kshatriya*, or warrior, caste are its arms; the *vaishya* caste—traders and landowners—are the legs; and the *sudra* caste—the servants of the other three—are the feet. These four castes—*brahman*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya*, and *sudra*—are the classical four divisions of Hindu society. In practice, however, there have always been many subdivisions (*J'atis*) of these castes.

1. THE FOUR VARNA:

The word caste comes from the Portuguese word *castas*, meaning "pure." This Portuguese word expresses one of the most central values of Indian society: the idea of ritual purity. In India, however, the word *varna*, or "color," denotes the fourfold division of Indian society. The word *varna* may have been used because each of the four castes was assigned a specific color as its emblem.

In Hindu religious texts, the dharma—the law, or duty—of each *varna* is described. It was thought that this dharma was an inherited, or inborn, quality. Consequently, people thought that if intermarriages took place, there would be much confusion as to the dharma of the next generation of children. As a result of such concerns, marriage between different castes was strictly prohibited. The practice of marrying only a person of "one's own kind" is called endogamy and is still a central rule in many Hindu communities.

The Brahmins. The *brahman* caste is assigned the highest status of the four *varnas* but also must live by the strictest rules. In their very name, brahmins are identified with the supreme being, and so are expected to uphold this high honor by their conduct. In addition, they must observe many detailed rules concerning ritual purity in their personal lives. They must avoid contact with dirt, for instance, and may not eat foods such as meat that are considered to be polluted.

Because of the strict rules that the *brahmins* observe, they cannot perform many of the tasks necessary to everyday life. They cannot obtain their own food, for instance, or use violence to defend themselves. Thus, they must depend on other castes to perform these essential services. This is one way in which the interdependence of the castes is evident. Without the other castes, there could be no *brahmins*.

In terms of occupation, the first duty of a *brahman* is to study the *Vedas*, the ancient scriptures of India. A young *brahman* boy begins this period of study after going through a special ceremony marking his spiritual rebirth. *Kshatriya* and *vaishya* boys also go through this ceremony of "rebirth" at age 10 or 11. After the ceremony, each boy is given a sacred thread to wear around his neck as a symbol of membership in the "twice-born" castes. After ten or more years of study, a brahman may become a priest of a temple, or he may instruct boys of the twice-born castes in Sanskrit and the *Vedas*. If there is no employment available as a priest or teacher, a *brahman* may enter certain other occupations. He must be careful, however, to observe all of the rules and rituals of his caste.

The Kshatriyas. The *kshatriya* caste includes soldiers, generals, and kings. Their traditional role is to defend the society from invaders and robbers, and they are expected to be both brave and high-minded. The *kshatriyas* must study the ancient Hindu scriptures under the guidance of a *Brahman* teacher and are expected to follow many of the same rules of ritual purity that the *brahman* caste observes.

The Vaishyas. The job specialties of the *vaishya* caste are agriculture and cattle raising. The *vaishyas* also carry on trading activities; for example, they bring farm products to market and lend money to keep various enterprises going. Like the *brahmins* and the *kshatriyas*, the *vaishyas* are a twice-born caste.

The Sudras. In ancient law, the *sudras* were given only one occupation: to serve the members of the twice-born castes. As servants to the other three castes, the *sudras* performed many of the tasks that involve "pollution," such as agricultural labor, leather working, disposing of garbage, and laundering. In time, however, many *sudras* became wealthy farmers or artisans in their own right. When a *sudrajati*, or subcaste, improved its status in this way, it was

also able to adopt many of the rituals and habits of the twice-born castes. Menial tasks then became the *dharma* of the "out-casts" of society—the untouchables, or *harijans*.

The Untouchables, or *Harijans*. Inevitably, there were certain people who failed to live up to their caste *dharma* or who violated the rules concerning marriage between castes. Such people and their children were considered outcasts from Hindu society. They had to live apart from other castes and were given the jobs that no one else wanted to perform. Because of their contact with things considered unclean or polluted, the outcasts were believed to be deeply tainted. They came to be thought of as "untouchable" because people believed that their touch—or even the sight of them—would compromise a *brahman's* purity.

The untouchables were not admitted into Hindu temples and instead formed religious sects of their own. Over the centuries, they also organized into sub-castes much like those of orthodox Hindu society. In the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi made it one of his life's goals to bring the untouchables back into Hindu society. He renamed them the *harijans*, or "children of God," and tried to convince orthodox Hindus to admit them into their temples and their everyday lives. However, other leaders doubted that upper-caste Hindus would ever treat the *harijans* as equals. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a distinguished scholar who had been born an "untouchable," was a leading spokesman for this view. He used the term scheduled castes when referring to this group, for he believed that the term *harijans* was demeaning. The scheduled castes, he said, should withdraw from Hinduism altogether and join another religion, such as Buddhism, which does not recognize caste distinctions.

After India became an independent nation in 1947, its new constitution outlawed the practice of "untouchability." The constitution also established affirmative action programs to ensure that the scheduled castes would have access to higher education and better jobs. In contrast to similar legislation in the United States, these clauses actually guarantee that a certain percentage of university and job openings will be assigned to disadvantaged groups. Because of these programs, there has been a marked improvement in the status of the scheduled castes. Yet discrimination continues, and the condition of the former "untouchables" is still a major social issue today.