The Indian caste system is a separation of social classes. The system is based on your birth. It was once viewed as a system based on race. Portuguese sailors, who first saw the South Asian caste system, used the word “casta.” Casta means race. When they saw that Indian society forbade marriages between classes, they thought it was due to race. They were wrong. Most Indian societies use the term “jati” when talking about the caste system. Jati means birth. The caste system is not based on race. It’s based on the rank you are born into.

India’s caste system has been around for centuries. It’s thought that the Aryans, settlers coming from Asia and Europe, started the system. They moved into India, perhaps after a natural disaster destroyed the early civilizations in the Indus River Valley. The main civilizations were in two major cities. They were called Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

The Aryans practiced Brahmanism and later Hinduism. Both religions worshipped a creator god. His name was Brahma. The castes represent Brahma. Indians made the caste system using him as a model. Brahma’s mouth was the highest class. They were the Brahmins. They were priests and teachers. Brahma’s arms were the next highest class. The Kshatriyas were the nobles and warriors. His thighs were the middle class. They were merchants and bankers. They were called Vaisyas. From the feet of Brahma came the farmers and manual laborers. This was the lowest caste. These people were called Sudras. Later, an even lower caste emerged. They were known as Untouchables. They disposed of dead bodies. They dealt with cleaning sewage and garbage. Untouchables did the worst jobs.

Once you were born into a caste, you couldn’t leave it. You couldn’t change your social status. You must marry someone in your caste. You must have a suitable job for your caste. Even clothes and food had to match your social rank. Each rank within the caste system was called a varna. If you tried to move beyond the realm of your varna, you had committed a terrible social sin, and you could be moved to the ranks of the Untouchables.

This rigid social belief prompted many people to cling closely to the idea of reincarnation. It’s a key belief of Hinduism. In reincarnation, when you die, your soul slips into something that is being born. It is a chance to live again.

How did this idea of reincarnation help people stay content with their social rank? It had to do with how you lived your life. If you did your duty and lived honorably within your social class, reincarnation offered rewards. You would move up into a higher varna when you were reborn. For example, a Sudra who lived a life of duty and honor could be reborn as a Vaisya, or higher. But, a Sudra who had tried to live above his social caste would be punished. He could be reborn as an Untouchable. He could be reborn as an animal! This was true for all castes.

The caste system was followed strictly in India until about fifty years ago. More recently, laws have changed. They prevent inequality based on social caste. Reformers like Mahatma Gandhi campaigned for equal treatment of all Indians. He wanted fairness for everyone, no matter what caste. New laws were passed. They forbade discrimination against Untouchables. They even adopted a new name, the “Dalits.” It means “those who have been broken.” They have started to fight for their rights. They have a clear message. They may have been broken, but they can be built up. All people, of all castes, should have opportunities to improve their lives. All people should follow the paths they want.
The Indian caste system is a separation of social classes. The system is based on your birth, but it was once viewed as a system that was based on race. The Portuguese sailors, who first witnessed the South Asian caste system, used the word “casta” which refers to race. When they saw that the Indian society forbade marriages between classes, they assumed it was due to race. They were wrong. Most Indian societies use the term “jati” when talking about the caste system. Jati means birth. The caste system is not based on race, but rather the rank you are born into.

The caste system of India has been around for many centuries. It is believed that the Aryans, settlers coming from other parts of Asia and Europe, moved into India after a natural disaster destroyed the early civilizations in the Indus River Valley. The main civilizations were in two major cities. They were known as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

The Aryans practiced Brahmanism and later Hinduism. Both of these religions worshipped a creator god. His name was Brahma. From a divine representation of Brahma, Indians created a caste system. Representing Brahma’s mouth was the highest class, the Brahmins. They were priests and teachers. Brahma’s arms represented the next highest class. The Kshatriyas were the nobles and warriors. From his thighs would come a middle class of merchants and bankers, who were called Vaisyas. From the feet of Brahma came the farmers and manual laborers, with the lowest rank in the caste system, known as Sudras. Over time, an even lower caste emerged, known as Untouchables. They disposed of dead bodies, dealt with cleaning sewage and garbage, and other very unpleasant jobs.

Once you were born into a caste, you couldn’t change your social status. You must marry someone in your caste. You must have a suitable job for your caste. You even had to dress and eat according to your social position. Each rank within the caste system was called a varna. If you tried to move beyond the realm of your varna, you had committed a terrible social sin, and you could be demoted to the ranks of the Untouchables.

This rigid social belief prompted many people to cling closely to the idea of reincarnation. It’s a key belief of Hinduism. In reincarnation, when you die, your soul slips into something that is being born. It is a chance to live again.

How did this idea of reincarnation help people adhere to their social caste? Well, if you lived honorably and followed the rules of society, you would move up into a higher varna when you were reborn. For example, a Sudra who had led a life of duty and honor could be reborn as a Vaisya, or higher. But, a Sudra who had tried to live above his social status would be punished. He could be reborn as an Untouchable, or even a lowly animal! This was true for all castes.

Up until about fifty years ago, the social ranks and caste system was the way of life in India. It’s just been within the last several decades that laws have changed. They prohibit inequality based on social caste. Reformers like Mahatma Gandhi campaigned for equal treatment of all Indians, regardless of varna. Laws were passed forbidding discrimination against Untouchables. They even adopted a new name, the “Dalits.” It means “those who have been broken.” They have become politically active in fighting for their rights. Their message is clear- they may have been broken, but they can be built up. All people, of all castes, should have opportunities to improve their lives and follow the paths they want.
The Indian caste system is a separation of social classes. Although the system is based on your birth, it was once viewed as a system that was based on race. The Portuguese sailors, who first came into contact with the South Asian caste system, used the word “casta” which refers to race. When they saw that Indian society forbade marriages between classes, they wrongly assumed it was for racial reasons. They were incorrect. Most Indian societies use the term “jati” which means birth, and the caste system is based not on any skin color, but rather the rank you are born into.

The caste system of India has been around for many centuries. It is believed that the Aryans, who were settlers coming from other parts of Asia and Europe, began the system. Aryans moved into India, perhaps after a natural disaster destroyed the first Indian civilizations in the Indus River Valley. These civilizations were mainly centered in two major cities. They were known as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

The Aryans practiced Brahmanism and later Hinduism. Both of these religions worshipped a creator god, Brahma. From a divine representation of Brahma, Indian society created a caste system. Representing Brahma’s mouth was the highest class, the Brahmins, including priests and teachers. From his arms would come the next highest class, the Kshatriyas, nobles and warriors. From his thighs would come a middle class of merchants and bankers, who were called Vaisyas. From the feet of Brahma came the farmers and manual laborers, with the lowest rank in the caste system, known as Sudras. Over time, an even lower caste emerged, known as Untouchables. They disposed of dead bodies, dealt with cleaning sewage and garbage, and other very unpleasant jobs.

Once you were born into a caste, you had no ability to change your social status. You must marry someone in your caste. You must perform a job that was suitable for members of your caste. You even had to wear clothes and eat meals suited to your social position. Each rank within the caste system was called a varna. If you tried to move beyond the realm of your varna, you had committed a terrible social sin, and you could be demoted to the ranks of the Untouchables.

This rigid social belief prompted many people to cling closely to the idea of reincarnation, a key belief of Hinduism. In reincarnation, you lived your life and then died, but at the moment of your death, your soul slipped into something that was being born, giving you a chance to live again.

How did this idea of reincarnation help people adhere to their social caste? Well, if you lived honorably and followed the rules of society, you would move up into a higher varna when you were reborn. For example, a lowly Sudra who had led a life of duty and honor could be reborn as a Vaisya, or even higher. However, a Sudra who had tried to live above his social status would be punished by being reborn as an Untouchable, or even a lowly animal! This was true for all castes.

Up until about fifty years ago, the social ranks and the traditional caste system was the way of life in India. It’s just been in the last several decades that laws have changed to prohibit inequality based on social caste. Reformers like Mahatma Gandhi campaigned for equal treatment of all Indians, regardless of varna. Laws were passed forbidding discrimination against Untouchables. They even adopted a new name, the “Dalits,” which means “those who have been broken.” They have become politically active in fighting for their rights. Their message is clear— they may have been broken, but they can be built up. All people, of all castes, should have opportunities to improve their lives and follow the paths they want.
India's Caste System

Use evidence from the text to find the correct answer. Then, fill in the bubble of the correct answer.

1. Which word in the text means “birth”?  
   A. varna  
   B. caste  
   C. jati  
   D. race

2. Which process offered a reward for following the rules of your caste system?  
   A. reincarnation  
   B. Hinduism  
   C. varna  
   D. social mobility

3. The caste system you were born into impacted which of the following?  
   A. who you could marry  
   B. what job you would do  
   C. what clothes you would wear  
   D. all of the above

4. Who were the Aryans?  
   A. People who invaded India and forced them to adopt the caste system.  
   B. People who settled in India and began the caste system based on their religion.  
   C. People who currently work in India to create equality and fairness for all castes.  
   D. People who began India's earliest civilization.

5. Which civilization in India preceded the Aryans?  
   A. The Xia Dynasty  
   B. The Portuguese Trading civilization  
   C. The Indus River Valley civilization  
   D. None of the above

6. What is the new name that the Untouchables prefer to use?  
   A. Brahmins  
   B. Touchables  
   C. Rebuilds  
   D. Dalits

7. What consequence did people face who broke the laws of the caste system?  
   A. have a worse life in reincarnation  
   B. have a better life in reincarnation  
   C. have the same kind of life in reincarnation  
   D. not have the chance to experience reincarnation

8. What determines one's rank in a caste system?  
   A. money  
   B. race  
   C. birth  
   D. religious beliefs

9. When did laws begin to change in India to target discrimination and promote equality among social classes?  
   A. about 200 years ago  
   B. centuries ago  
   C. about fifty years ago  
   D. it hasn't happened yet

10. Why do Sudras supposedly represent Brahma's feet?  
    A. They are the lowest class and the feet are the lowest part of the body.  
    B. The feet do the hardest and most tiring tasks, like walking and standing, so they are associated with hard labor.  
    C. The feet are the part of the body most associated with luxury, so they represent the highest class.  
    D. Both A and B are possible
Which word in the text means "birth"?

a. varna  
b. caste  
c. jati  
d. race

Which process offered a reward for following the rules of your caste system?

a. reincarnation  
b. Hinduism  
c. varna  
d. social mobility

The caste system you were born into impacted which of the following?

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When did laws begin to change in India to target discrimination and promote equality among social classes?

a. about 200 years ago
b. centuries ago
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d. it hasn’t happened yet
India's Caste System

1. a   b   c   d
2. a   b   c   d
3. a   b   c   d
4. a   b   c   d
5. a   b   c   d
6. a   b   c   d
7. a   b   c   d
8. a   b   c   d
9. a   b   c   d
10. a   b   c   d
INDIA'S CASTE SYSTEM

1. Why did the Portuguese assume the caste system was based on race?

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2. How does the practice of Hinduism relate to the caste system?

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3. Describe how Brahma’s body represented the different castes.

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4. What motivated people to remain in their caste systems, even if they were lower in society?

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5. Why wasn’t social mobility (moving between caste ranks/varnas) a goal for many people?

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6. How did the actions of Mahatma Gandhi change the caste system?

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7. What caused the Untouchables to adopt a new name for themselves?

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8. What did they believe would happen if a person lived an honorable life and did the duties required of his caste?

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9. List the five ranks in the Indian caste system from highest to lowest.

____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________

10. **Writing Prompt:** Choose a caste. Using the text and what you infer about that caste, describe the people and their way of life. For example: jobs, types of houses, clothing, duties, feelings, rules to follow.

    **Introduction:**
    ______________________________________________________________________________________

    **Detail 1:**
    ______________________________________________________________________________________

    **Detail 2:**
    ______________________________________________________________________________________

    **Detail 3:**
    ______________________________________________________________________________________

    **Conclusion:**
    ______________________________________________________________________________________
INDIA'S CASTE SYSTEM

1. Why did the Portuguese assume the caste system was based on race?

2. How does the practice of Hinduism relate to the caste system?

3. Describe how Braham’s body represented the different castes.

4. What motivated people to remain in their caste systems, even if they were lower in society?

5. Why wasn’t social mobility (moving between caste ranks/varnas) a goal for many people?

6. How did the actions of Mahatma Gandhi change the caste system?

7. What caused the Untouchables to adopt a new name for themselves?

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India’s Caste System

1. The Portuguese, who first saw the caste system in South Asia, saw that marriage between people of different castes was forbidden and they assumed it was because of race, not realizing it had to do with the social position one was born into.

2. Hinduism relates to the caste system because the caste system is a representation of the creator god, Brahma, worshipped by Hindus. Brahma’s body is the spiritual representation of the different castes.

3. Brahma’s body represents the different castes. His mouth was the highest caste. His arms were the next highest caste. His thighs were the middle class. His feet was the lowest class.

4. People were motivated to remain in their caste system for two reasons. For one thing, if they attempted to leave their caste system and better themselves, this was considered a social sin, which would put them down into the ranks of the Untouchables, the worst place to be. Also, if people did live their lives following the duties and rules of their castes, when they died, they would be rewarded during the process of reincarnation. They would be reborn into a higher caste and have a better life.

5. People didn’t want to risk attempting social mobility because they knew it could backfire on them, and end up getting them put into a lower caste in their next lifetime, or getting them kicked out of their caste and into the caste of the Untouchables.

6. The actions of Gandhi changed the caste system because he campaigned for fairness for all people, no matter what their social caste. Because of his work, and others like him, laws in India were changed to prohibit discrimination against castes and equal treatment for all people.

7. The Untouchables no longer want to be considered outcasts from society. Instead, they want to be thought of those who were broken, but those who are capable of being strong and able to rebuild. Their new name indicates strength and ability, instead of derision and lowliness.

8. If a person lived a good, dutiful, honorable life, they would be reborn into a higher caste system during the process of reincarnation.

9. The five ranks were: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Sudras, and Untouchables.

10. Answers will vary.

Multiple choice
1. C
2. A
3. D
4. B
5. C
6. D
7. A
8. C
9. C
10. D