

Caste System

The caste system developed in India over 3000 years ago. Created by Aryan priests from Central Asia, the system had separate levels of society and was considered religious law.

Brahmans, those at the highest level of the caste system, were typically priests, earthly gods, religious leaders, or teachers. The next level was the **Kshatriyas**, the wealthy ruling families, kings, and warriors. These people owned most of the land and villages. The third caste was the **Vaishyas**, the business men, money-lenders, merchants, and farmers. The fourth caste was the **Shudras**, the laborers, artisans, shoemakers, and leather workers. Below the Shudras were the **Untouchables**. They had no caste, and they performed chores no other caste would do, such as collecting dead oxen and sweeping the streets.



A Brahman priest

According to the Hindu law, each caste had a strict set of duties. The only way a person became a member of a particular caste was by birth. One could not marry someone from another caste and one could not get a job outside of his or her caste. The Hindu idea of reincarnation kept the caste system alive. Hindus believe when a person dies, he or she is reincarnated as another being, hopefully in a higher caste. The only way to move to a higher caste in the next life is to strictly obey the rules of one's current caste.

The caste system is still prevalent in India, but has relaxed somewhat. Arranged marriages within a caste still occur, but occasionally people now marry outside their caste. Most of the jobs and government positions are open to different castes, and children are not required to pursue the occupations of their parents.

While many people still observe some aspects of the caste system, it is no longer a law to observe the old rules. Many people, like Mahatma Gandhi, worked to end the caste system. Their work was rewarded by a proclamation in 1949 outlawing discrimination against the Untouchables and the lower castes.

Mahatma Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in India in 1869, and attended school in England, earning a law degree from University College in London. Gandhi then accepted a position with a law firm in South Africa.

Mohandas Gandhi studied many religions—Muslim, Hindu, Judaism, and Christianity. From his readings, he formed a philosophy of religious tolerance and nonviolent resistance, known as **ahimsa**.

Mohandas Gandhi returned to India where he led the movement for independence from Great Britain. He traveled throughout India, preaching his ideas of nonviolence and passive resistance. People called him "Mahatma," meaning "great soul." He realized that one reason for India's poverty was unfair British trade policies. Indians were forced to buy British goods and had stopped making their own goods. Mahatma thought that if people returned to a more simple lifestyle their situation would improve. Urging people to boycott British goods, he began making all his own clothing and gave away most of his material possessions. He lived with the poorest people of India so that he could understand their suffering. Gandhi was troubled by the caste system and the unfair treatment of the Untouchables. He called them the **Harijans**, which means "children of God." Through prayer and fasting he persuaded the government to outlaw the Untouchable designation.



Mahatma Gandhi

As a leading member of the Indian National Congress, Gandhi worked hard for the end of British rule in India. His practice of nonviolence and passive resistance proved effective in 1947, when Britain agreed to India's independence. But Mahatma Gandhi could not settle the disagreements between the Hindus and Muslims. He sadly watched part of India break away and form Pakistan. After Pakistan was established as a separate country, riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims who were still living in India. Mahatma Gandhi was disturbed by the separation of Pakistan, but instead of joining the violence, he fasted until the riots stopped and peace was restored.

On January 30, 1948, Mahatma Gandhi, the preacher of nonviolence, was assassinated by a fanatic Hindu. People all over the world mourned his death. His teachings and principles were adopted in places as far away as the United States, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. continued Gandhi's teachings of nonviolence.