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Date: _____

The Aryans and the Caste System

About 1500BC, powerful nomadic warriors known as Aryans began to appear in northern India. Their skill on horseback allowed the Aryans to conquer the native people and to expand south into the subcontinent. The Aryans spoke Sanskrit, a language that is similar to what is spoken in Europe, but unlike the Dravidian languages spoken in India before the Aryan invasion. The similarities with European languages suggest the Aryans may have migrated to India from Central Asia, but we cannot be sure because the writings of the Aryans do not suggest they came from somewhere else.

The Aryans wrote songs and stories about their gods. The stories were called the Vedas. The Vedas were handed down by word of mouth for hundreds of years until about 500BC, when the Aryans learned to write. The *Rig Veda* is a collection of more than 1000 songs that survives to this day. The influence of these stories is why the period of Indian history lasting from about 1500BC to 322BC is known as the Vedic Age.

About 1000BC, the Aryans discovered iron ore in the Ganges River Valley. The Aryans used the iron to build strong plows to grow crops. They also used iron weapons to control the Dravidian people and to impose a rigid social structure called the caste system.

Caste members lived, ate, married, and worked with their own group. A person born into one caste rarely changed castes or mixed with members of other castes.

At the top of the caste system were the Brahmin and the Kshatriya (KUH SHAT REE YUHZ). The Brahmin were the priests, teachers, and judges who understood dharma. Dharma were the spiritual laws that the people of ancient India believed governed the universe. The Brahmin often lived apart from the rest of society in temples. The Kshatriya were the warrior caste who made everyday decisions and ran the government. The Kshatriya had most of the power in everyday life, but their decisions could be overruled by the Brahmin.

The Vaishya were skilled farmers and merchants. They occasionally had leadership positions in local villages. The unskilled workers were of the Sudras caste. Members of the Sudras caste often worked on the farms of the people of higher castes.

Foreigners, lawbreakers, people from isolated tribes, and people suffering from contagious diseases were called the untouchables or “outcastes.” Members of this caste were traditionally regarded as unsuitable for personal relations with people in the caste system. These “untouchables” had jobs or habits that involved “polluting

activities” such as having a job that involved ending a life. Caste members were vegetarians, so people who ate meat or fish were not accepted into their society. Untouchables were hired to do work that members of the caste system would not do. These jobs included killing or disposing of dead cattle or working with their hides. The untouchables also worked as sweepers, washers, or in other jobs that required contact with human emissions such as sweat, urine, or feces.

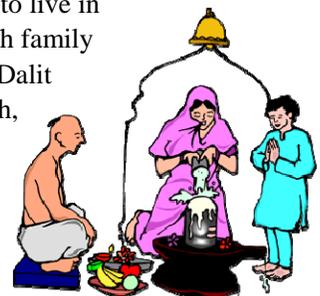
Untouchables were often forbidden to enter temples, schools and wells where caste members drew water. In some parts of India, even the sight of untouchables was thought to be polluting. The untouchables were often forced to sleep during the day and work at night. The caste system became less rigid as the Indian people were exposed to outside ideas. Many untouchables left their rigid social structure by converting to Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity.

Gandhi referred to the untouchables as the Harijan, a term that means “blessed” because Gandhi believed the Harijan were blessed by their suffering. In modern usage, Gandhi’s term has been rejected as demeaning. The Harijan prefer call themselves the Dalit, a term that can be translated as “oppressed.” The Indian government has provided the Dalit with specific employment privileges, and granted them special representation in the Indian parliament. Despite such measures, the Dalit continue to have fewer educational and employment opportunities than Indians whose families belonged to the caste system.

The British controlled part or all of the Indian subcontinent from 1612 to 1947. The British thought that caste members believed they would have to live out their lives in a particular caste in order to be reborn into a higher caste. We now know that some Indian people did have an opportunity to join higher castes, but this didn’t happen very often.

Discrimination against the Dalit has been forbidden by the Indian Constitution since 1950 but many of India’s 160 million Dalit continue to live in poverty. Indian people with family names associated with the Dalit often face prejudice, though, the Indian people elected a Dalit to the presidency.

K. R. Narayanan served in that position from 1997 to 2002.



*This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.



Name: _____

Fill in the Blanks

The Aryans were n_m_d_c horsemen first appeared in n_r_h_rn India about 1000 years before the C_m_on E_a. The stories and songs of the A_y_n gods were collected a volume called the R____ V____. The Rig Veda is written in S_n_k_t, the language of the Aryans. Sanskrit is related to E_r_pe_n languages, but *ar_h_e_l_g_sts have not yet found a connection between the A_y_ns and other cultures.

The Aryans used their knowledge of i____n weapons to impose a r_g_d social structure called the c_s_e system. Caste members generally l_v_d, ate, w_rk_d and m_r_i_d within their own groups. The Brahman were the p_i_s_s and j_d_es at the t_p of the caste system. The Brahmin lived apart from the rest of Indian societies in t_m_l_s where they studied D_ar_a. Dharma were the s_i_i_u_l laws the ancient Indians believed g_v_r_ed the u_i_er_e. The everyday activities of Indian society were controlled by the Kshatriya w_r_i_rs. Skilled laborers composed the V_i_h_a caste, while *u_s_i_l_d laborers belonged to the Sudras caste.

The u_t_u_h_bl_s were people not allowed into the caste system. The untouchables were forced to work in dirty and unsafe environments and do jobs the members of the castes were unwilling to do. Gandhi called the untouchables the H_r_j_n, but the preferred term today is Dalit, a term that means o_p_e_s_d. The caste system has been illegal in India for more than ____ years, but many of India's 160 million Dalit continue to live in p_v_r_y.

Answer in complete sentences

1. What was the caste system?

2. Why is 1500BC to 322BC known as the Vedic Age of Indian history?

*3. Why do you think the Brahmin were more important in Indian society than the Kshatriya?

4. Why were some people not allowed to join the caste system?

*5. What statement in the text suggests that the Dalit face less discrimination today than in the past?

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