

# The Indian Caste System

When the Aryans first migrated into the Indus Valley, they brought with them a culture which was totally different from any other in the region. The Aryans, who were nomads, did not dominate the land by building great cities out of stone and brick. Instead, they left their mark in numerous other ways.

They passed on their Sanskrit language, which was used to compose the great poetry used in the sacred *Rig-Veda* and other stories that talk about the value of righteous living. Although they could not write Sanskrit in the beginning, the oral language had a rich and thorough vocabulary. For example, the word *Aryan* means noble.

The Aryans also contributed their religion, which was based on set rituals that filtered into the daily life of everyone. The military techniques and weapons of the Aryans were also far superior to those in the region. The Aryans brought domesticated horses, the chariot, and bronze weapons to Indian culture.

One of the most lasting contributions of the Aryans was their unique social structure. In their system, every class had a duty in society to fulfill. This concept of moral duty was called **dharmā**. Each class contributed to the others and got something in return. Originally, there were three main classes, or **varnas**. Because daily life was centered on religion and rituals, the priests and educated became the highest class, called **Brahmins**. Next came the rulers and warriors, the **Kshatriyas**. The third class, made up of the common people, was called **Vaishyas**. Eventually, a fourth class, the **Shudras**, emerged, made up of servants and peasants.

People who did not follow their religious practices were considered unacceptable by the Aryans. They were called “untouchables” or **Panchamas** and were totally shunned by society and they were forced to live “outside” the class system. These people lived outside the villages and performed tasks considered too lowly for even the Shudras. They cleaned up the dead bodies, executed criminals, tanned animal skins, and did other jobs that were considered unclean. They were also supposed to eat from broken bowls and wear only clothes that were taken from the dead. As time passed, they were also forced to sound wooden clappers to warn people that they were coming. This way, the higher classes did not have to worry about becoming unclean by seeing an untouchable or their shadow.

In the Aryan system, class was hereditary (passed on from ancestors), and regardless of one’s actions, he or she would remain in their class until death. There were very strict rules that governed the classes and dictated what they wore, what they ate, their occupations, their friends, whom they could marry, their duty, their destiny, and how they treated others. Although all classes had rights and were protected by law, the law varied depending on one’s class. For example, if a member of the Brahmin class hit and killed a servant, he would only have to pay a small fine. If a servant killed a priest, the servant would be executed.

Eventually, this system became known as a caste system. The caste system was very strict. One was born into a certain caste, they worked within that caste, married within the caste, and one’s children belonged to that caste. A person could not move out of their caste throughout their entire life. Although the caste system is not as strict now, it is still going on in India today. It is remarkable to consider that this tradition began thousands of years ago when the Aryans invaded India through the Hindu Kush Mountains.

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- I. The Aryans were \_\_\_\_\_
- They did not \_\_\_\_\_ the land by building \_\_\_\_\_
- II. The Aryans passed on their \_\_\_\_\_ language
- Their language was used to compose the \_\_\_\_\_
  - The word *Aryan* means \_\_\_\_\_
- III. The Aryans also contributed their \_\_\_\_\_
- The \_\_\_\_\_ techniques and \_\_\_\_\_ of the Aryans were also far superior
  - The Aryans brought domesticated \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_, and bronze \_\_\_\_\_
- IV. One of the most lasting contributions of the Aryans was their unique \_\_\_\_\_
- In their \_\_\_\_\_, every class had a \_\_\_\_\_ in society to fulfill
    - This \_\_\_\_\_ of moral duty was called \_\_\_\_\_
  - Originally, there were three main \_\_\_\_\_, or \_\_\_\_\_
    - The priests and educated became the highest class, called \_\_\_\_\_
    - Next came the rulers and warriors, the \_\_\_\_\_
    - The third class, made up of the common people, was called \_\_\_\_\_
    - Eventually, a fourth class, the \_\_\_\_\_, was made up of servants and peasants.
- V. People who did not follow religious practices were called “\_\_\_\_\_” or \_\_\_\_\_
- These people performed \_\_\_\_\_ considered too lowly for even the \_\_\_\_\_
- VI. In the Aryan system, class was \_\_\_\_\_ (passed on from ancestors), and regardless of one’s \_\_\_\_\_, he or she would remain in their class until \_\_\_\_\_
- There were very strict \_\_\_\_\_ that governed the \_\_\_\_\_
- VII. Eventually, this system became known as a \_\_\_\_\_
- One was \_\_\_\_\_ into a certain caste, they \_\_\_\_\_ within that caste, \_\_\_\_\_ within the caste, and one’s children \_\_\_\_\_ to that caste
  - A person could not \_\_\_\_\_ out of their caste throughout their entire \_\_\_\_\_
  - Although the \_\_\_\_\_ is not as strict now, it is still going on in \_\_\_\_\_ today

# ARYAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Per. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ class of people  
\_\_\_\_\_ job within each class  
\_\_\_\_\_ (unit into which one is born and cannot change)

\_\_\_\_\_ : duty of each class to society

