



BRAHMINS

Priests

KSHATRIYAS

Warriors and rulers

VAISYAS

Skilled traders, merchants,
and minor officials

SUDRAS

Unskilled workers

PARIAN

"Harjans"

Outcastes, "Untouchables,"
"Children of God"

The Caste System

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 when in the presence of people from other castes.

The caste system precedes written history, but it seems to have developed slowly over time based on the traditional beliefs of the Aryan nomads who began moving onto the subcontinent about 1000BCE.

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 were later incorporated into the Hindu religion.

At the top of the caste system were the Brahmin and the Kshatriya. The Brahmin were the priests, teachers, and judges who understood dharma. Dharma are the spiritual laws that govern the universe. The Brahmin 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 Vaishyas 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 the people of higher castes.

Many Brahmin priests believed contact with lower castes would contaminate their souls. Vedic prayers were considered so pure that they could not be recited or even heard by a person of a lower caste. One Indian law stated that if a Sudras was caught listening to the Vedas, molten lead was to be poured into his ears.

Foreigners, lawbreakers, people from isolated tribes, and people suffering from contagious diseases lived outside the caste system. These untouchables or "outcastes" were traditionally regarded as unsuitable for personal relations with people who belonged to a caste. Caste members were vegetarians, which meant that 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.