

# HANDOUT #1: HINDUISM IN ANCIENT INDIA ca. 2500 BC - 535 AD

Epic Age: A period of time from 1000 to 500 BC

Aryans: A group of people from Central Asia who migrated into North India around 1200 BC They were responsible for the Vedas.

Caste System: A form of social organization.

Monism: The belief that God and human beings are one.

Reincarnation: From the Sanskrit word samsara, meaning cycle of births and deaths. One's next birth is determined by the karma of previous births.

Dharma: The fulfillment of one's moral duty in this life so that the soul can make progress toward deliverance from punishment in the next life.

Karma: Deed or action. The law of Hinduism which states that whatever actions one does, those actions will bear fruits either in this life or in some future life.

Hinduism: Religion of the Hindus based originally on the Vedas.

Vedas: Large body of oral literature, preserved orally and in texts, sacred to the Hindus. Contains the prayers, chants, and sacrificial details, incantations and other musings and meditations of the Aryan people.

Upanishads: Body of the sacred literature composed between 800 and 400 BC Several of the most important, influential, and subtle concepts of Hinduism are articulated in the Upanishads.

# **HANDOUT #2: Overview of The Caste System of Ancient India**

## **UPPER CLASS**

**BRAHMAN:** Included both priests and Scholars

**KSHATRIYAS:** Included both rulers and warriors

## **MIDDLE CLASS**

**VAISYAS:** Included merchants, traders and farmers

## **LOWER CLASS**

**SUDRAS:** Consisted of peasants bound to the land

**OUTCASTES:** Also known as the Untouchables

In approximately 1500 BC a group of people known as the Aryans invaded India. The Aryans were a nomadic people and brought many new ideas to India, including their religion. Their religious beliefs were derived from the Vedas, a collection of their sacred writings of knowledge.

The caste system began in India after the Aryans invaded and established their own rules for governing the society. The Aryans prohibited marriages between their own people and people of the cultures they conquered.

During the Epic Age four classes of people emerged in India. They included the subgroups outlined in the chart of the caste system. The Untouchables were considered such a low group that they were never mentioned or acknowledged within the society.

Each caste had a specific place in society. They socialized, ate, married, worked and worshipped within their own caste. They would never consider marrying or working outside their caste.

Over time each of the five subgroups, or castes became subdivided into over 3,000 castes.

The Indians believed that they could attain a higher caste position by leading a good life. This belief was derived from the Hindu religious teachings of reincarnation. They also believed that they could be reincarnated into the body of an insect if they did not lead a good life in their current position.

# HANDOUT #3: GROUP ACTIVITY - The Caste System of Ancient India

After reading the handout titled "Overview: The Caste System of Ancient India" you are to discuss the handout with the members of your group.

Each person in your group should be wearing a name card, placing him or her into a specific Indian caste. You should treat the people in your group as if they are actually members of that caste.

THE BRAHMAN is the most important person in your group. Agree with anything s/he says. Do anything s/he tells you to. This is the wisest person in your group. Because s/he is so intelligent, any answer s/he gives is acceptable.

THE KSHATRIYA is the most important person in your group. Ask the Kshatriyan to protect you from the other groups in the room who may try to invade your group and steal your answers. Also, as the Kshatriya to keep the Untouchables out of your group.

THE VAISYAS is in an important caste, but, not nearly as important as the others already mentioned. Tell the Vaisya to record the answers on your assignment sheet. This is his job. The Vaisya may try to give you answers, however, they will be wrong, so laugh off anything s/he says.

THE SUDRAS have little importance to your group. Ignore anything the Sudras says. When the Brahman has finished expounding his profound knowledge and the Vaisya has recorded it, tell the Sudra to hand in the assignment sheet. Otherwise pretend s/he doesn't exist.

THE UNTOUCHABLES should be completely ignored. Do not talk to them nor should you acknowledge their presence in any way. If they come near you move away quickly so that you are not contaminated.

# HANDOUT #4: ASSIGNMENT SHEET

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

## **PART I. Answer the following questions:**

1. In the caste system which group of people fit into the Upper Class society?
2. What professions do the members of the upper class hold?
3. What is the name of the middle class?
4. What professions do the middle class work in?
5. How could one enter a higher caste?
6. If one's karma is bad what might happen?
7. The vedas is a collection of work from what group of people?
8. At what time in history did the caste system dominate the society of India?
9. From what two sources is the Hindu religion based?
10. What rule did the Aryans have about marriage?

## **PART II. DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS WITHIN YOUR GROUP.** Remember to follow the guidelines established in handout #2.

1. If you had lived during the Epic Age, how difficult do you think it would have been to follow the strict rules of the caste system?
2. Do you think people questioned the system? Why or why not?

©1993, Oklahoma Bar Association. All rights reserved, except any part may be reproduced for no-charge educational purposes, provided credit is given to publisher and author for its availability.