

Chapter 4: Central Asia and India's Beginnings: 4-3a Beginnings of the Caste System

Book Title: World Civilizations

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4-3a Beginnings of the Caste System

The Vedas describe the beliefs of a warlike people who saw themselves as the natural masters of the inferior Indians and who reinforced their difference by dividing society into four groups, or classes. The two highest classes—priests and warriors—were reserved for the Aryans and their pure-blooded descendants. The priests were called **Brahmins** ((BRAH-mihn) The caste of priests, originally limited to the Aryans and later allowed to the Indians, with whom they intermarried.) (BRAH-mihns) and originally were superior in status to the warriors, who were called *Kshatrija* (kuh-shah-TREE-yah) and evolved over time from warriors to the governing class. The third class, the *Vaishya* (VIE-shyah), was probably the most numerous and included freemen, farmers, and traders. In the fourth and lowest group within the system were the peasant farmers, or *Shudra* (SHOO-drah).

Over the long course of the **Vedic (VAY-dik) Epoch** (The period in Indian history when the Vedas were being recorded—roughly 1500 to 500 B.C.E.) (over a thousand years, from 1500 to about 500 B.C.E.), these four classes evolved into something much more complex: multiple social groups defined by birth, or **castes** (A socioeconomic group to which a person belongs based on birth.) (pronounced “casts”). A caste is a social unit into which individuals are born and dictates most aspects of daily life. It confers a status that cannot be changed. Each caste except the very lowest has special duties and privileges, some of which are economic in nature, whereas others are manifested by dietary and marital restrictions. A high-caste Indian normally has little contact with lower castes and none at all with the outcasts, or *pariahs* (pah-REYE-yahs). Perhaps a seventh of Indian society still falls into this last category—the untouchables—whose members were, until recently, treated worse than animals.

The stratification of Indian society begun by the Aryan conquest persists to the present day. The Aryans were gradually absorbed among the indigenous Indian peoples through intermarriage with high-status individuals, but the caste system took root more strongly. By the eighteenth century B.C.E., there were more than 3000 separate subcastes, or *jati* (JAH-tee). Although the number has probably declined since then, the belief that one is born into a group that is fixed by age-old traditions and allows no change is still strong among rural Indians.

Throughout Indian history, caste has had the effect of inhibiting any type of change, particularly social change. Why? Combined with the beliefs of Hinduism (see the [next section](#)), caste made it next to impossible for someone born into a low social group to climb the ranks of prestige and privilege. It also limited political power to the uppermost ranks. Caste discouraged or prohibited cultural innovation by those in the lower ranks. Meanwhile, those on top were content to have things go on forever as they were. Under the Aryan-founded caste system, India became a highly stratified and immobile society.

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