

Source: <https://india.mrdonn.org/castesystem.html>

## The Caste System in India

The idea of the caste system in ancient India began after the Indus Valley Civilization disappeared and a new people arrived, the Aryans. The Aryans were nomads from the north. They brought with them some new ideas. One of those ideas was Hinduism, which is now a world religion. Another was the idea of a caste system. A caste is a life-long social group into which a Hindu is born.

The Vedas are the Sanskrit writings that are the earliest sacred texts of Hinduism. The Vedas suggest the caste system in India. There were four social classes in the ancient Aryan society. These were the brahmins (priests & scholars); warriors & nobles; artisans & merchants; and on the lowest level, farm workers, laborers, servants

Once the Aryans settled down and began to grow their food instead of being just herdsmen, they started developing a caste system. The caste system started with just four castes. In order of importance and power these castes were priests, warriors, traders and farmers, and finally paid workers. The caste system grew progressively more strict until finally you were born into your caste and could not move or marry out of your caste.

The caste system really wasn't part of Hinduism, at first. The caste system began at about the same time as Hinduism. The caste system remained in place in India for thousands of years, long after Aryan rule was replaced by other leaders. But over the years, the caste system became intertwined with Hindu India. When Buddhism began in India, Buddhists did not recognize castes. That made Buddhism very attractive to the lower ranks in India's society. But in spite of the introduction of Buddhism and other religions, most ancient India people remained Hindus, and thus the caste system continued.

Top Caste: The Brahmins: The top caste was made up of scholars, priests, teachers, judges, and landowners. They were known as the Brahmin caste or Brahmins. Many Brahmins lived in temples, removed from society. Others spent a great deal of time in contemplation and meditation. Some were quite social.

The Kshatriya: Kshatriyas were the warriors. Rulers of towns and cities mostly came from the Kshatriya caste. Any decision they made, however, could be overruled by a member of the Brahmin, the caste above them.

The Vaishyas: Vaishyas were skilled farmers, merchants, and craftsmen. Vaishyas could hold office in village government. They might live in very nice houses. Even though they were three down on the social scale, they still had good clothes and ample food. They might not be the top leaders, but they were certainly a respected part of society.

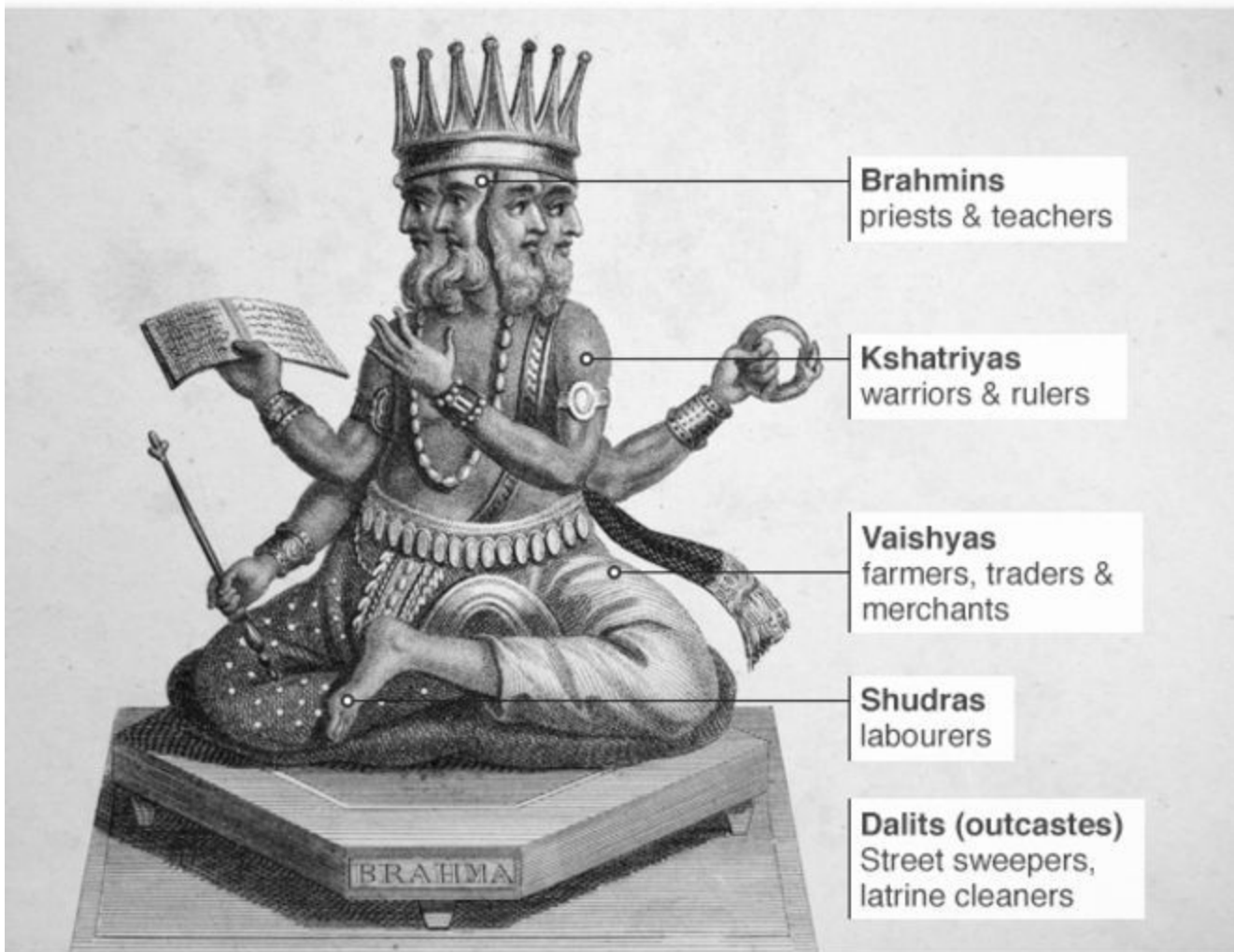
Bottom Caste: The Sudras: The Sudras were the unskilled workers. They might find a job on a farm or a non-skilled job in a home or business like cleaning. They were the bottom caste.

**The people without a caste, the Untouchables:** There was one other social rank in ancient India. People who were born into this social rank were called Untouchables. These were the people who were considered the lowest in society in Hindu India, so low that they were not part of the caste system. They had no rights. If they had a job at all, other than begging, it was a degrading job that no one else wanted to do. If your parent was an Untouchable, so were you. Untouchables could not move up or marry out of their social rank.

Since 1950, the Indian Constitution has forbidden discrimination.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35650616>

## Brahma and the origins of caste



Source: Alamy

BBC

### How did caste come about?

**Manusmriti**, widely regarded to be the most important and authoritative book on Hindu law and dating back to at least 1,000 years before Christ was born, "acknowledges and justifies the caste system as the basis of order and regularity of society".

The caste system divides Hindus into four main categories - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. Many believe that the groups originated from Brahma, the Hindu God of creation.

At the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmins who were mainly teachers and intellectuals and are believed to have come from Brahma's head. Then came the Kshatriyas, or the warriors and rulers, supposedly from his arms. The third slot went to the Vaishyas, or the traders, who were created from his thighs. At the bottom of the heap were the Shudras, who came from Brahma's feet and did all the menial jobs.

The main castes were further divided into about 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes, each based on their specific occupation.

Outside of this Hindu caste system were the achhoots - the Dalits or the untouchables.

### **How does caste work?**

For centuries, caste has dictated almost every aspect of Hindu religious and social life, with each group occupying a specific place in this complex hierarchy.

Rural communities have long been arranged on the basis of castes - the upper and lower castes almost always lived in segregated colonies, the water wells were not shared, Brahmins would not accept food or drink from the Shudras, and one could marry only within one's caste.

The system bestowed many privileges on the upper castes while sanctioning repression of the lower castes by privileged groups.

Often criticised for being unjust and regressive, it remained virtually unchanged for centuries, trapping people into fixed social orders from which it was impossible to escape.

Despite the obstacles, however, some Dalits and other low-caste Indians, such as BR Ambedkar who authored the Indian constitution, and KR Narayanan who became the nation's first Dalit president, have risen to hold prestigious positions in the country.

Historians, though, say that until the 18th Century, the formal distinctions of caste were of limited importance to Indians, social identities were much more flexible and people could move easily from one caste to another.

**New research shows that hard boundaries were set by British colonial rulers** who made caste India's defining social feature when they used censuses to simplify the system, primarily to create a single society with a common law that could be easily governed.

### **Is the system legal?**

Independent India's constitution banned discrimination on the basis of caste, and, in an attempt to correct historical injustices and provide a level playing field to the traditionally disadvantaged, the authorities announced quotas in government jobs and educational institutions for scheduled castes and tribes, the lowest in the caste hierarchy, in 1950.

In 1989, quotas were extended to include a grouping called the OBCs (Other Backward Classes) which fall between the traditional upper castes and the lowest.

In recent decades, with the spread of secular education and growing urbanisation, the influence of caste has somewhat declined, especially in cities where different castes live side-by-side and inter-caste marriages are becoming more common.

In certain southern states and in the northern state of Bihar, many people began using just one name after social reform movements. Despite the changes though, caste identities remain strong, and last names are almost always indications of what caste a person belongs to.