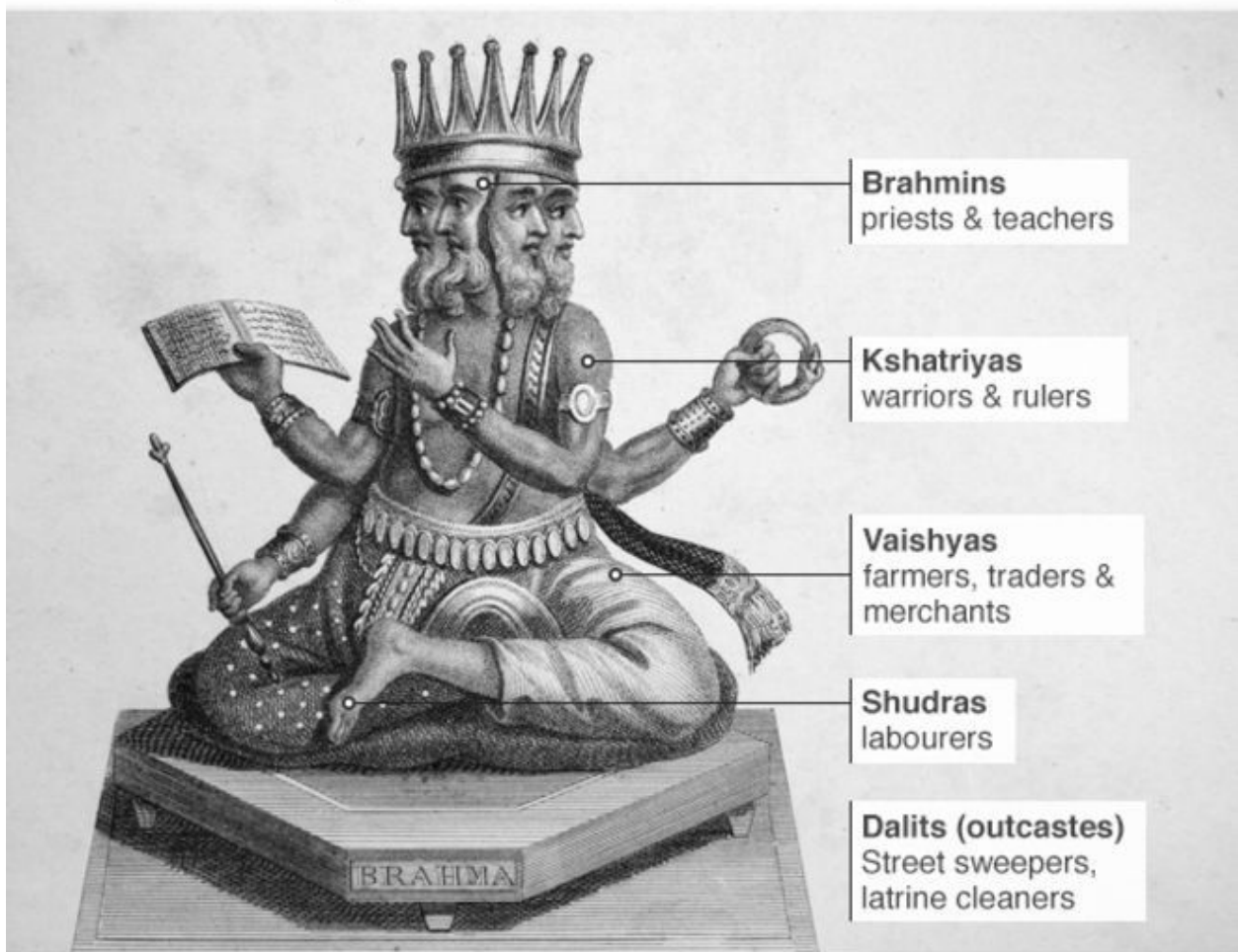


Caste System in India

India's caste system is among the world's oldest forms of surviving social stratification. The BBC explains its complexities.

The system which divides **Hindus** into rigid hierarchical groups based on their karma (work) and dharma (the Hindi word for religion, but here it means duty) is generally accepted to be more than 3,000 years old.

Brahma and the origins of caste



Source: Alamy

BBC

How did caste come about?

Manusmriti, widely regarded to be the most important and authoritative book on Hindu law and dating back to at least 1,000 years before Christ was born, "acknowledges and justifies the caste system as the basis of order and regularity of society".

The caste system divides Hindus into four main categories - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. Many believe that the groups originated from Brahma, the Hindu God of creation.

At the top of the hierarchy were the Brahmins who were mainly teachers and intellectuals and are believed to have come from Brahma's head. Then came the Kshatriyas, or the warriors and rulers, supposedly from his arms. The third slot went to the Vaishyas, or the traders, who were created from his thighs. At the bottom of the heap were the Shudras, who came from Brahma's feet and did all the menial jobs.

The main castes were further divided into about 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes, each based on their specific occupation.

Outside of this Hindu caste system were the achhoots - the Dalits or the untouchables.

How does caste work?

For centuries, caste dictated almost every aspect of Hindu religious and social life, with each group occupying a specific place in this complex hierarchy.

Rural communities were long arranged on the basis of castes - the upper and lower castes almost always lived in segregated colonies, the water wells were not shared, Brahmins would not accept food or drink from the Shudras, and one could marry only within one's caste.

Traditionally, the system bestowed many privileges on the upper castes while sanctioning repression of the lower castes by privileged groups.

Often criticised for being unjust and regressive, it remained virtually unchanged for centuries, trapping people into fixed social orders from which it was impossible to escape. Despite the

obstacles, however, some Dalits and other low-caste Indians, such as BR Ambedkar who authored the Indian constitution, and KR Narayanan who became the nation's first Dalit president, have risen to hold prestigious positions in the country.

Is the system legal?

Independent India's constitution banned discrimination on the basis of caste, and, in an attempt to correct historical injustices and provide a level playing field to the traditionally disadvantaged, the authorities announced quotas in government jobs and educational institutions for scheduled castes and tribes, the lowest in the caste hierarchy, in 1950.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35650616>