

Ancient Civilizations of Asia—India

Section 2



MAIN IDEAS

1. Indian society divided into distinct groups.
2. The Aryans formed a religion known as Brahmanism.
3. Hinduism developed out of Brahmanism and influences from other cultures.
4. The Jains reacted to Hinduism by breaking away.

Key Terms and Places

caste system a division of Indian society into groups based on a person’s birth, wealth, or occupation

reincarnation the belief that the soul, once a person dies, is reborn in a new body

karma the effects that good or bad actions have on a person’s soul

nonviolence the avoidance of violent actions

Section Summary

INDIAN SOCIETY DIVIDES

Aryan society was divided into social classes. There were four main groups, called *varnas*. The Brahmins (BRAH-muhns) were priests and were the highest ranking varna. The Kshatriyas (KSHA-tree-uhs) were rulers or warriors. The Vaisyas (VYSH-yuhs) were commoners, including farmers, craftspeople, and traders. The Sudras (soo-drahs) were laborers and servants.

Eventually a more complex **caste system** developed, dividing Indian society into many groups based on birth, wealth, or occupation. Castes were family based. If you were born into a caste, you would probably stay in it for your whole life. Life for the lower castes was difficult, but those who had no caste, called untouchables, were ostracized.

Rank the main groups of the Aryan social classes in order of importance, with one (1) being highest and four (4) being the lowest:

- Brahmins
- Sudras
- Kshatriyas
- Vaisyas

In ancient India, why was it important to belong to some caste?

BRAHMANISM

Because Aryan priests were called Brahmins, the Aryan religion became known as Brahmanism. Brahmanism was perhaps the most important part

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of ancient Indian life, as shown by the high status of the priest caste. The religion was based on the four Vedas, writings that contained ancient sacred hymns and poems. Over time, Aryan Brahmins and scholars wrote their thoughts about the Vedas. These thoughts were compiled into Vedic texts. The texts described rituals, such as how to perform sacrifices, and offered reflections from religious scholars.

HINDUISM DEVELOPS

Hinduism is India's largest religion today. It developed from Brahmanism and other influences. Hindus believe that there are many gods, but all gods are part of a universal spirit called Brahman. Hindus believe everyone has a soul, or *atman*, and the soul will eventually join Brahman. This happens when the soul recognizes that the world we live in is an illusion. Hindus believe this understanding takes several lifetimes, so **reincarnation**, or rebirth, is necessary. How you are reborn depends upon your **karma**, or the effects of good or bad actions on your soul. In the caste system, those who have good karma are born to higher castes. Those with bad karma are born into lower castes or maybe even an animal.

What is the Hindu name for the soul?

Think about why you believe that the real world actually exists. Do you think you can prove that it does?

JAINS REACT TO HINDUISM

The religion of Jainism developed in reaction to Hinduism. Jains believe in injuring no life, telling the truth, not stealing, and not owning property. Jains also practice **nonviolence**, or *ahimsa*. This emphasis on nonviolence comes from the belief that everything in nature is part of the cycle of rebirth.

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY

Critical Thinking: Drawing Inferences Do *ahimsa*, reincarnation, or karma have relevance in our society today? Pick one of these terms and write a one-page essay on how it may or may not be important in your life.