

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

## Caste System in Ancient India

**Directions:** While you read the article, use a variety of annotation skills – written and symbols – to understand the caste system. Then, use the information to complete the organizer and questions.

Around 1500 BC, a group of nomadic warriors known as Aryans began to settle in northern India. Their skill on horseback allowed the Aryans to conquer the native people and to expand south into the subcontinent. The Aryans brought with them their beliefs, customs, and writing system – Sanskrit.

The Aryans wrote songs and stories about their gods. The stories were called the Vedas. The Vedas were handed down by word of mouth for hundreds of years until about 500 BC when the Aryans developed their writing system. The influence of these stories is why this period of Indian history lasting from about 1500 BC to 322 BC is known as the Vedic Age. This is when the Aryans began to impose a rigid social structure in Ancient India. This system is called the caste system.

Caste members lived, ate, married, and worked with their own group. A person born into one caste rarely changed castes or mixed with members from other castes. There were some Indian people who did have the opportunity to join higher castes, but this was pretty rare. The caste system was deeply embedded in the Hindu religion. The Vedas identify four varnas, or caste groupings, based on religious status.

At the top of the caste system were the Brahmin. These were the priests and they held a tremendous amount of power over everybody. There were the only ones who could both study and teach the Vedas, the holy text. They were also the only ones who could perform sacrifices of food to the gods and other religious ceremonies. Because of their authority, people of other castes often gave them generous donations. By giving Brahmins valuable goods,

people of other castes believed that they would be rewarded in their next life.

The Kshatriyas (kuh-shuh-tree-yuhs) were the warriors who also ran the government and made everyday decisions for the civilization. Their decisions could be overruled by the Brahmin though. Like the Brahmins, they could learn the Vedas, but they could not teach the holy texts. Since the Kshatriyas were responsible for defending the civilization, they underwent extensive military training. They were experts in archery, swordsmanship, and hand-to-hand combat.

The Vaishyas were skilled farmers, craftsmen, and merchants. They were expected to tend cattle, farm or trade. They could only learn, but not teach the Vedas.

The Shudras (shoo-dras) were the lowest of the four varnas. This was the majority of the population. People in this caste were slaves, servants, and unskilled workers. They received little informal education and were often the poorest of the castes. Also, they were not allowed to learn the Vedas, unlike the other three castes.

Though Shudras were the lowest of the four varnas, they were still better off than the so-called *outcastes* or *untouchables*. As the name suggests, these people did not belong to any of the four castes. Foreigners, lawbreakers, and people suffering from contagious diseases made up the “untouchables” group because they were regarded as unsuitable for personal relations with people in the caste system. The “untouchables” had jobs that involved “polluting activities” such as sweeping the streets, collecting garbage, cleaning toilets, and digging graves. They were

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

not allowed to live in villages, but had to build their huts on the outskirts. If someone in the caste system was touched by an untouchable or even had the shadow of one fall on him, that person had to go through certain religious ceremonies to get rid of the "pollution." The outcastes were not allowed to drink from the public well, could not enter temples, and were not allowed to study. This group of people in India suffered the worst fate.

The caste system became less rigid as the Indian people were exposed to outside ideas. Many untouchables left their strict social structure by converting to Islam, Buddhism or Christianity. Today, this group calls themselves the Dalits, a term that can be translated as "oppressed." The Indian government has provided the Dalit with specific employment privileges and granted them special representation in the Indian Parliament. However, the Dalit continue to have fewer educational and employment opportunities than others.

Discrimination based on the caste system, especially toward the Dalit, has been forbidden by the Indian Constitution since 1950, but many of India's 160 million Dalit continue to live in poverty. Indian people with family names associated with the Dalit often face discrimination. Despite Dalit poverty and discrimination, the Indian people elected a Dalit to the presidency in recent history. K.R. Narayanan served in that position from 1997 to 2002.

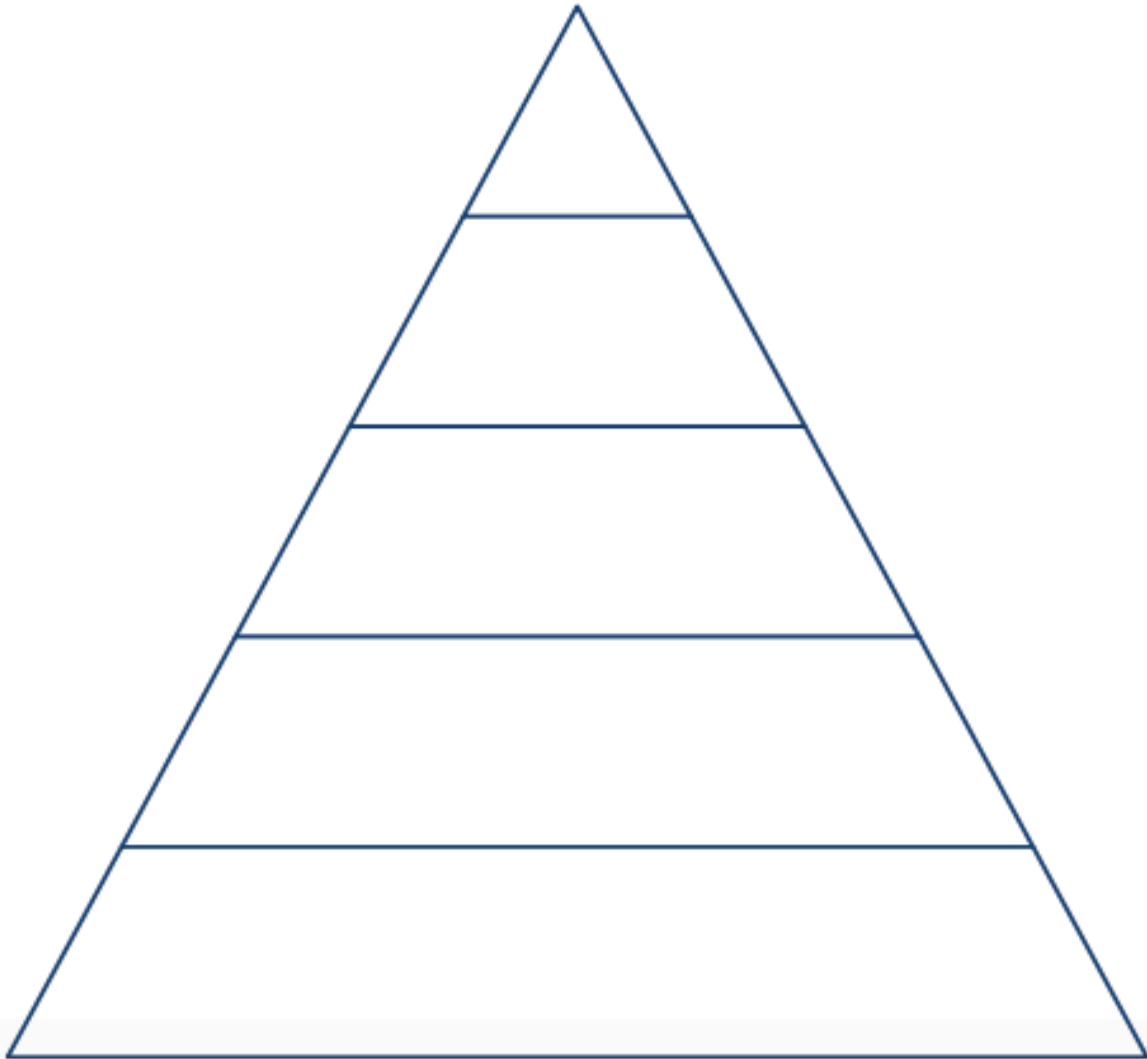
Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

# Ancient India Caste System

1. Use the Caste System article to fill in the following information for each caste:

- **Types of jobs and people** that made up the caste
- **Responsibilities** of the caste
- Any **restrictions** placed on the caste (what they could not do)



2. Despite some negative stereotypes that developed in the caste system, what are some **benefits** this social structure could have had for Ancient Indian civilization? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. How has the caste system impacted modern India? What issues still need to be addressed regarding social equality? \_\_\_\_\_

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