**The Caste System** What is the caste system?

When the Aryans conquered the land around 1500 BCE, they brought with them their cultural and religious beliefs. Among these beliefs was the idea of a divided social structure with different levels.

A person’s status and role within society was tied to the group, or caste, he or she belonged to. Different groups in society were responsible for different jobs and responsibilities. People in one group were not allowed to marry people from another group. A person was born into a group and was not allowed to change groups at any point in life. The Aryans called this system the [caste system](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/2705579d-a567-4d5a-9d5b-11604d35c974), and it remained a dominant force in Indian society for many centuries.

The system consists of four major castes, which were based on the original four orders of ancient Indian society. These four orders came out of an interpretation of the [Vedas](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/6fe34f76-9fd4-4460-ac09-dc512803c5d1), the ancient Hindu scriptures. The castes were organized as follows:

* The highest class was the [**Brahmans**](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/5fd48bbd-ed21-439a-9f82-689d25faa913). This caste consisted of **priests, judges, and scholars.**
* Next were the **Kshatriyas, or the rulers and soldiers**.
* [Merchants](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/4bfdf53c-ce0f-4874-8b85-38381885a559) and farmers, the [Vaisyas](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/aa0f8008-f1a2-4a25-b103-1e91457e92cc), made up the third level.
* The final level, the [Sudras](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/a094225e-bbf5-47e1-9cf6-d85085e43725), consisted of [peasants](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/c615c56f-88cc-4fae-aabb-a49f77405ed0), servants, and laborers.

There is a fifth social group as well. The Dalits/Untouchables were thought of as outcasts because their professions usually involved activities that were believed to be impure or unclean. They were believed to be so low that they were not even considered to be a part of the caste system.

#### How did the caste system work?

In the United States, because of a universal education system and rights promoting equal opportunities for everyone, some citizens have moved between social classes. While the system in the United States does not benefit everyone, can you imagine living in a country where your [social class](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/6485dfdc-7f82-4c0c-bc72-596d29e22e54) and opportunities are set for life, before you are even born?

##### The Upper Castes

A person’s caste determined practically everything about his or her life, from the type of work he or she did to how many opportunities he or she had available.

[Brahmans](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/5fd48bbd-ed21-439a-9f82-689d25faa913) were typically priests or scholars, and were viewed as the purest of the social classes. Because of this, they were the only ones able to conduct certain religious rituals and study religious texts.  Their education meant that they often acted as advisors to government officials and had a great deal of influence over society.

[Kshatriyas](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/fa6f1861-6cd5-41ec-a713-1904c6875cd8), were warriors, leaders, and rulers. They held high positions in government and had a great deal of wealth and power. They were viewed as the keepers of religious and moral laws. Based on some texts and the high esteem rulers were held in—which is demonstrated by the frequent representation of gods as rulers—it is thought that the Kshatriya may have at one point been viewed as equal to or even above the Brahmans.

##### The Lower Castes

The lower castes included the [Vaisyas](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/aa0f8008-f1a2-4a25-b103-1e91457e92cc), who were [merchants](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/4bfdf53c-ce0f-4874-8b85-38381885a559) and farmers, the [Sudras](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/a094225e-bbf5-47e1-9cf6-d85085e43725), who were [peasants](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/c615c56f-88cc-4fae-aabb-a49f77405ed0), laborers, and servants. The Dalits, or untouchables, were so low they were not even considered to be a part of the [caste system](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/2705579d-a567-4d5a-9d5b-11604d35c974). They were viewed as more impure than the other castes based on their labor and were therefore restricted from certain privileges. For example, the Vaisyas were allowed to study the [Vedas](http://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2:concept/view/guidConceptId/a06b3b94-cc21-4bdb-87ac-89bace800069/guidUnitId/6fe34f76-9fd4-4460-ac09-dc512803c5d1), whereas the Sudras were forbidden from study.

Dalits/untouchables took care of the dirty work in society—for example, disposing of dead animals and cleaning toilets. This work was believed to make the Dalits so impure that their rights were limited to keep them separate from others in society. They were forbidden from entering temples, schools, or even from drinking from the same wells as the higher castes. Some people even believed that just seeing a Dalit was considered polluting, so Dalits were often confined to living in certain areas.

##### The Caste System Today - As India became more urbanized in the 20th century, people of different castes began interacting with one another, particularly in the cities. The caste system was eventually made illegal in 1949. Ever since, the government has created laws protecting people from lower castes against discrimination. There are programs in place so that lower caste members can go to college, have government representation, and access good jobs. However, even now the old social systems of India continue to have a great deal of influence on the lives of its habitants. Discrimination and prejudice still exist, especially in rural areas. Statistics show that almost 90 percent of India's poor, and 95 percent of all illiterate Indians, are Dalits. You can see that an individual’s place within this system greatly impacted his or her life. Although life could be difficult for those in the lower castes, those at the top of the caste system were able to use their influence and power to further change the lives of Indian people.