

Caste

Sociology skills

- Analysis and Interpretation

Key skills

- Communication

Stimulus materials

Caste

This is a very ancient system of dividing people and the best-developed form is found in India. In theory, it was abandoned in 1949 when India gained Independence from the political control of Britain. Under caste, people are born into a position in society and a job. They have no choices over their work. A street-sweeper marries a street sweeper and their children will be street sweepers. From birth, a person's life is mapped out until death. This is known as a closed system of stratification.

Each caste is has different food rules and clothing styles. Members of different castes may not speak to or eat with each other. Some caste groups have become physically different over the years. The system of caste has developed over more than 2,000 years in India and there are four main castes, and a group of non-caste members known as **harijan** or untouchables. Each caste group is divided into hundreds of thousands of sub-caste groups known as **jati**.

There are four main castes:

- **Brahmins** are priestly aristocrats and of high status. They are usually vegetarians.
- **Kshatriyas** were warrior princes in the past.
- **Vaisya** are traders and sellers of goods
- **Sudra** are peasants and land workers.

Harijan people are **non-caste members** or **untouchables**. They are called untouchable because no one may touch them without being spiritually dirty (ritual pollution). Harijans do all the horrible jobs such as leather working and toilet cleaning.

Understanding the stimulus

1. In which culture did the best example of the caste system develop?
2. When was the caste system outlawed in India?
3. How many castes are there?
4. What is a closed system of stratification?
5. Which caste position is considered the highest under Hinduism?
6. What is a harijan?
7. Describe the caste position of a harijan in your own words.
8. How do members of the different castes behave differently from one another?