# **CASTE SYSTEM**

The Aryans were a warrior group that moved across Asia. Early Aryans did not build cities and left few artifacts. Around 1500 BCE, they conquered the Indus Valley civilization. The Aryans gradually mixed with the people they conquered and learned new ways. They settled in villages to farm and raise cattle. About 800 BCE, the Aryans learned to make tools and weapons out of iron. With these, the Aryans carved out more territory in the Ganges river basin. Soon cities ruled by chiefs called rajahs arose. By 500 BCE, the Aryans had built a new Indian civilization.

Most of what we know about the Aryans comes from a collection of writings called the Vedas. The period from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE, is known as the Vedic Age, named for those writings. According to the Vedas, the Aryans were warriors who loved food, music and chariot racing. They organized people into social classes by occupation. This was the beginning of the caste system. Under this system, people stayed in the social class into which they were born.

The caste system was and continues to be considered religious law. Brahmans, those at the highest level of the caste system, were typically priests, earthly gods, religious leaders, or teachers. The next level was Kshatriyas, the wealthy ruling families, kings and warriors. These people owned most of the land and villages. The third caste was the Vaishyas, the business men, money-lenders, merchants and herders. The fourth caste was the Shudras, the laborers, shoemakers and leather workers. Below the Shudras were the Untouchables. They had no caste, and they performed chores no other caste would do, such as collecting dead oxen and sweeping the streets.

According to Hindu law, each caste had a strict set of duties. The only way a person became a member of a particular caste was by birth. One could not marry someone from another caste and one could not get a job outside of his or her caste. The Hindu idea of reincarnation kept the caste system alive. Hindus believe when a person dies, he or she is reincarnated as another being, hopefully in a higher caste. The only way to move to a higher caste in the next life is to strictly obey the rules (dharma) of one’s current caste.

The system is still prevalent in India, but has relaxed somewhat. Arranged marriages within a caste still occur, but occasionally people now marry outside their caste. Most of the jobs and government positions are open to different castes, and children are not required to pursue the occupations of their parents.

While many people still observe some aspects of the caste system it is no longer a law to observe the old rules. Many people, like Mahatma Gandhi, worked to end the caste system. Their work was rewarded by a proclamation in 1949 outlawing discrimination against the Untouchables and the lower castes.

1. Who were the Aryans?
2. What is the caste system?
3. Label the different castes on the pyramid below: