

India's Caste System

Civilization in India began in the Indus River Valley. Settlements developed as farmers raised crops in rich soil left behind by the river's yearly floods. The small farming communities grew into large cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. The Indus River Valley civilization did well until invaders from central Asia took over around 1500 B.C. This group of nomadic warriors, called the Aryans, eventually took over all of India.



The Aryans looked down on the Indians, whom they ruled over. A set of four main class divisions, called the caste system, developed in India. The caste system was based in part upon skin color. Aryans had lighter skin than the Indians. A person's position in society depended on which class he or she belonged to. People were born into their caste for life. Caste membership determined what kind of job a person could have. It also decided whom a person could marry.

Brahmins, or priests, led religious ceremonies, and the Aryans thought religion was very important. Therefore, *Brahmins* made up the highest class in the caste system. Below the *Brahmins* were the *Kshatriyas*, or warriors, and below them were the *Vaisyas*, or peasants. A fourth group of non-Aryan workers, called the *Sudras*, eventually formed.

At the bottom of the caste system were the untouchables. Members of the four castes thought the untouchables were not even human. The untouchables were considered to be impure, or "dirty," by the other groups. It was important to be spiritually pure, so the untouchables did the jobs that were considered impure. For example, untouchables worked as butchers, gravediggers, and garbage collectors.

To touch or even talk to an untouchable was thought to hurt a person's spiritual purity. Purity was so important that untouchables were forced to warn others that they were coming near. They had to ring a bell, tap two sticks together, or make some other warning noise.

As time passed, the four castes became more complex. Hundreds of subdivisions developed. India's caste system lasted from 1500 B.C. until less than a hundred years ago. Discrimination based on the caste system was finally outlawed in India in the 1950s A.D.



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Multiple Choice

Circle the best answer, and write the letter in the box.

1. The Indus River Valley cities were taken over by invaders from central _____.

- A. Africa
- B. Asia
- C. America
- D. Europe

2. _____ were at the top of the caste system.

- A. Priests
- B. Warriors
- C. Peasants
- D. Non-Aryan workers

3. The _____ were thought to be impure.

- A. *Kshatriyas*
- B. *Vaisyas*
- C. untouchables
- D. all of the above

4. Caste membership determined _____.

- A. a person's position in society
- B. what kind of job a person could have
- C. whom a person could marry
- D. all of the above

5. Discrimination based on the caste system in India was finally outlawed in the _____.

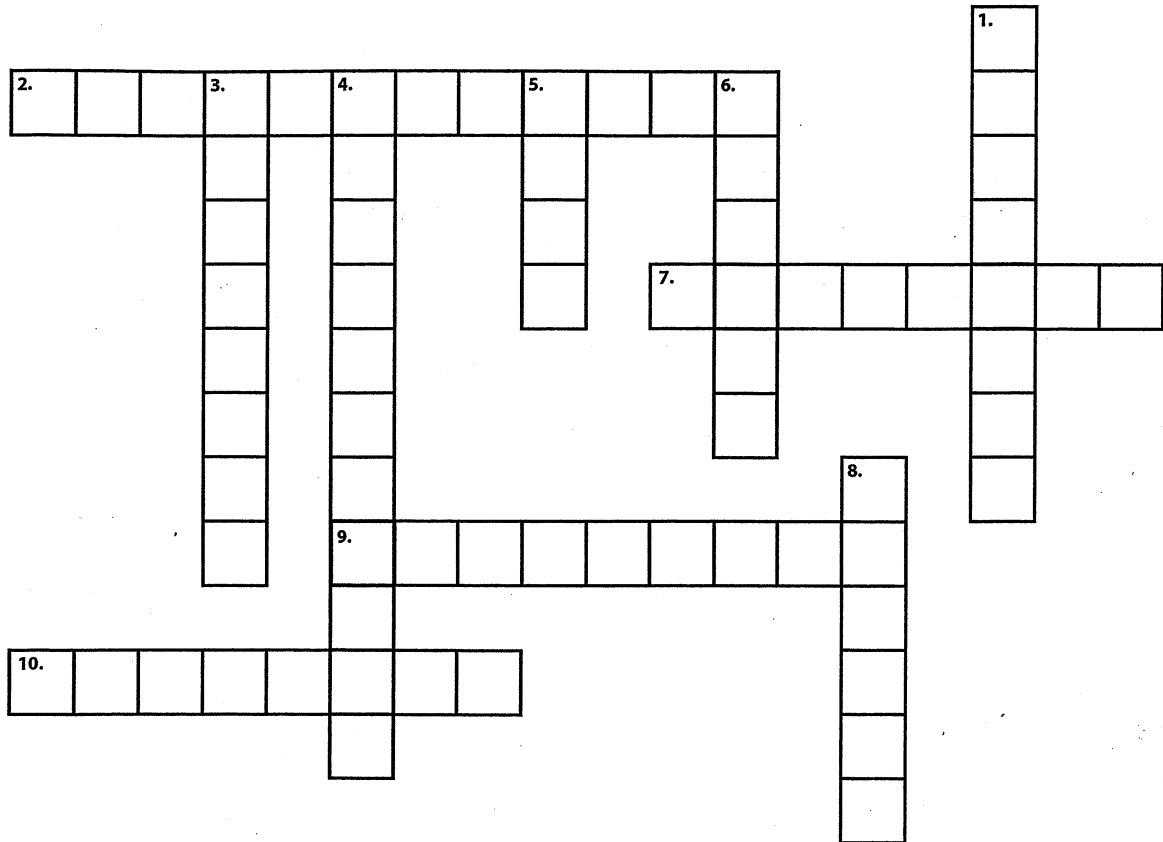
- A. 1500s B.C.
- B. 1500s A.D.
- C. 1750s A.D.
- D. 1950s A.D.



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Crossword Puzzle

Write the best answer in each blank, and complete the crossword puzzle.



ACROSS

2. _____ worked as butchers, gravediggers, and garbage collectors.
7. The _____ were priests.
9. In part, the caste system was based upon _____.
10. As time passed, the caste system included _____ of subdivisions.

DOWN

1. The *Kshatriyas* were _____.
3. Discrimination based on the caste system was finally _____ in the 1950s A.D.
4. The _____ was a set of class divisions.
5. Untouchables had to ring a/an _____ to warn others that they were coming near.
6. The _____ were non-Aryan workers.
8. The _____ invaded the Indus River Valley.