

## Lesson Two – The Vedic Period and Caste System

- 6.24 Analyze the impact of the Aryan invasions.  
 6.25 Explain how the major beliefs and practices of Brahmanism in India evolved into early Hinduism.  
 6.26 Outline the social structure of the caste system and explain its effect on everyday life in Indian society.

### Watch, "The Vedic Age"

What was the name of the people who are associated with the vedic age?

How did they impact the history of ancient India?

How did they impact the religion of ancient India?

How did they impact the society of ancient India?

### The Vedic Period Begins

Many scholars believe that over many centuries, groups of **nomadic** people from Central or Southwest Asia began migrating into India. These migrants are often called Aryans and were part of a larger group of people often called Indo-Europeans.

Though many theories exist, historians lack sufficient evidence to determine where the Indo-Europeans originally came from or why they eventually spread out to settle in different areas. What is known is that groups of Indo-Europeans eventually migrated all over **Eurasia**, settling in places like modern-day Greece, Turkey, and Iraq. Most historians agree that by around 1500 BCE, the migrants had settled into India. For many years, historians believed that the Aryan migration was an invasion and that they had conquered the people already living in South Asia. However, no evidence of large-scale war or conquest has been found by archeologists. A few historians argue that the Aryans may have been native to South Asia, but this is a minority view among scholars.

The Aryans gave up their nomadic way of life and settled in the fertile valleys as farmers, raising cattle and horses that they had brought with them. They also brought their religious beliefs and rituals, as well as their own cultural customs. These ideas blended with existing cultures to shape life in ancient India.

### Answer the following questions using the article.

Who were the Aryans?

When do historians believe the Aryans settled in India?

Why are the Aryans important in India's history?

### Watch, "The Aryans and the Vedic Age"

Describe who the Aryans were.

What language did the Aryans speak?

Why is this period of India's history known as the Vedic Age?

## Vedic Period Cultural Contributions

As noted earlier, a few historians argue that Aryans were not migrants from across the mountains at all but that they were natives of the northern portions of the subcontinent whose ideas blended, over time, with those of their neighbors from farther south. Still, most historians agree that they became a dominant group in India and developed a new **culture** and **society** there. They worshipped many Deities that they believed lived in nature. These Deities were part of a universal Supreme Being who served as the source of everything. As the religious beliefs became more defined in practice, this Supreme Being became known as Brahman. Historians used to call the religion Brahmanism, but this term is not common.

The religious traditions and rituals were collected in a series of texts called the **Vedas**. For this reason, the Aryans in India are often called the Vedic people, and their early religion is now commonly called the Vedic tradition. Some scholars call it Vedic **Hinduism** because it became a critical source of the beliefs and rituals in Hinduism, which emerged in the first few centuries of the Common Era. Hinduism combined a wide range of traditions and today is practiced by about one billion people around the world.

The Vedas were passed on through oral tradition (the passing down of knowledge, religious beliefs, and other cultural elements through stories, poems, and songs) in the language known as Sanskrit. **Indo-European** speakers did not have a written form of this language, but over time they developed a written alphabet. They used this new alphabet to write down the information contained in the Vedas. Even today, the Vedas are considered some of India's most sacred ancient writings. Although Sanskrit was initially used to record religious traditions, it would eventually become prevalent throughout Indian culture.

Religion was not the only contribution of the Vedic society. As in other early civilizations, such as Mesopotamia and Egypt, Indian society witnessed the development of an idealized set of social classes. The social classes, called varnas, were based on ideas from the Vedas. The varnas were the **Brahmins** (priests and teachers), the **Kshatriyas** (rulers and warriors), **Vaisyas** (merchants, farmers, herders, and artisans), and **Sudras** (laborers). Varnas were mostly determined by birth; though during early Indian history, these varnas were somewhat fluid, and some people switched varnas during their lifetimes. Many Hindu sages of that period were not born as Brahmins. Two great Hindu sages, Vyasa—who edited the Vedas to help people understand them—and Valmiki—who wrote the epic poem the *Ramayana*—were not Brahmins

### Answer the following questions using the article.

What was the religion of the Aryans known as? Describe the religion of the Aryans.

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What does the term Brahman mean?

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What are the Vedas?

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What does oral tradition mean?

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Create a visual representation of the social classes that developed from the Vedic Age.

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### Watch, "Story of the Vedas"

What are the Vedas?


Who wrote the Vedas?


Name the Vedas and describe what is contained within each one.


### The Caste System

Contrary to what many people believe, the **caste system** in India is not as old as the Vedic period. The varnas presented an idealized **society** that emphasized the importance of each role in a society. However, by the early Common Era, social groupings began to develop based on one's occupation. A person's status and role within society was tied to the group, or jati, he or she belonged to. Different groups in society had different jobs and responsibilities.

Over time social rules developed that made the divisions between jatis more important and permanent. People in one jati group were not allowed to marry people from another group. The rules among these groups became more formal and complex. The development of jati social groups in India created a system in which a person who was born into a group was not allowed to change groups at any point in life. The Portuguese, who came to India in the 1400s, called this system the caste system, and it remained a dominant force in Indian society for many centuries.

The system today consists of several major castes, which were based on the original orders of ancient Indian society and thousands of subcastes. Today, most people in South Asia, regardless of religion, are treated as belonging to one caste or another. There is an additional social group that is considered to be outside of the caste system. The Dalits were traditionally treated as outcasts who were forced to remain in occupations that were believed to be impure or unclean. For this reason, many began to refer to Dalits as "Untouchables." In the 1900s, the famous activist Mohandas Gandhi introduced the name Harijans, or "children of God," as a name for this caste. The government of India calls this group the "Scheduled Caste." Today, many consider the terms "Untouchable" and "Harijan" to be hurtful.

#### Answer the following questions using the article.

True or False: The Caste System was created in the Vedic Period. Explain your answer.


What are some social rules that began developing and how did this impact Indian society?


Who are Dalits?


**Watch, "Varnas and the Caste System"**

Do you think that the varnas were meant to be social classes based on occupation or based on what you were born into? Why?


Do you think the caste system is good or bad? Why?


**Rules of the Caste System**

Castes and social hierarchies have existed across India for centuries. During the medieval era, **Brahmins** were usually given roles as influential scholars and priests. The rulers and politicians were often drawn from the **Kshatriyas**, but these rulers relied heavily on Brahmin advisors. Vaisya merchants and farmers often accumulated great wealth. Much later, in the 1800s, the British rulers of India strictly viewed the divisions in the caste distinctions. They also relied strongly on Brahmins to play important roles in the government and as leading scholars and thinkers. Other castes were often given fewer opportunities.

Many leaders spoke against the caste hierarchies throughout Indian history. The Hindu scholar Adi Shankara lived in the 800s. He spoke against social discrimination. He argued that it had no place in Hindu **society**. Later, Hindu reformers in the Bhakti movement tried to change the **caste system**. Other religions also challenged social divisions. These religions included **Buddhism**, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism. Nonetheless, many Indians continued to identify themselves and others by their castes.

As India became more urbanized in the 1900s, people of different castes, particularly in the cities, began interacting with one another. Discrimination based on the caste system was eventually made illegal in 1949. Since then, the government has created laws protecting people from lower castes against discrimination. There are programs in place to ensure that lower caste members can go to college, have government representation, and have access to good jobs. Today, many Indians, both on the subcontinent and in the United States, do not identify themselves as belonging to a caste.

**Answer the following questions using the article.**

How did the British in the 1800s influence the Caste System?


How has the caste system been opposed?


What happened in 1949?


**Watch, "Is India's Caste System Still Alive?"**

Is the caste system in India still alive? Support your answer with information from the video.


Briefly describe the evolution of the caste system in India.


### Activity One: Respond

Describe how the Aryans influenced Indian life in the following ways.

History -
Religion -
Society -

### Activity Two: Watch, "The Untouchable Kids of India"

1. What is a Dalit?


2. Why are Dalits sometimes called untouchables?


3. The Caste System and the mistreatment of an untouchable has been illegal in India since 1950. Why is it still a problem?


4. What is life like for a Dalit? Give a specific example from the video.


5. How does the caste system impact everyday life in India? Provide three reasons.
