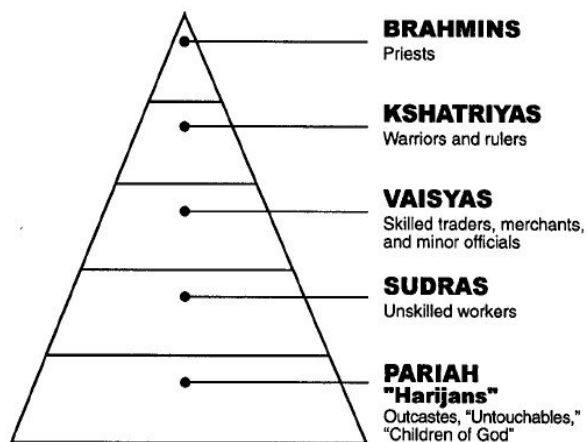


Culture VI-Class 10

The Caste System

Origins of the Caste System

- There are many theories on how the caste system originated
- One theory suggests that it originated based on skin color
 - When Aryans came to India, they were light skinned
 - The native people were dark skinned
 - That is why the caste system is also referred to as Varna Vyavastha (Varna means skin color) and Vyavastha means system or arrangement
- Another theory is called Purusha Sukta and it can be vaguely traced back to Rig Veda
 - During vedic rituals a Cosmic Being emerged
 - Brahmins flowed from his mouth
 - Kshatriyas from his arms
 - Vaisyas from his thighs
 - Sudras from his feet
- The Caste Pyramid



Description of the Caste System

- Brahmins were priestly caste, allowed to study Vedas and perform religious rituals and teach people

- Kshatriyas were the warrior caste, their duty was to protect people
- Vaisyas were the merchant class, their duty was trade and commerce, farming
- Sudras were the laborer caste and their duty was to serve the three classes
- Dalits, the lowest class did the jobs that nobody else would do

Characteristics of the Caste System

- Caste was determined by birth. Very rarely people were allowed to change caste
- Inter –caste marriages were prohibited with exceptions
 - Higher caste men could marry lower caste women but not vice versa
- Only the three higher castes were allowed to study the Vedas
- Being born in a certain caste was thought to be the consequence of our actions from past birth-karma
- Caste was also thought to be a result of three gunas or qualities
 - Sattva was characterized by purity, spirituality which manifested itself as knowledge, intelligence, piousness. Such quality was possessed by Brahmins
 - Rajas was characterized by egoism, materialism and manifested itself as ambition, pride, desire for wealth and power. Kshatriyas and Vaisyas were said to have this quality
 - Tamas was characterized by lethargy and manifested itself as lack of ambition, ignorance, negative attitude, uncleanliness. Sudras were said to have this quality

Advantages of the Caste System

- Continuity of tradition- strong belief in the caste system resulted in the tradition being passed down from one generation to the next
- Division of labor- everyone knew what they were supposed to do
- Unity- people from the same caste bonded together
- Purity of lineages- because inter caste marriages were not common

- Unity in diversity- since caste system was believed to be derived from the vedas, all castes worked together to preserve this sacred law or dharma

Disadvantages of the Caste System

- Exploitation of the weak- the three higher castes were able to exploit people from lower caste
- Preferential treatment- The three higher castes were able to get opportunities which were denied to those from lower caste
- Foreign domination- caste system prevented people from coming together to fight against invaders
- Conversion to other religions- many people who wanted to escape the caste system converted to other religions
- Untouchability- caste system also created a class of people that were ostracized from society

Caste System Today

- After Independence, the caste system was abolished and many people from lower castes were now able to choose the profession they wanted
- Many political leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar led the effort to uplift untouchables
- But unofficially it still exists in villages and cities

Interesting Facts

- In Dashaavatar, Lord Vishnu was incarnated as a Kshatriya- Parshuram, Ram and Krishna and as a Brahmin-Vamana
- Parshuram was a brahmin who became a Kshatriya and Vishwamitra was a Kshatriya who became brahmin. Valmiki was a thief and Sudra and he became a brahmin
- Jawaharlal Nehru was a brahmin and Mahatma Gandhi was a vaisya
- Former President of India, KR Narayanan was a Dalit
- Caste system was also seen in other cultures such as Roman and Nordic cultures
- Greek philosopher Plato had also proposed a social order based on professions

- An order similar to but not as rigid as the caste system is also evident in Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and other religions