

## The facets of India

### 1. The caste system

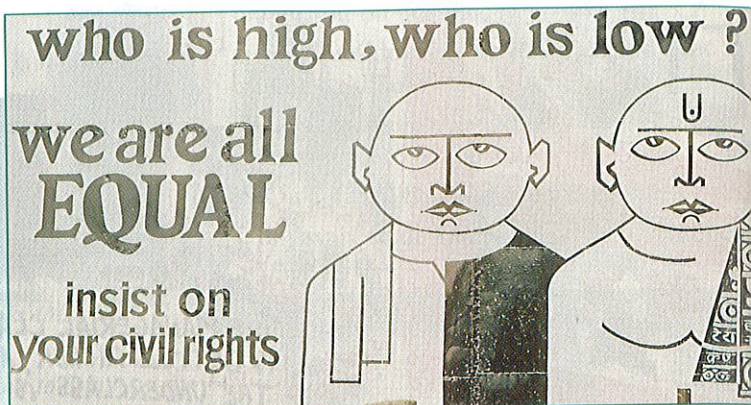
The caste system is the pattern of social classes in Hinduism. It developed more than 3000 years ago when the priests divided society into four great hereditary divisions which still survive today:

1. **Brahmans**, priestly and learned class.
2. **Kshatriyas**, warriors and rulers.
3. **Vaisyas**, farmers and merchants.
4. **Sudras**, peasants and labourers.

In addition to the basic castes, there is an outcaste called the **Untouchables (Dalits)**, who are not considered part of human society. There are approximately 250 million Dalits in India (25% of the population) and they perform the most menial and degrading jobs.

The characteristics of an Indian caste include:

- rigid, hereditary membership in the caste into which one is born;



- the practice of marrying only members of the same caste;
- restrictions on the choice of occupation and on personal contact with members of other castes;
- the acceptance by each individual of a fixed place in society.

In Hindu religion, all people are reincarnated on earth, at which time they have a chance to be born into another, higher caste, but only if they have been obedient to the rules of their caste in their previous life on earth.

### 2. Hinduism

Hindus believe in a single collective soul named Brahman, divided into different lesser gods such as Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), and Shiva (the Destroyer).

- 5 Life is seen as cyclical, and Hinduism teaches both reincarnation and karma. Hindus believe that the soul is eternal: when the body dies, the soul lives on and is given a new body. Karma – the culmination of all the actions of a person in his life – affects the form his next
- 10 life will take. Hindus believe that both animals and humans have souls; thus most Hindus abstain from meat (vegetarianism depends on caste), and beef is forbidden to all.

- 15 Many holy places such as Benares on the Ganges are the objects of pilgrimages from all over India. Prayaga, where the Ganges and Yamuna rivers join at Allahabad is crowded with pilgrims during the Kumbha Mela festival each January and overwhelmed by the millions who come to the special ceremony held every 12 years.

