**World History**

**Classical India: caste system reading**

Castes were the central feature of people's identities beginning in ancient India. Soon after the [Indo-European invasion](http://quatr.us/india/history/aryan.htm), about [1500 BC](http://quatr.us/timelines/1500bc.htm)E, Indian residents were divided into one of five groups, or castes. People thought of the caste system as a mirror of the way the universe worked. Just as the [sun](http://quatr.us/physics/space/sun.htm) and the [planets](http://quatr.us/physics/space/planet.htm) each had to follow its prescribed path, in the same way people had to live according to their caste. This parallel between the real world and the caste system made castes seem natural and impossible to change or avoid. The caste system gave some people special rights and privileges.

The [*Rig Veda*](http://quatr.us/india/religion/rigveda.htm), an **ancient** Hindu **book,** describes each of these castes. **According to its account, the primal man - Purush - destroyed himself to create a human society. The different castes were created from different parts of his body. The Brahmans were created from his head; the Kshatrias from his hands; the Vaisyas from his thighs and the Sudras from his feet.** The lowest group had no caste, and were known as untouchables. Below the untouchables were the [slaves](http://quatr.us/india/people/slaves.htm).

The most powerful caste was the Brahmans, who were the priests and leaders. They were in charge of religious ceremonies as well as studying and teaching the Vedas, or religious texts, that were so important to Indian society. They comprised a very small percentage of the population. Only Brahman men were allowed to go to school, or to teach in schools. Brahman women could not go to school.

Below these were the Kshatriya, or warriors. A lot of Ksatriyas were in the army, or leaders in other ways. They were expected to support the emperor by bravely leading men in combat. Women could be Kshatriyas, whether or not they were actually warriors. There were not very many Kshatriyas.

Below them were the Vaisyas, or farmers and traders, who owned their own farms or businesses. These jobs often paid well and were considered important for the well-being of Indian society. Vaisyas were expected to use their wealth to throw religious feasts for the Brahmans and to build religious temples. There were a lot of members of this caste.

The lowest of the castes was the Sudras - the servants and farmhands who did not own their own business or their own land. They were expected to faithfully use their unskilled labor to support the higher castes. Historically, the largest number of people belonged to this caste. They had limited rights in Indian society.

Untouchables were technically not part of the caste system and usually did the worst jobs, like cleaning up human waste from the gutters, collecting garbage and burying the dead. The life of the untouchable was extremely difficult. They were not considered human, and their very presence was considered harmful to members of the other classes. No Indian would touch or eat food handled by an untouchable. Untouchables lived in separate quarters and were required to tap two sticks together so that others could hear them coming and avoid them. The untouchables made up approximately 5% of Indian society.

There were also a lot of smaller groups within these castes. People who came from different castes could not [eat](http://quatr.us/india/food) together. Usually people from one caste did not marry or make [friends](http://quatr.us/india/people/friends.htm) with people from another caste.