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 **“The Caste System" *World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras*. ABC-CLIO, 2015.**

Hinduism, India's main religion, is one of the most ancient faiths in the world. It arose as a complex tradition of beliefs and practices by around 1500 BCE. Over time, Hinduism evolved to include a social class order known as the caste system, a pantheon of many gods and goddesses, a variety of sects and ritual practices, and an epic religious literature.

**The Caste System**

"Caste" is the term used to describe the complex system of social divisions that **pervades** life in India. Caste is an ancient hereditary system that developed alongside and became **intertwined** with Hinduism. Caste determines whom a person can marry, specifies what kind of work he can do, and even controls what he can eat or touch. Since the great majority of Indians are Hindu, the caste system has played an enormous role in the history of India, and it continues to **exert** tremendous influence on modern Indian culture and politics. ...

All Hindus are divided among four*varna* and a fifth group, known as the untouchables. The four*varnas* are: the Brahmins, the traditional priest class; the Kshatriya, the warrior class; the Vaishya, the workers; and the Sudra, whose role is to serve the three higher classes. Below the Sudra are the untouchables, who are supposedly unclean from birth and are therefore assigned jobs that would "pollute" the higher classes. These include working with dead animals or cleaning sewage.

Each of the*varnas* are divided into hundreds or thousands of*jati*, literally meaning "birth." The*jati* are **kinship** groups with hereditary roles and professions within society. Hindus will traditionally marry only within their own*jati*. …

The untouchables are thought to have been added to the system as newly conquered tribal groups were added to Hindu society at the lowest rungs. Another explanation is that they developed in response to the religious needs of the higher castes as Hindu religious practices became more restrictive. Strict religious interpretation dictates that members of the

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higher castes avoid contact with many aspects of daily life, like dead animals, human waste, or menstrual blood. The untouchable caste may have been created out of the Sudra caste in order to provide workers who could take care of these "polluting" aspects of life. At some point, this concept of ritual pollution extended to the workers themselves, so they were literally "untouchable." Strict Brahmins, for example, will avoid touching anything that has come in contact with a member of the Chamar*jati,* the untouchable group responsible for dealing with dead animals.

The caste system in India is **inextricably** linked to the beliefs of Hindu religion. One of the tenets of Hinduism is reincarnation—the belief in the rebirth of a person's soul into another life form after death. The life a person is reincarnated into is determined by his or her karma; a person with good karma may be reborn as a higher caste human, while a person with bad karma might be reborn as a lower caste human. Hinduism teaches that since a person's fate is determined by his past life, his fate is justified. A good Hindu, therefore, accepts his position in life; by accepting his position willingly, he can improve his karma and thereby hope for a better incarnation in the next life.

The social **implication** of this belief system has been a remarkable stability—or rigidity—in Indian culture. Since being a good Hindu means accepting one's position in life, Hindus have been reluctant to challenge restrictions imposed on them by the caste system. The system has kept a large part of the Indian population in a condition of servitude, since the Sudras and Untouchables have been reluctant to challenge their positions. The higher castes have not questioned the system because they benefit from it and because, according to their beliefs, the lower castes deserve their status because of actions in past lives.

Challenges to the caste system in India have primarily come from the influence of non-Hindu faiths. Islam, Christianity, and Jainism all espouse a more **egalitarian** message that runs counter to caste practices. Of those faiths, Islam has been the most significant, as it has held a large number of **adherents** in India for well over a thousand years. Some lower-caste Indians have elevated their social status by converting to these non-Hindu faiths, although this has generally meant separation from their traditional family groups. The majority of Indians have remained within the Hindu faith, and the caste system has continued to exert a profound influence on their lives.

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|  **Text Dependent/Specific Questions**  | **Possible Answers- Including Line Numbers****& Teacher Notes** |
| 1. According to lines 1 and 2 where does this document come from? What type of source is it?
 | 1. This document comes from ABC-CLIO.  It is a secondary source because it was recently written (2015) about the ancient and medieval eras.  This is a trustworthy source because it is an historical research database. |
| 1. In the first paragraph, the author describes a number of different aspects of Indian culture. List the terms that relate to culture.
 | 2. religion, faiths, tradition, beliefs, practices, social class, gods, goddesses, sects, ritual practices, religious literature |
| 1. Using evidence from lines 11 and 12, explain how the caste system “became intertwined with Hinduism.”
 | 3. The caste system became "intertwined with Hinduism" because it "determines whom a person can marry, specifies what kind of work he can do, and even controls what he can eat or touch" (lines 11-12). |
| 1. In lines 19-20 the author states the untouchables are “assigned jobs that would pollute the higher classes.” What does the author mean by this statement? Use lines 20-35 to support your answer.
 | 4. The untouchables did jobs the higher castes avoided including working with dead animals, human waste, and sewage (lines 20 and 30).  These aspects of daily life were thought to be unclean, or polluting, and coming into contact with such would be against religious beliefs (line 28).  |
| 1. Use evidence from the text to explain why this group is called “the untouchables.” Why was this group added to the caste system?
 | 5. Those born unclean from birth, or engaging in unclean work, were deemed literally untouchable because of religious rules strictly dictating the avoidance of contact with all unclean things and people (line 29).  It is thought this group was added to the caste system to incorporate newly conquered tribal groups (lines 26-27) or create workers to meet religious needs of higher castes (line 28). |
| 1. The author uses the analogy of the “rungs” of a ladder being like the caste system. Create an illustration that places the varna on these rungs. Use evidence from the text to label these rungs.
 | 1. Rung 1: Brahmins-priests (line 17)

        Rung 2: Kshatriya-warriors (line 17)        Rung 3: Vaishya- workers (lines 17-18)        Rung 4: Sudra- servants (line 18)        Rung 5: Untouchables- unclean servants (line 19) |
| 1. The author refers to the caste system as “remarkably” stable and rigid. What role does karma play in maintaining the rigidity of the caste system? Use textual evidence to support your answer.
 | 7. Karma helps keep the rigidity of the caste system because followers of Hinduism believe in reincarnation which is determined by ones karma from his or her past life (line 41).  They willingly accept their position in life, to improve their position in the next life (lines 42-43).  This leads to few challenges of the system from the lower castes and even fewer challenges from the upper castes because of their high social standing (lines 49-51). |
| 1. Why have some lower caste Indians converted to non-Hindu faiths? What is a consequence of this?
 | 8. Some lower caste Indians have converted to non-Hindu faiths as a way to challenge the caste system (line 52).  Religions like Islam, Christianity, and Jainism offer the chance to be equal in a way the caste system does not (line 53).  A consequence these converts face, however, is having to leave their families (lines 56-57). |

Writing Task:

Write an informative piece, using evidence from the text, to answer the following question.

*How has Indian culture been shaped by religious practices and beliefs?*

**Students will be able to:**

* Develop a topic with relevant facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.
* Use appropriate transitions to clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts.
* Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.
* Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from the information or explanation presented.