

Hinduism in India and the Caste System (BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET)

Hinduism is derived from the Persian word for Indian. It differs from Christianity and other Western religions in that it does not have a single founder, a specific theological system, a single system of morality, or religious organization. Many outsiders influenced the development of Hinduism, especially the **Aryans**, who came to India in 1500 and brought with them their religion of **Vedism** and the **Vedas**, a large body of oral literature, preserved orally and in texts, which were sacred. These beliefs became mixed with the indigenous Indian native beliefs.

The **Caste System** began in India after the Aryans invaded and established their own rules for governing the society. The Aryans prohibited marriages between their own people and people of the cultures they conquered. From 1000 to 500 BC, four classes of people emerged in India. Really there are 5 groups, however the untouchables are considered so low that they aren't even counted.

Each caste had its own specific place in society. They socialized, ate, married, worked, and worshipped within their own caste. They would never consider marrying or working outside their caste.

The castes:

Upper Class

BRAHMAN: Included priests and scholars (teachers, intellectuals, etc.)

KSHATRIYAS: Included rulers (government) and warriors (military)

Middle Class

VAISYAS: Included merchants, traders, and farmers (higher level workers)

Lower Class

SUDRAS: Peasants bound to the land (work for the farmers, artisans)

HARIJAN: untouchables (the lowest of the low)

Although the caste system was **abolished by law in 1949**, it remains a significant force throughout India, particularly in the south (especially in the countryside). Humans are perceived as being trapped in **samsara**, a meaningless cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth (**reincarnation**). **Karma** is the sum of ones good and bad deeds and this determines how you will live your next life. Through pure acts, thoughts and devotion, one can be reborn at a higher level caste. Bad deeds can cause a person to be reborn as a lower level, or even as an animal or an insect. The unequal distribution of wealth, prestige, suffering are thus seen as *natural* consequences for ones previous acts, both in this life and in previous lives. (they can't complain about the system because they are responsible for where they ended up)

Caste Simulation Rules

After reading the handout titled "Hinduism in India and the Caste System" you are to discuss the questions in the following handout with the members of your group.

Each person in your group should be wearing a name tag. These name tags are to be worn at all times and they indicate the caste of that group member. You will NOT be allowed to switch castes. You should treat the people in your group as if they are actually members of that caste.

Here's how you treat them:

The BRAHMAN (1) –

- Is the most important person in your group. Agree with anything s/he says. Do anything s/he tells you to. This is the wisest person in your group. Because s/he is so intelligent, any answer s/he gives is acceptable.
- **Job: Give answers to questions, give advice**

The KSHATRIYA (2) –

- Is also a very important member of the group. Ask the Kshatriya to protect you from other groups in the room who may try to invade your group and steal your answers. Also, ask the Kshatriya to keep the Untouchables out of your group.
- **Job: Protect the group from the untouchables (don't let them in). Give answers to questions**

The VAISYAS (3) –

- Is an important member, but not nearly important as the others already mentioned. Tell the Vaisya to record the answers on your assignment sheet. This is their job, while the Vaisya may try to give you answers, they will be wrong, so laugh off anything s/he says.
- **Job: Record the answers on the group's assignment sheet; Help give answers if you are told to**

The SUDRAS (4) –

- Have little importance to your group. Ignore everything the Sudras says. When the Brahman has finished expounding their profound knowledge and the Vaisya has recorded it, tell the Sudras to hand in the assignment sheet. Otherwise pretend s/he doesn't exist.
- **Job: Hand in the assignment sheet; Give answers if asked**

The UNTOUCHABLES (5) –

- Should be completely ignored. Do not talk to them nor should you acknowledge their presences in any way. If they come near you move away quickly so that you are not contaminated.
- **Job: Pick up all the caste cards at the end of the lesson.**

Remember – the Hindus believe in reincarnation. For all the good deeds you do your Karma becomes greater and you will move on to a higher caste. If you don't like your place in society you can change it in this way. Be good!

Group Member Names _____

SIMULATION QUESTIONS (Answer the following questions using the reading; follow the rules given to you on the rules sheet.)

1. In the caste system, which group of people fit into the Upper Class society?
2. What professions do the members of the upper class hold?
3. What is the name of the middle class?
4. What professions do the middle class work in?
5. How could one enter a higher caste?
6. If one's karma is bad, what might happen?
7. The Vedas is a collection of work from what group of people?
8. What rules did the caste system have for marriage, work, and socialization?

POST SIMULATION QUESTIONS (discuss as a group, free from simulation's restrictions)

1. Do you think the people of India questioned this system? Why or why not?
2. The Hindus believe in reincarnation. What does this mean for those of you who may not be in the most ideal caste? What could you do to change that?
3. Why do you suppose the caste system was so strict?