The Caste System

Aryan society developed a social structure based on caste. Over time, caste became a fixed social class into which a person is born. Often, the members of different castes remained separate for many important activities. A person’s caste is inherited at birth and does not change over his or her lifetime. A social structure in which social class is inherited from one’s parents is known as a caste system.

Origins of Caste

When Indo-Aryans arrived in the Indus River valley, their society already had three social classes: priests, rulers, and common people. They soon added a fourth caste for the native peoples who already lived in the area.

Main Idea

The social structure known as the caste system was an important characteristic of Aryan society.

Levels of the Caste System

As this chart shows, the levels of the Indo-Aryans’ caste system were related to the jobs that their members performed.

Critical Thinking: Interpret Charts

Which of these castes do you think would have included the greatest numbers of people?
For the first few hundred years after the arrival of the Indo-Aryans in India, the castes had not yet become hereditary. Once their society had merged with the local population, a late hymn of the Rig Veda described the four castes. The highest caste consisted of priests known as Brahmins. Next came the Kshatriyas, a caste made up of rulers and warriors. Below them were the Vaishyas, a caste of artisans, bankers, and merchants.

The members of these three highest castes were considered “twice-born.” This meant that males from these castes could belong to the Vedic religion. They could study Sanskrit and the Vedas. “Twice-born” males also had the right to take part in particular religious ceremonies.

At the bottom of the caste system stood the native peoples known as Sudras. The higher castes looked down on the Sudras and made them work as farmers and menial workers.

Later Indo-Aryans identified a class of workers below the Sudras, and they called its members untouchables. The members of this group often did the dirty jobs that no one else would do. Members of the higher castes would not have contact with untouchables for fear of being made unclean. In modern India, these people are now called Dalits, and treating someone as an untouchable is a crime against the law.

**Evolution of the Caste System**

As Indian society developed more occupations and skills, the caste system grew more complex. The larger castes divided into hundreds of smaller castes. Most of these castes were based on occupation. People who did the same job belonged to the same caste. Today, the total number of castes in India may exceed 2,000.

Caste rules also became more rigid. People were born into a caste and could not leave it. They could marry only members of their own caste. They had to work and eat among their members. All social events took place within one’s caste.
In time, the caste system became the most powerful force in Indian society. The system brought both costs and benefits. For instance, the system limited people’s individual freedom. They could not develop talents, interests, or friendships outside their caste. The patterns of their lives were fixed at birth.

However, the caste system also brought stability to Aryan society. It gave people a sense of belonging because every person had a place within a caste. Indian goods became famous because of the skills passed down through members of the castes. The system also allowed different groups to follow their own beliefs and customs within their caste while maintaining a place in the larger society.

Checkpoint What is the caste system?

Looking Back and Ahead In this section, you have read about India’s Vedic age. You have learned that nomads known as Aryans appeared in the Indus River valley around 1500 B.C. The Aryans established a social structure based on a caste system. In the next chapter, you will read about the development of India’s first major religion, Hinduism.

Section 3 Check Your Progress

Standards Review  H-SS: 6.5.2, 6.5.4; E-LA: Reading 6.1.5

Comprehension and Critical Thinking  
1. (a) Recall What are two possible explanations for the origins of the Indo-Aryans?  
(b) Apply Information Why might the Indo-Aryans have composed the Vedas after they settled in the Indus Valley?  
2. (a) Recall On what idea was Aryan social structure based?  
(b) Understand Sequence How did this social structure change over time?

Reading Skill  
3. Explain Shades of Meaning Use shades of meaning to explain how the words occupation and job are related.

Vocabulary Builder  
Read each sentence below. If the sentence is true, write YES. If the sentence is not true, write NO and explain WHY.

4. Sanskrit was similar to some languages spoken in Europe.
5. The Indo-Aryans’ way of life shifted, or stayed the same, as their civilization developed in the Indus River valley.

Writing  
6. Write three or four sentences that explain the major similarities and differences between the lives of members of the three highest groups of the Indo-Aryan caste system and the members of the fourth group.

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