

# INTO WHICH CASTE HAVE YOU BEEN CAST?: INDIA'S CASTE SYSTEM

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## **ABSTRACT:**



This lesson teaches about the Caste System of Ancient India by grouping students so that they act out roles of the Caste as they complete an assignment. Students experience first hand the lack of equality and fairness that exists in India. At the conclusion of the lesson students compare the caste system with the American class structure. This lesson will stir a lively discussion and lead to student thinking about the inequalities that exist among most societies, including our own.

## **OBJECTIVES:**

As a result of this lesson, students will:

1. Summarize the contributions made by the Aryans to the culture of India.
2. Distinguish between the classes of the Indian cast system.
3. Define caste, reincarnation, Karma.
4. Have empathy for the challenges of people in groups other than our own.
5. Make comparisons between the caste structure of India and the class structure of the United States.
6. Evaluate own cultural value systems.

## **AUDIENCE:**

The basic approach to this lesson -- cooperative learning groups -- could be used

at any level from elementary to college. This lesson is designed for high school world history classes, however, it is applicable in geography, civics, critical thinking, economics, law, and U.S. History classes.

## **TIME REQUIRED:**

One or two class periods.

## **MATERIALS NEEDED:**

1. Handout #1: HINDUISM IN ANCIENT INDIA ca. 2500 BC - 535 AD
2. Handout #2: Overview of The Caste System of Ancient India
3. Handout #3: GROUP ACTIVITY - The Caste System of Ancient India
4. Handout #4: Assignment Sheet
5. Handout #5: Caste Headbands
6. Five name cards for each group, Handout #5: Caste Headbands
7. String or yarn for name cards.

## **PROCEDURE:**

1. Prior to this lesson the teacher should provide background about the history of India and the emergence of the Caste System. Students should be familiar with the economic and geographical problems which exist in India, as well as religious obstacles.

2. At the beginning of the lesson explain to students that they will work in groups of 4 or 5. You may need to explain the concept of cooperative learning groups.

3. Explain that this lesson is about the history of the caste system in India.

4. Establish ground rules. a) Once they are assigned to a group they may not change groups. b) Unless instructed otherwise there is to be no talking during the exercise. c) They are to read their assignment sheets silently and not share information with other group members unless instructed to do so. d) Explain that as a part of this lesson it is important that each person wear a name card on their forehead. They will not be told what is written on their name card. They may not remove the name card until told. They may not look at what is written until told to do so. They may not tell any other person what is on their name card.

5. Now have students get in their groups. I randomly select who will be placed in each caste group. I tie the name cards (Handout #5: Caste Headbands) so that they are tight enough to hold, yet loose enough not to cut off circulation.

6. Distribute Handout #1: HINDUISM IN ANCIENT INDIA ca. 2500 BC - 535 AD and Handout #2: Overview of The Caste System of Ancient India.

7. Allow a few minutes to read the handouts. You may wish to read them aloud.

8. Ask for one volunteer from each group. Send the volunteers out of the room so that they cannot hear what is about to happen. Reassure them that they will be brought back inside within a few minutes.

9. Explain to the class that they will participate in a role play of the caste system. The people who have left the room are Untouchables and should be completely ignored when they reenter the room. Each person in the groups will represent a caste system. They must not tell another person what is written on their name card, but should treat them appropriately. They will be given an assignment sheet, one per group. One person in their group will record the group answers. Every person in the group will receive the same grade.

10. Distribute Handout #3: GROUP ACTIVITY - The Caste System of Ancient India and tell students to read it silently.

11. Tell them that after they have finished

reading their handout, one person from their group is to come to the front of the room and collect Handout #4: Assignment Sheet for the group.

12. Send for the "Untouchables." Before they enter the room place a name card on them using Handout #5: Caste Headbands. Once they enter the room ignore them.

13. Tell students to begin. They must follow instructions on their sheet. It may take a few minutes for them to accept that they are to treat each other in such drastically different ways. Within a couple of minutes everyone should move away from the Untouchables and begin to ignore them.

14. After 15-20 minutes end the exercise.

### **CLOSURE:**

Students are likely to be frustrated by the restrictions of this exercise. It is important to allow them to discuss their feelings about being treated differently by their peers.

Use the questions on the last handout for the debriefing exercise. Allow all students to express their analysis of class structures as well as their feelings about the prejudice involved in the class structure system.

Stress the significance of economics and the role it plays in keeping an established class system.

### **EVALUATION:**

1. Have the students draw a chart comparing the class system of the United States and India.
2. Using the discussion questions on handout #4, assign a short essay addressing one of the topics.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

- Auboyer, Jeanine. Daily Life in Ancient India. MacMillan
- Religions of the World Video Series. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Austin, Texas.
- Lewis, John. Religions of the World Made Simple. Doubleday.

# HANDOUT #1: HINDUISM IN ANCIENT INDIA ca. 2500 BC - 535 AD

Epic Age: A period of time from 1000 to 500 BC

Aryans: A group of people from Central Asia who migrated into North India around 1200 BC They were responsible for the Vedas.

Caste System: A form of social organization.

Monism: The belief that God and human beings are one.

Reincarnation: From the Sanskrit word samsara, meaning cycle of births and deaths. One's next birth is determined by the karma of previous births.

Dharma: The fulfillment of one's moral duty in this life so that the soul can make progress toward deliverance from punishment in the next life.

Karma: Deed or action. The law of Hinduism which states that whatever actions one does, those actions will bear fruits either in this life or in some future life.

Hinduism: Religion of the Hindus based originally on the Vedas.

Vedas: Large body of oral literature, preserved orally and in texts, sacred to the Hindus. Contains the prayers, chants, and sacrificial details, incantations and other musings and meditations of the Aryan people.

Upanishads: Body of the sacred literature composed between 800 and 400 BC Several of the most important, influential, and subtle concepts of Hinduism are articulated in the Upanishads.

# HANDOUT #2: Overview of The Caste System of Ancient India

## UPPER CLASS

BRAHMAN: Included both priests and Scholars

KSHATRIYAS: Included both rulers and warriors

## MIDDLE CLASS

VAISYAS: Included merchants, traders and farmers

## LOWER CLASS

SUDRAS: Consisted of peasants bound to the land

OUTCASTES: Also known as the Untouchables

In approximately 1500 BC a group of people known as the Aryans invaded India. The Aryans were a nomadic people and brought many new ideas to India, including their religion. Their religious beliefs were derived from the Vedas, a collection of their sacred writings of knowledge.

The caste system began in India after the Aryans invaded and established their own rules for governing the society. The Aryans prohibited marriages between their own people and people of the cultures they conquered.

During the Epic Age four classes of people emerged in India. They included the subgroups outlined in the chart of the caste system. The Untouchables were considered such a low group that they were never mentioned or acknowledged within the society.

Each caste had a specific place in society. They socialized, ate, married, worked and worshipped within their own caste. They would never consider marrying or working outside their caste.

Over time each of the five subgroups, or castes became subdivided into over 3,000 castes.

The Indians believed that they could attain a higher caste position by leading a good life. This belief was derived from the Hindu religious teachings of reincarnation. They also believed that they could be reincarnated into the body of an insect if they did not lead a good life in their current position.

# HANDOUT #3: GROUP ACTIVITY - The Caste System of Ancient India

After reading the handout titled "Overview: The Caste System of Ancient India" you are to discuss the handout with the members of your group.

Each person in your group should be wearing a name card, placing him or her into a specific Indian caste. You should treat the people in your group as if they are actually members of that caste.

THE BRAHMAN is the most important person in your group. Agree with anything s/he says. Do anything s/he tells you to. This is the wisest person in your group. Because s/he is so intelligent, any answer s/he gives is acceptable.

THE KSHATRIYA is the most important person in your group. Ask the Kshatriyan to protect you from the other groups in the room who may try to invade your group and steal your answers. Also, as the Kshatriya to keep the Untouchables out of your group.

THE VAISYAS is in an important caste, but, not nearly as important as the others already mentioned. Tell the Vaisya to record the answers on your assignment sheet. This is his job. The Vaisya may try to give you answers, however, they will be wrong, so laugh off anything s/he says.

THE SUDRAS have little importance to your group. Ignore anything the Sudras says. When the Brahman has finished expounding his profound knowledge and the Vaisya has recorded it, tell the Sudra to hand in the assignment sheet. Otherwise pretend s/he doesn't exist.

THE UNTOUCHABLES should be completely ignored. Do not talk to them nor should you acknowledge their presence in any way. If they come near you move away quickly so that you are not contaminated.

# HANDOUT #4: ASSIGNMENT SHEET

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

## **PART I. Answer the following questions:**

1. In the caste system which group of people fit into the Upper Class society?
2. What professions do the members of the upper class hold?
3. What is the name of the middle class?
4. What professions do the middle class work in?
5. How could one enter a higher caste?
6. If one's karma is bad what might happen?
7. The vedas is a collection of work from what group of people?
8. At what time in history did the caste system dominate the society of India?
9. From what two sources is the Hindu religion based?
10. What rule did the Aryans have about marriage?

## **PART II. DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS WITHIN YOUR GROUP.** Remember to follow the guidelines established in handout #2.

1. If you had lived during the Epic Age, how difficult do you think it would have been to follow the strict rules of the caste system?
2. Do you think people questioned the system? Why or why not?

3. Why do you suppose the class distinctions were so harsh?
4. How is the class/caste system of Ancient India like the class system of the United States? How is it different?
5. In our society do we treat people differently who are born into different economic situations? Defend your answer.
6. In the United States we are influenced strongly by Christian customs and teachings. Are any of these customs like those of the Hindu? Explain.
7. In American society do we have different standards for members of different groups? Do we apply laws the same to people in different classes? Give examples to defend your answer.
8. How have the teachings of the Hindus influenced our society?
9. The Hindus believed in reincarnation/ What is your opinion of this concept? Is it conceivable that you could have lived a previous life, perhaps as an animal?

# Handout #5: Caste Headbands

1. Cut each caste band straight across. Attach yarn to the ends of each. Allow enough string to tie securely around the students head. Make enough caste bands for each group.

2. Place students into groups of 5. Tie a caste band around the head of each member. Make certain that the band is secure, but not too tight. Students should not be told to which caste they have been assigned.

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UNTOUCHABLE

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VAISYA

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# SUDRA

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# KSHATRIYAS

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# BRAHMAN

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