

The Caste System

According to Hindu tradition, society is organized into four main social classes or “castes,” the **Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya** and **Sudra** (divided into many sub-categories), which assign people a certain status in the social hierarchy. There are also those who fall outside the caste system, the ‘Dalits’ or the ‘**untouchables**’. They are seen as the lowest rank of society, whose presence, touch and even mention is considered ‘polluting’ to the ‘upper’ castes. As such, they face intense discrimination and abuse.

The caste system is based on the following ideas:

- A person’s job and social status is determined by birth and cannot be changed during a person’s lifetime
- People of different castes cannot get married to each other (and any children resulting from such a marriage would take on the lower caste or even become untouchable);
- A person’s caste cannot be changed for any reasons or by any actions
- The positions and privileges held by each person are determined by caste. Language used to address each other, dress codes and lifestyles all represent who is of a higher or lower caste in a situation.
- A peaceful and harmonious society is only possible when people follow the expectations of their caste and maintain the hierarchy.
- Punishment is used to ensure compliance; people in lower castes are given much harsher punishments than those of upper castes, including punishing families and communities for the crimes of an individual.

The Caste System and Hindu Beliefs

The ranks in Hindu society come from a legend in which the main groupings, or *varnas*, emerge from an ancient creature at the beginning of time. From the mouth come the **Brahmins**—the priests and teachers. From the arms come the **Kshatriyas**—the rulers and soldiers. From the thighs come the **Vaisyas**—merchants and traders. From the feet come the **Sudras**—laborers.

Many Hindus believe that part of person’s **dharma** is to accept the responsibilities of his/her caste. People believe they could build good **karma** by fulfilling the duties of their caste (**dharma**) and so could earn the reward of a higher status in their next life.

People with bad **karma** are reborn into a lower caste or life form (such as an insect). People with good **karma** are reborn into a higher caste.

However, some Hindus argue that the caste system does not come from their holy book and should not be considered part of their religion. These people disagree with the discrimination that results from the caste system.

Name:

Date:

Caste System Guiding Questions:

1. What is a caste?
2. What are the four main castes?
3. Explain who the untouchables are.
4. Can a person change castes?
5. What is the purpose of having this system? Why does it supposedly help society?
6. How does the caste system relate to the Hindu beliefs of **dharma**, **karma**, and **samsara (reincarnation)**?
7. Do all Hindus believe in the caste system?

Caste System Social Hierarchy Diagram:

Place the castes on the diagram below, according to how much power/ wealth/ respect they have in Hindu society.

