What Is a Caste?
Have you ever heard of the American Dream? It refers to the idea that anyone can become anything in the land of opportunity—that you can be born into a poor family but grow up to become a successful business person, a scientist, a professional athlete, or even president. In India, for thousands of years, the opposite was true. If you were born poor, you stayed poor. If your father was a woodworker, you would also be a woodworker. This is how things operate in a caste system.

The word caste refers to people who are grouped together based on factors such as wealth, jobs, power, privileges, and sometimes ethnicity. A caste system is very much like a social class structure with one major difference: people can move between social classes but not castes. In other words, someone can be born in the working class and move to the middle class in a social class structure. In a caste, there is no such movement, or mobility. The caste a man is born into determines his place in society. It also indicates the friends the man can have and the type of home in which he can live. As a rule, a man cannot leave the caste he is born into. So, father, son, grandson, and great-grandson would all be in the same caste. A woman is in the caste of her father and then her husband, which would be the same caste.

The Hindu Castes of India
The castes in India were created as part of the Hindu religion and consisted of five levels. The top level had the most privileges and the fewest people. The bottom level had the least rights and the most people. The caste system was enforced as law in India prior to 1949. In that year, the Indian government passed a constitution that outlawed discrimination based on caste. The description that follows details the pre-1949 caste system in India.

The caste system was based on a Hindu legend. According to the legend, the god Brahma created the four top rankings. From his mouth came the Brahmans. The Kshatriyas came from his arms. The Vaishyas came from his thighs. The Shudras came from his feet. The lowest caste was the Pariah. They
were also called Untouchables or Dalits and were considered impure and not good enough to have come from a god at all.

The Brahmans were the highest caste. Priests and scholars belonged to this caste. A child of a Brahman was automatically a Brahman. When a Brahman grew up, he or she had to marry another Brahman. Members of the Brahman caste had high social status and much wealth. They were highly educated. Brahmans associated only with people of their own caste and Kshatriyas, the next caste down. When a young Brahman man grew up, he had to have the same occupation as his father. So, the son of a priest had to become a priest.

The second caste level was the Kshatriyas. This group was made up of warriors and rulers. The Kshatriyas were supposed to protect the Brahmans. The Kshatriya rulers worked with the Brahmans to make decisions. The Kshatriyas were given complete rule and control over the next lower class and could use them as needed. And, as with the Brahmans, the son of a warrior had to be a warrior, and all rulers were the sons of rulers. The Kshatriyas were expected to be dependent upon the priests.

The third class was the Vaishyas. This group consisted of skilled traders, merchants, farmers, and low-level officials. The Vaishyas were expected to provide for the community’s needs. The members of this group had less power in comparison to the rulers. Members of this caste were able to afford a comfortable lifestyle, but they were denied a high social status. As with the higher castes, Vaishyas were required to follow in their parents’ paths.

The Shudras were the fourth caste. They were usually servants, laborers, and artisans such as barbers and blacksmiths. The Shudras were viewed as low-skilled and best suited to serve the upper classes as servants, or even to be enslaved. The Shudras had no rights and were not allowed to take part in religious services. In fact, they were not even allowed to enter the temples. A person born a Shudra had no options for improving his status in life.

The bottom class was the Pariah, or Untouchables. These people were considered unclean and impure. They were required to do the “dirty jobs.” For example, Pariah were often leather tanners, scavengers (sewage workers), or butchers. Many were beggars. The Pariah were often not even listed as a caste,
since they were not considered worthy of inclusion. A Pariah could be arrested for walking on a street where higher classes live. Pariahs could only live on the outskirts of a village or town and could not take part in community activities. In English, the word *pariah* actually refers to an outcast. The children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on of a Pariah were also Pariahs.

**Dalits**

Around the 500s CE, after approximately 1000 years of the caste system, some individuals in the lower classes tired of the suppression. Many of these people converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. Buddhism did not support the caste system. Instead, Buddhism focused on personal behavior rather than birth rights. However, the caste system was so firmly in place that changing religions did not allow members of the lower classes to improve their status in life. The change simply made them less accepting of this suppression.

Between the 500s and the 1900s the caste system continued, despite ongoing revolts and disenchantment by the lower classes. Beginning in the mid-1800s and through the mid-1900s, India was a British colony. During this time, anti-caste movements were common. One notable anti-caste leader was Jyotirao Phule. He and his followers promoted the rights of both those in lower castes and women. They worked to eliminate the idea that some people were “untouchable” and supported finding a place for the lower castes within the Hindu religion. The lower caste people who were opposed to the caste system came to be known as Dalits. Soon, the lower struggling class members were all known as Dalits. *Dalit* is a Hindi word that means “crushed” or “broken.”

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) was another notable leader who worked to increase equality in India. The Gandhi family belonged to the Vaishya caste. Even though he belonged to the middle caste, he argued for the equality of lower castes. Mahatma Gandhi was a leader in India’s fight for independence and is one of the most-loved leaders of India.

In 1935, the British government published a list of low caste groups that were “untouchable.” As a way of countering discrimination, the British gave these groups special privileges. In 1945, when India was granted independence from Britain, the Indian government continued these different programs to benefit the low castes. The government commissioned a study to explore social and economic backwardness in India. Backwardness refers to practices that do not
help people move forward and cause people to stay stuck in poverty or low castes. Known as the Mandal Commission Report, the results of the study indicated that the caste system was the main cause of backwardness. The Commission suggested that state schools set aside a percentage of openings for Dalits.

**Castes Outlawed**
As of 1949, the India constitution forbids discrimination based on caste. The caste system itself is not against the law, however, because it is so connected to the Hindu religion. Not surprisingly, because the caste system is still allowed, it is still used. Publicly, discrimination is not tolerated. But privately, the lower classes still experience inequality to a great degree.

For several years after the 1949 ruling, the government did not try to implement the suggestions of the Commission out of fear of opposition from the higher caste members. Finally, in 1990, the government did implement some of the suggestions, and the upper- and middle-caste members revolted. Nevertheless, the equalization efforts continued.

In India today, even though castes still unofficially exist, the separations between castes are more relaxed. Members of higher and lower castes often eat at the same restaurants. Women have individual rights rather than being extensions of their husbands. Both men and women can pursue jobs outside their traditional caste options. Dalits can run for public office and be elected. Members of lower castes can own land. Mingling of all ranks is more evident in some geographic areas than in others. This relaxing of caste levels is especially true in larger cities. In rural areas, less progress has been made. For example, on some Indian Internet dating sites, a person’s caste is listed on their profile. It is very difficult to undo 3,500 years of tradition.

Although much progress has been made in the past 100 years, India still has much to do to ensure that all people can enjoy the same opportunities.
After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Which statement is an accurate interpretation of the Hindu legend upon which the caste system is based?
   A. From the head come the sickly, from the arms come the angry, from the legs come the mighty, and from the feet come the solid base.
   B. From the head come the creative artists, from the arms come the fighters, from the legs come the unimportant, and from the feet come the athletes.
   C. From the head come the Hindu, from the arms come the Buddhists, from the legs come the Christians, and from the feet come the nonreligious.
   D. From the head come the brains, from the arms come the muscles, from the legs come the workers, and from the feet come the trod upon.

2. Which term refers to the same caste as Dalit?
   A. Brahman
   B. Kshatriya
   C. Shudra
   D. Pariah

3. Since discrimination based on caste in India is outlawed by the Indian constitution, why does it continue in some parts of India?
   A. People are free to choose whether or not to follow the constitution.
   B. People are set in their ways and have not easily made changes.
   C. The constitution only applies to certain areas of India.
   D. The constitution is a historic paper and does not have any power.

4. Explain how the caste system could hinder a teenager’s desire to work hard for a goal. Use details from the passage to support your answer.