

◀ The land where Hinduism developed. Find the River Indus. The orange-shaded areas show where most Hindus live now

**H**induism is older than any other living religion. Hindus believe that it has always existed and always will exist. This book will use the word Hinduism, but Hindus themselves usually call it Sanatana Dharma. It means the **Eternal Law**.

The word Hindu comes from the River Indus. It was first used by the Persians. In the beginning it described the region and the people who lived there and not just their religion.

Hinduism developed gradually as different groups of people met and shared their ideas and their ways of practising their beliefs. Some rituals and ideas stayed the same, while others died out. Some got mixed up together and became new ones.

India is an enormous country, over fourteen times the size of Britain. The northern part is close to the Himalayas, a *land of snow*. The south is near the Equator, very warm all the year round.

People in different areas live in different ways. They have different languages and ways of dressing. So, as Hinduism slowly spread from the north to the south, it developed in different ways in different parts of the country. But most people came to share the same basic beliefs.

Hinduism has developed its beliefs and ceremonies over thousands of years. New ideas have been introduced and placed alongside old ones.

It is a rich, fertile religion that is like a luxurious growth, with many branches, leaves and flowers.

It can be confusing to outsiders, with its many rituals, symbols, stories and scriptures. Many non-Hindus ask questions about the holy statues of many gods and goddesses. Hindus appear to worship more than one God; though some do, many do not. There are varieties of belief.

- Some Hindus are polytheists, worshipping many deities.
- Some Hindus treat all the deities as aspects of one God.
- Others see only some deities as aspects of one God, with others being lesser divine beings, or holy souls, rather like the angels and saints in Christianity.

As some of the earliest Scriptures state:

- God is One, but wise men call Him by different names.

*Rig Veda 1.164.46*

To many Hindus, the various gods and goddesses represent different forms and aspects of the one God.

There were people living near the River Indus about five thousand years ago. They built large cities. One of these was called Mohenjo-daro. Archaeologists have dug up this city and discovered many things about the Indus people and their civilisation.

They found that the ancient people here had brick houses and paved streets. There was running water and a drainage system. It was an advanced civilisation for its time. (People in Britain were living in simple villages and huts at this time.)

There were female statues which looked like mother goddesses in Mohenjo-daro. They often had smoke stains on them, as if there had been a lamp burning in front of them.

Dead people were buried. Often they were given food and drink to take with them on their journey to the next life. The bowls and cups sometimes had pictures of animals, and gods and goddesses on them.

The Aryans came to the River Indus from Central Asia about 3,500 years ago. Their name means 'noble people'. They worshipped round a fire, on which they made sacrifices, including animals. There were three main reasons for this:

- It showed that they were sorry for doing wrong, and pardoned their sins.
- It formed a link between them and their ancestors.

- It persuaded the gods to make them healthy and rich, and give them lots of children and cattle.

Aryan gods were connected with the sky and everything to do with the sky, like the sun and the wind. Gods were more important than goddesses.

At first the Aryans fought the Indus people. They believed that Indra, god of thunder, helped them in battle. This is how one of their holy books describes him.

- Without whom men do not conquer, whom when fighting they call on for help; who has been a match for everyone, who moves the immovable: he, O man, is Indra.

But sometimes groups of Aryans made friends with the local people and joined with them to attack other groups. Others began to live near to each other in peace. They found out about each other's religions and way of life. They traded with each other and intermarried.

Aryans settled down and built large cities, mainly along the River Ganges in Northern India. Some of their ideas began to change as they mixed with the local people. For example, they began to feel it was wrong to kill animals to offer to the gods.



A residential area of Mohenjo-daro ▶

The archaeological remains at Mohenjo-daro show how modern Hindus still draw some of their practices from their ancient heritage – ritual bathing, and praying before the sacred fire.

Most religions use water and fire in their worship, in different ways – candles, lamps, washing before prayer, or sprinkling with holy water. Deep truths and feelings are symbolised by these elements.

Water is cleansing, fresh, and gives life.

Fire burns bright, suggesting the light of truth, and the power of God.



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▲ Hindus today carry out many ceremonies in front of a holy fire

1. Copy this paragraph into your book, choosing the correct words from the brackets.  
Sanatana Dharma means (Endless Story; Eternal Law). The Indus people lived near the River (Inn; Indus). Aryan means (noble; noisy). Hinduism developed in modern-day (America; India). It contains the ideas of (one group; many groups) of people.
2. On a clean page, copy the map on page 4. Use your atlas to find the modern names of the orange-shaded countries. Write them on your map and colour those countries in orange.
3. a) Give three reasons why the Aryans worshipped their gods.  
b) For each, say whether or not you think it is a good reason. Explain your answers.
4. c) Write your own description of the god Indra.  
d) Write down three words which you think describe the way the Aryans felt about Indra. Give your reason for each.

If you had to divide your class into sets, how would you do it? Maybe you would divide everyone according to how much pocket money they get. Or you might have twelve sets, grouping together people with the same birthday month.

If you grouped by amounts of pocket money, people would probably be in a different set if you asked them again the following year. But if you chose the second way, each person would always belong to the same set.

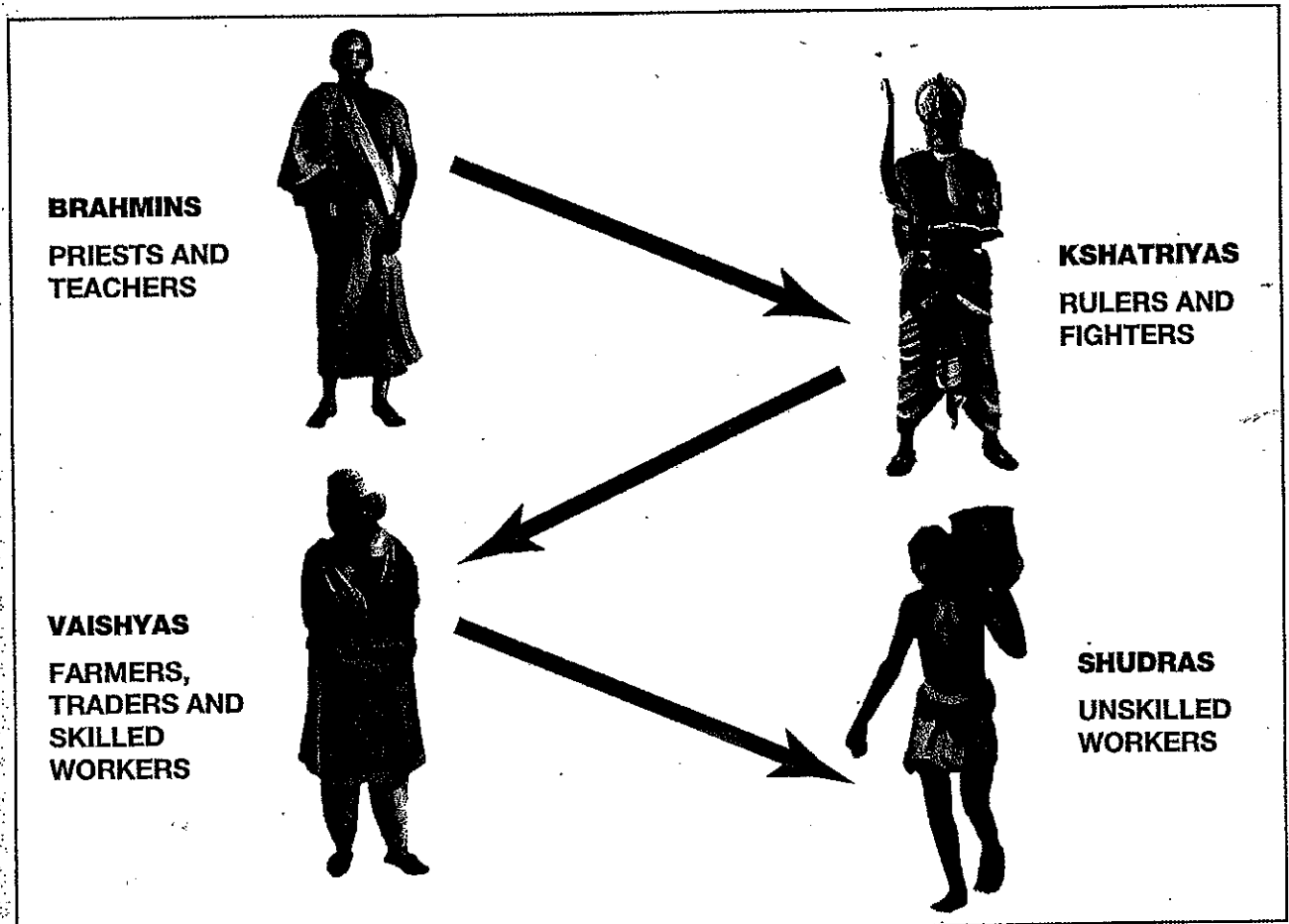
Hindus believe that people are divided into sets called varnas or classes. Some believe that each person belongs to the same varna for their whole life. Some think birth decides your varna, others your skill and merits.

There are four varnas, and in each one there are hundreds of smaller groups called jati. These divide people according to their traditional jobs. At one time, a Hindu could only do a certain job if he or she belonged to a particular caste.

There was an important reason for the caste system. Hindus believe that everyone has a special duty. This duty is called dharma. It means holy law.

A Hindu's dharma depends partly on which caste he or she belongs to. Those with certain skills have a duty to use them.

The varna you are born into is thought to depend on your actions in previous lives i.e. your Karma. Here are the varnas in order of importance.



▲ The varnas in order of importance

There is also a fifth group of people. These do not belong to any class. They are sometimes called Untouchables. They do the really unpleasant jobs like cleaning the roads and toilets and getting rid of dead animals.

Until about fifty years ago Untouchables could not go into a high-caste temple, or into a house belonging to a Hindu in one of the three highest classes. They had to have their own wells. They could only travel by train if there was a special compartment for them. Today they are still among the poorest people in Hindu society.

Some Hindus will only mix closely with members of their own caste. They will only eat with people from the same caste. And they will not marry anyone from another caste.



▲ Untouchables do the unpleasant jobs

**SUITABLE match for vegetarian.** Punjabi Brahmin girl, 22, M.A., Delhi University. Early marriage. Box 18888-CA. Hindustan Times New Delhi - 1.

**MATCH for a Punjabi Khatri,** issueless divorcee, 38, lady doctor. First marriage was a brief affair: she was duped by a cheat. Caste no bar. Apply in full details. Box 73452-CH Hindustan Times New Delhi - 1.

**MATCH for Hindu Arora** Punjabi pretty girl, 21, B.A., Diploma in Teaching, daughter of retired army officer. Caste no bar. Box 71963-M Hindustan Times New Delhi - 1.

▲ Sometimes parents advertise for marriage partners for their children

Nowadays, it is illegal to discriminate against people because of their caste. But many Hindus still prefer to keep to their own caste, as this Hindu woman explains.

● Only people from our own caste can come here and eat with us off our plates. If we went out to eat it would only be with our own caste. There would never be any question of us eating with Untouchables. When we give food to our servant, he either eats off his own plate or we give him a clay plate which is then tossed away.

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Historians debate how and why the caste system began. Many assume the Aryans made the earlier people of India into the two lower varnas, while they were the religious leaders and warriors. One of the old hymns in the Vedas declares that humans were made from one first man, and his many parts divided up into the varnas. The Brahmins were his mouth, his arms were the warriors, his thighs the farmers and traders, and his feet the craftsmen and workers. (Craftsmen who worked for someone else, and were not financially independent, belonged to the fourth varna.)

It is not clear how rigid this system was or what jobs people did until later on in Indian history. According to scholars, the laws of Manu were written between 200BCE and 200CE. These laid down long lists of rules for what type of work a caste member could do. Spiritual pollution was a key to this – the dirtier the job, the more polluting it was, and the higher castes could not work at these. The dirtiest jobs were for the Untouchables, and, to this day, leather workers tend to be from this group, as touching the skins of dead animals was forbidden to members of the four varnas.

There is a different tradition about the varnas in Hinduism, which might have been the oldest and purest. This rejects a rigid, hereditary system, and a person's varna is decided by their personality, their skills, their gifts, and their merits. This means that you can become a member of a different varna, if thought worthy, even though you are not born into it, by developing the right skills and attitudes. An old story tells of a youth who went to study with a holy man. When asked who his father was, he said he would have to go and ask his mother. His mother admitted that she did not know – she had been a society woman, living a wild life in her youth. He went back and told the holy man that he had no idea. The holy man stared at him and then said, 'I accept you as a Brahmin, for your soul is honest!'

The Gita gives this different idea of the four varnas. There, spiritual character and ability decide caste and not just birth:

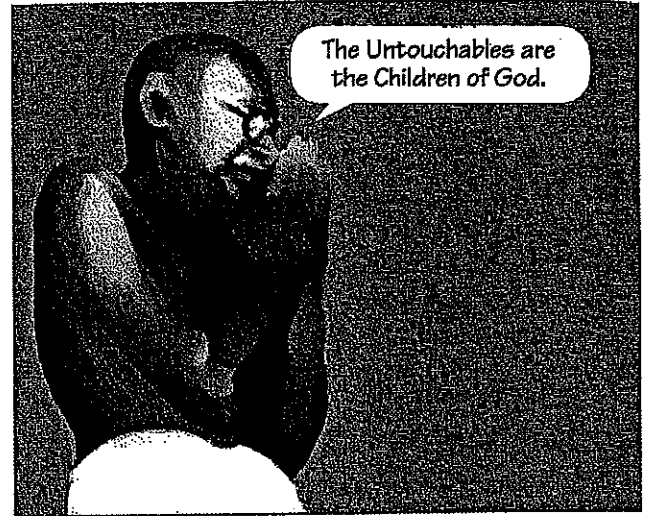
- Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religiousness – they are the qualities by which the Brahmins work righteous.

*Gita 18:42*

This more creative, spiritual understanding of caste is not accepted by all, for some say that to have these qualities you must also be born in the right caste. The spiritual interpretation allows for Western converts to Hinduism, born out of the caste system, to become Hindu priests. This is true of those who have joined the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. They are accepted by most Hindus in India.

Untouchables are now referred to as 'dalits', 'the oppressed class', and many of them are the poorest in India. Gandhi campaigned for them, calling them 'the Children of God'. Some have gained an education and have risen to great things in Indian society, for example Ambedkar, who helped write the Indian Constitution in 1947.

Indian universities have actively encouraged lower castes to gain places in more recent years. An Indian President, K.R. Narayanan, was previously a dalit.



▲ Gandhi championed the rights of the Untouchables

In modern India, the caste system still exerts great influence in the villages, where members of different jatis form guilds that help each other. It is breaking down in the towns, though, where many different jobs need to be done, and education is now more widely available. Most Temples are now open to all castes, but considerations of varna are most noticeable in marriage arrangements.

1. a) Discuss the advantages of following the same career as your parents.  
b) Imagine that you are being told that you have to do the same job as your parents, but you feel you have different skills and interests. Work out a role play in groups, where you have an argument and try to explain how you feel.
2. a) Name the different varnas.  
b) What were Hindus called who did not belong to a caste, and what are they called today?  
c) What kind of jobs did this lower group do, and why?  
d) What did Gandhi call this group? What point was he trying to make?
3. a) Why do people think the caste system began?  
b) How have things changed in modern day India?  
c) What does the Gita teach?  
d) Why can some Westerners become Hindu priests, even if they are not born in the Brahmin caste?
4. a) Think about groups in our own society. Are any disadvantaged through no fault of their own?  
b) Identify aspects of a class system in our own society.