

15.3 Hinduism and the Caste System

Brahmanism was more than a religion in ancient India. It was a way of life. It affected how Indians lived, what they believed, and even the way they organized their society. Many of those ideas live on in modern Hinduism.

Brahmanism taught that a well-organized society was divided into different social classes. Today, we call this practice of social organization, developed in India, the **caste** system. The Vedas describe four main social classes, or *varnas*:

- Brahmins (priests and religious scholars)
- Kshatriyas (KSHA-tree-uhs) (rulers and warriors)
- Vaishyas (VIESH-yuhs) (herders and merchants)
- Shudras (SHOO-druhs) (servants, farmers, and laborers)

According to the Vedas, each class, or *varna*, had its own duties. For example, Brahmins had a duty to study and teach the Vedas. Warriors had a duty to become skilled with weapons. But the caste system meant that some people were favored much more than others. Brahmins held the highest place in society, while Shudras held the lowest.

Over the centuries, the caste system in India grew very complex. By medieval times, there were thousands of castes. The people in the lowest caste were known as Untouchables. Their descendants today often call themselves *Dalits*, from a word meaning “suppressed” or “crushed.” This group had jobs or ways of life that involved activities that high-caste Indians considered lowly or “dirty,” such as handling garbage and dead animals. Untouchables often had to live in their own villages or neighborhoods. They could not enter many temples or attend most schools. Other Hindus avoided touching, and in many cases, even looking at this group of people. Some of these rules separating the lowest caste remain today.

The caste system affected all aspects of people’s lives. Indians were born into a certain caste, and they could not change it. They could only marry within their own caste. Today, caste discrimination is outlawed in India. But despite the laws, caste status continues to affect many parts of Indian life.

This way of organizing society is just one example of how ancient religion affected daily life in India. Let’s look now at other aspects of Hinduism and how they helped shape Indian life and culture.

caste a class, or group, in Hindu society



Even today, the highest caste in India is the Brahmins. Shown here is a gathering of Brahmin women in India.