

# Hinduism caste system assignment

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Question: 3 ??? The Caste System The origins of the complex hierarchy of the Hindu caste system can be tracked back to the Vedic ages. The principle of the caste system is based upon that a person's status in society can be placed in a block of a pyramid, the higher you rise up the pyramid the closer you get to reaching Moksha. 1 Moksha is the ultimate spiritual goal for a Hindu, where the soul is liberated from the cycle of death and rebirth, and the soul merges with the Supreme Reality. Caste placement is hereditary; you cannot switch out of the caste you are born into. Women were not considered part of the caste system; they led the lifestyle of the caste affiliated to their father or husband. 1 Thus, being born to a higher caste was an indication that one had lived their previous lives in a sacred manner. So those who belonged to the higher castes had to be very careful and diligent to lead a virtuous life to keep good Karma, so they would not regress to a lower caste in the next life cycle, or even worse, reincarnate as an animal. The law of Karma is the notion that our actions today will have a direct effect on how we will lead the rest of our life, and which caste we will be placed during the next reincarnation. 2 The caste system consisted of four main classes: 1. The highest level of caste being the Brahmins; they are "priests and philosophers, specialists in the life of the spirit" 1. Dharma is the responsibilities and duties of a Hindu according to the caste he is born into; this is done to control the social, moral and cosmic order. The Dharma of a Brahmin was to study the Vedas and perform the religious rituals, and maintain high customary standards of ritual purity. 3 2. "Valour, chivalry, forgiveness, ability to rule are the characteristics of the Kshatriyas", this is the second most important caste consisting of kings, warriors and vassals. 3 Dharma of the Kshatriyas was to act as the protectors of peace. 1 3.

Vaishyas, is the caste group of farmers and merchants. Their Dharma was to be involved in the trade aspect and provide economic stability to the society.  
3 4.

Shudras are the lowest of the original four castes. They were manual labourers and artisans. They were allowed to participate in the Hindu religion, but being servants to the higher three castes, they were not allowed to study the Vedas. 1 According to the Code of Manu, they were not allowed to own land<sup>5</sup> and in the Asnudasana Parva, Section CXXXV it states that "... those Brahmans that take their food from Shudras, take dirt of the earth...".  
3 The code of Manu (Manu Smriti) compiled between 100-300 BCE, is regarded as the foundation of Hindu Laws.

These laws instruct Hindus on how they should approach their lives in all aspects, from dietary restriction to purification rites, social laws to marriage laws<sup>1</sup>. In verses 87 and 92, " But in order to protect this universe He, the most resplendent one, assigned separate (duties and) occupations to those who sprang from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet .. Man is stated to be purer above the navel (than below); hence the Self-existent (Svayambhu) has declared the purest (part) of him (to be) his mouth... 5 From these two verses, the four castes are associated with four parts of the human body, the parts above the naval which are the mouth and arms represent, the Brahmans and Kshatriyas, who are considered higher castes compared to the other two. Initially called the " Untouchables", this class was treated the worst; being considered to be lower than all castes. These were the people who swept the streets, worked with leather from the skins of dead cows and

removed human waste and corpses, performing labour that was considered repulsive to others.

They were considered outcasts from society and may not come into physical contact with one of the four castes. <sup>1</sup> This system continued till Mahatma Gandhi started the Indian independence movement towards the beginning of the 20th century. He states that the introduction of the ‘untouchables’ into the caste system was created at the “lowest ebb” of Indian history. Instead of ‘untouchables’, he introduced them as Harijans, ‘the children of God’. From a purely religious standpoint, I would say that this was a well thought out system, as everyone in the society strives to lead a more holy, virtuous lifestyle to achieve Moksha. From a political perspective, I would say that this system maintains social order as it places each person in a role that society requires. When a religion discriminates its followers by castes, I personally think it is just a socially accepted form of bigotry. We should all be seen as a product of humanity, a Harijan.