

Name _____

Cast: A Way of Living

Govindan, age 22, had just returned to his south Indian village from the university where he had completed his law studies. He was walking with his father, who owned a small paint factory, along a village street. Govindan stopped at a well set in a little square. It was hot; Govindan was thirsty. He began to lower the bucket to get a drink.

For a moment his father stood silent. Then, angry, he ordered Govindan away from the well. The reason for his anger was that this well was for a certain caste (social group) in the village -- and for that caste only. This was a lower caste than the one to which Govindan belonged. So he would have defiled himself, and his family as well, by drinking water from the well. The possibility of defilement was that had upset Govindan's father.

Govindan, like millions of others in India, no longer believed in caste customs, but he was not ready to defy them. Thus he obeyed his father immediately. Not to have done so, to have drunk the well water, would have been a serious violation of custom in the village, which still followed the traditional ways.

Indeed, If Govindan had remembered to which caste the well belonged, he never would have come near it. Although caste customs are becoming weaker each year in India, they are still powerful in many places, particularly the villages. In fact, caste customs are responsible for much of the condition of Indian society today.

Long centuries ago the Indian people began to divide into different groups, or classes. At first these were only separate classes, without the caste codes, which arose later. Then the most powerful groups found a way to strengthen and preserve their own privileges and position. At the top was a group called Brahmans. These were the priests and teachers. Next to the Brahmans were the statesmen and soldiers. Merchants and farmers made up the third. Common laborers and workers (serfs) were in the fourth and lowest group.

The first three groups are known even today as the twice born. Boys in these castes pass through a special ceremony when they are 10. A priest anoints the boy with oil, chants sacred verses, and then ties a sacred thread around the boy's body. He is now considered to have been born again. The thread, a reminder of caste obligations, will be worn until it rots away. Then it will be replaced many times during the boy's life.

Each of the four groups once had a carefully worked-out set of obligations and rights. The duty of the merchant and farmer caste, for instance, was to engage in commerce and trade and increase the wealth of the land. The ancient codes instructed a member of this group to know "the prices of mercantile commodities, especially of gems, pearls, coral, iron, cloth, perfumes, and liquids. He must be skilled in sowing seeds, in the qualities of land, in weights and measures, in the excellence and defects of articles of traffic, in the advantages and disadvantages of different districts, in the probable gain and loss on goods, in the breeding of cattle, in the wages of servants, in the various languages of men, in the best place for keeping cattle..."

By about the third century B.C., when the caste system began to take over the old four-class society, laws spelled out the relations between the castes. In later centuries these laws became a complex code. A Hindu could not marry someone of another caste. Nor could Hindus eat with those of a lower caste. It was equally forbidden for them to eat with people of a higher caste. Social functions such as weddings could not be attended by people of different castes.

Seating was another important aspect of caste. One student of Indian customs wrote: "The height of a seat one occupies is in direct ratio to the social position of the occupant. A man of a lower caste cannot sit in the presence of a man of higher caste. Men of the same caste, but having different social positions on account of differences in wealth or on account of some prejudice, may sit in one another's presence, but the lesser man must be careful to occupy a lower seat than his superior. If seats of the correct height are not available, the lesser man must stand. Social position being equal, age decides seniority."

Many of the ancient rules made clear the relative positions of the castes down to the most trivial detail. For instance, the stick which a Brahman used to brush his teeth had to be 12 inches long. A man from the warrior caste was instructed to use a stick 11 inches long. The two lower castes were told to use sticks of 10 or 9 inches.

Those in the higher castes, particularly the Brahmans, enjoyed many privileges under the old social system. If a low-caste person were for some reason to attack a Brahman, the person would be sentenced to death. But if a Brahman were to attack a low-caste person, the Brahman would only be reprimanded for becoming polluted by touching an inferior being.

It was the duty of all other castes to support the Brahmans, to give them money, food, and shelter if needed. If a man gave a Brahman a house, some of the codes said, the donor would be blessed with a palace in heaven. If he gave a Brahman a red cow, he would after death receive safe and swift passage across a terrifying river that the dead encountered on the way to the next world.

Brahmans, in turn, were instructed to be thrifty, kind, satisfied, and generous. They were never to get angry or tell lies, never to sing or dance, never to use an umbrella or wear sandals because this would make them too comfortable, and never to eat any kind of meat or kill any living thing.

Over the centuries, the four major castes were divided into thousands of subcastes. These subcastes were then divided into clans. The exact subcaste and clan to which a family belonged determined the specific occupation of the men in the family and the exact god or goddess, which the family worshipped.

For example, two men who belonged to the fourth caste, that of the laborers and workers, were in separate subcastes if the work they did differed. A carpenter and a blacksmith would not be in the same subcaste. Two men in the same subcaste might be in different clans if their families worshipped different gods. To complicate matters further, in some cases two families in different subcastes might regard themselves as particularly close if they happened to worship the same god.

Just as each of the major castes had regulations governing behavior, so each of the subcastes had its own exact rules. These covered every phase of life. For instance, the value and kind of gift one subcaste member should give to a member of another subcaste at various ceremonies was often specified. To give too much or too little was equally bad and could upset village relationships.

Within the subcaste system, some groups enjoyed a higher status than others. Just as a Brahman could not meet a member of a worker caste socially, so a member of a worker caste would not want to socialize with another worker of a lower subcaste.

The result of all this was an incredibly complex social system governed by an elaborate set of rules. It was an absolutely rigid system because people could not change the subcaste into which they had been born.

Outside the caste system entirely was still another group – the Untouchables. These were people whose work was sweeping streets, picking up refuse, treating animal hides, disposing of dead animals. Such work was thought to make them unclean.

Strict rules governed the behavior of the Untouchables and their relations with other groups. According to these rules, most of which are no longer strictly observed, Untouchables are not to come into any contact with caste members. Their touch or shadow was considered to be defiling or polluting.

In some regions, Untouchables had to wear tinkling bells around their necks to warn people of their coming. Before entering the gates of one city, Untouchables had to ring a gong hung at the entrance and so signal their approach.

INDIA: CASTE SYSTEM (COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS)

NAME _____

DATE _____

DIRECTIONS: After reading the selection on the Caste System in India, Please write out the answers to the following questions. You may work in groups of two.

1. Why was Govindan's father angry with him? _____

2. What is the responsible for much of the condition of Indian Society today? _____

3. What would happen if a low-caste person were to attacks a Brahman? _____

4. What duty did all other castes have toward Brahmins? _____

5. What determined the specific occupation of the men in the family and the exact god or goddess which the family worshipped? _____

6. How much might the caste system have to do with the condition of poverty-stricken people in India? _____

7. What effect might prejudice or discrimination have on the motivation or ability of people to succeed—in any society? _____

8. What are "rites of passage"? Would you consider the ceremony for some 10 year old Indian Boys to be called a "rite of passage"? _____

9. What kinds of discrimination are found in American society? Do you think this discrimination is as harsh as it is in India? _____

10. List another nation that we studied that had a very discriminatory policy toward one group of people? _____