

Name:	Date Issued: Date Due:	Period:	Assignment: Close Read Point Value =
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Instructions: Students take notes and place questions under Notes and Questions. Circle vocabulary terms or words you do not understand in the reading and write the definitions in the Notes/Questions/Vocabulary section.

Background: Close reading is thoughtful, critical analysis of a text that focuses on significant details or patterns in order to develop a deep, precise understanding of the text's form, craft, meanings, etc. It is a key requirement of the Common Core State Standards and directs the reader's attention to the text itself.

Steps:

1. Read the entire document.	2. Underline the Supporting Details.	3. Place a STAR by the Main Idea.	4. Summarize any notes on the right-side margin.
Things to Consider...	A: What is the author's purpose?	B: What text features were used?	C: What is the tone?

Article Title: Caste
Source: HAFsite.org, by the Hindu American Foundation © 2014

Notes/Vocabulary:

OVERVIEW

Caste is one of the most troublesome and complicated concepts an individual encounters when attempting to understand India and Hinduism. While the social hierarchies that became known as “caste” did develop in India and were influenced by religious elites, they are not specifically sanctioned by the Vedas, one of the oldest Hindu sacred texts. Moreover, it does not appear that the system was initially intended to be rigid and birth-based.

THE VARNAS AND JATIS

The Vedas describe an idealized social structure, known as the varna system. Hindu scriptures have come to use the term, which has a variety of meanings (including form, figure, character, and hue) to describe a way of understanding the diversity of classes and human temperaments found in any society. Initially, an individual was not born into a varna, but instead became identified as such through their abilities and actions. Traditionally, there were four varnas:

- Brahmins: Those who seek knowledge.
- Kshatriya: Those who seek power.
- Vaisyas Those who seek to own land or engage in commerce.
- Sudras Those who serve or grow and make.

The Vedas do not state that varna is based on birth, nor is it determinant of an established social hierarchy. Instead, they associate it with inherent qualities. Those associated with each varna were expected to contribute to the betterment of society in their own ways; and spiritual rewards were said to come to those who best fulfill their own obligations as defined by their varna.

While brahmins were afforded cultural capital in ancient Indian society, being a brahmin was not necessarily a birthright nor was it associated with political power or material wealth. There are numerous examples of brahmins not being born into brahmin families, including the sage Vyasa, who is considered the author of numerous revered spiritual texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Jatis refer to the communities defined by occupation. Those who worked different occupations became their own communities such as priests and teachers,

The Hindu American Foundation logo features the text 'HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION' and 'HAF' with a sun symbol and the Om symbol. Below it is a circular diagram with four orange circles representing the varnas, each with a description of their role:

- BRAHMINS**: study and teach members of society
- KSHATRIYAS**: protect and govern society
- VAISHYAS**: engage in commerce, own land, support society
- SHUDRAS**: grow food, make goods, serve society

In the center of the diagram, the text reads: 'Varna: the four primary categories'.

associated with brahmins; warriors and kings, associated with kshatriyas; cow-herders and farmers, associated with vaisyas; and laborers, associated with sudras. Over time, hundreds, if not thousands of jatis emerged in India, each with its own religious and social practices, and bound by numerous conventions governing their interactions and perceived hierarchies. The rules within each jati were not tied to scriptures as they were by passed down traditions and norms, which slowly became associated with birthright.

THE EVOLUTION INTO CASTE

Over time, the jati system became more complex, more formalized, and eventually birth-based. The life experience and circumstance of any individual identified with a particular jati community came to be equated with the qualities associated with the broader varna classification of the jati, rather than the inherent qualities of the individual. By the time the Portuguese arrived in the 15th century, many in India, across all religions, had their own formal jati identities and customs.

The British utilized and thus further formalized caste with the introduction of the census in the 19th century as a way of tracking the different groups in the colonial subcontinent. Although the connection between varna and jati had long been in existence, it had generally been more regional and loosely defined until the British formalized the system. This codification led to a more intractable social hierarchy and was done to better facilitate social and political control of India and its people.

One group that had long been relegated to the bottom of the social ladder outside the varna system were what the British referred to as “Untouchables,” a fairly accurate translation of the various indigenous labels for them. In the early twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi began calling them “Harijan” (children of God) to show his support and concern.

Although caste and untouchability have become a part of the religion for many Hindus, they are not inherent to the foundations of Hinduism, nor are they exclusively practiced by Hindus. In India, caste discrimination is practiced by people of all religious traditions, including Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians.

CHANGING “CASTE”

After independence from the British, Indian leaders enshrined a ban on caste discrimination in the Indian Constitution. Additionally, the Indian government established affirmative action programs for communities classified as outcastes or historically vulnerable to discrimination. In 1997, India elected its first Harijan president, K.R. Narayanan.

Today, caste still pervades as a social distinction, though there are still some religious undertones, and various forms of discrimination remain, especially in the more remote areas of the country. The lower caste communities who continue to exist on the fringes of Indian society have benefited from official programs, and many Dalits/Harijans [Untouchables] have also become more prominent economically and politically. Meanwhile, the poor among many higher castes continue to suffer from the same disadvantages poor Dalits/Harijans do, but without the benefits that come from the Indian government.

As should be apparent, the dynamics of caste in India are far more complex than what most textbooks suggest. In fact, historians such as Valerie Hansen and

Caste is derived from the Portuguese term *casta* and means race or breed. In South Asia, however, caste does not refer to race, but to the occupation-based community into which a person is born. The social concept *jati* has long been confused with the religious concept of *varna*. What is the difference?

What is Varna?

Varna refers to the religious concept that every individual is born with a unique set of tendencies and skills that help them serve one of the four general needs of a well functioning society. There are four *varnas*. The closest translation of *varna* is class.

What is Jati?

Jati refers to a social concept of the occupation-based community into which a person is born. There are hundreds of *jatis*. *Jatis* became mapped to the four *varnas*, though this mapping was fluid. Over time, the associations became rigidified, and those in occupations seen as ritually dirty began to face discrimination.

Kenneth Curtis note that “most outside observers tend to exaggerate the rigidity of caste in modern India” (Hansen and Curtis, 2011: p. 64).

Still, the stigma of caste and caste-ism is a problem in India that reformers both religious and secular are working to change.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Caste is an Indian social practice and not intrinsic to Hinduism.
- Caste is derived from the Portuguese term “casta” and conflated two separate concepts: varnas and jatis.
- Varnas were based on temperament, while jatis were based on occupation.
- What started as a way of organizing Indian society became more rigid and birth-based over many centuries.
- Caste-based discrimination in modern India is illegal, though it still exists