

The Master and the Untouchable

Read the following information along with the material on the caste system in your book. Then answer the questions at the end of this handout, using a separate sheet of paper if needed.

It is well known that Mahatma Gandhi was not enthusiastic about the caste system in India. In fact people excluded by the caste system, referred to as outcastes and including the Untouchables, were given a new name by Gandhi. That name was *Harijan*, “God’s children.” Because of Gandhi’s efforts, the Indian government outlawed discrimination against Harijan in 1948.

Much earlier in Hindu history, another revered master made a strong point in favor of the Untouchables. His name was Shankara. He was born in the year 788 and is renowned for his contributions to the school of knowledge known as Vedanta.

One morning Shankara was walking to the Ganges to bathe. Along the way he met an Untouchable. This man had four dogs with him, and the dogs and the man together blocked Shankara’s path. Prejudice against the lower castes and Untouchables was so strong in Indian society that even Shankara, a brahmin and a spiritual master, responded with hateful anger. He ordered the Untouchable to get out of his way. Rather than move, the Untouchable asked a question: “You teach that there is only one God. If that is so, why are there so many kinds of human beings? Why are there distinctions of religion or caste at all?” Hearing the question, Shankara felt ashamed. But even stronger than his shame was his feeling of reverence. He prostrated himself at the Untouchable’s feet. Later, he expressed his reverence in a poem that has this refrain:

Anyone who has learned to see the
Oneness of all,
That person is my master—whether
brahmin or Untouchable.

(Adapted from Swami Prabhavananda with the assistance of Frederick Manchester, *The Spiritual Heritage of India* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1963], pages 281–282.)

1. Summarize the structure of the caste system. Include the names of the four major classes.
2. Does any structure similar to the caste system exist in your society, community, or school? Explain.
3. What reasons might be behind the development of the caste system?
4. In contemporary world history, what civic or religious leaders might be compared to Mahatma Gandhi? Name at least one and explain the comparison.
5. Shankara experienced both shame and reverence when he faced the wisdom of a person considered an Untouchable. Have you ever learned an important lesson from an unexpected source? If so, describe the experience. If not, write a paragraph about what you imagine Shankara might have thought in the moments just after hearing the Untouchable’s words.

