What is a “caste”? 

"Caste" is the term used to describe the complex system of social divisions that pervades life in India. Caste is an ancient hereditary system that developed alongside and became intertwined with Hinduism. Caste determines whom a person can marry, specifies what kind of work he can do, and even controls what he can eat or touch.

Since the great majority of Indians are Hindu, the caste system has played an enormous role in the history of India, and it continues to exert tremendous influence on modern Indian culture and politics.
Where does this system come from?

The most widely accepted theory is that the four basic divisions of the Hindu caste system—the *varna*—developed in the period 1500-1000 B.C. as a result of the Aryan conquest of India.
Where does this system come from?

The earliest known mention of caste is found in the Aryan’s Vedic hymns, perhaps dating from about 1000 B.C.E. In a famous passage, the metaphor of the human body was used to describe Indian society. The *brahman*, or priestly, caste represents society’s head; the *kshatriya*, or warrior, caste are its arms; the *vaishya* caste—traders and landowners—are the legs; and the *sudra* caste—the servants of the other three—are the feet.

This metaphor stresses the idea of hierarchy as well as that of interdependence.
These four castes—*brahman, kshatriya, vaishya, and sudra*—are the classical four divisions of Hindu society. In practice, however, there have always been many subdivisions (*J'atis*) of these castes.
Caste and Dharma

In Hindu religious texts, the dharma—the law, or duty—of each varna is described. It was thought that this dharma was an inherited, or inborn, quality. Consequently, people thought that if intermarriages took place, there would be much confusion as to the dharma of the next generation of children. As a result of such concerns, marriage between different castes was strictly prohibited. The practice of marrying only a person of "one's own kind" is called endogamy and is still a central rule in many Hindu communities.
Inevitably, there were certain people who failed to live up to their caste dharma. Such people and their children were considered outcasts from Hindu society. They had to live apart from other castes and were given the jobs that no one else wanted to perform. Because of their contact with things considered unclean or polluted, the outcasts were believed to be deeply tainted. They came to be thought of as "untouchable" because people believed that their touch—or even the sight of them—would compromise a brahman's purity. The untouchables were not admitted into Hindu temples and instead formed religious sects of their own.
Harijans or “Scheduled Castes”

Over the centuries, they also organized into sub-castes much like those of orthodox Hindu society. In the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi made it one of his life's goals to bring the untouchables back into Hindu society. He renamed them the harijans, or "children of God," and tried to convince orthodox Hindus to admit them into their temples and their everyday lives.
Harijans or “Scheduled Castes”

However, other leaders doubted that upper-caste Hindus would ever treat the harijans as equals. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a distinguished scholar who had been born an "untouchable," was a leading spokesman for this view. He used the term scheduled castes when referring to this group, for he believed that the term harijans was demeaning. The scheduled castes, he said, should withdraw from Hinduism altogether and join another religion, such as Buddhism, which does not recognize caste distinctions.
Independence and Untouchables

After India became an independent nation in 1947, its new constitution outlawed the practice of "untouchability." The constitution also established affirmative action programs to ensure that the scheduled castes would have access to higher education and better jobs. Because of these programs, there has been a marked improvement in the status of the scheduled castes.
Today, the caste system continues to be the main form of government in villages throughout India. In large part, its continuity depends on two central Hindu concepts: caste dharma and karma. In Hindu society, caste dharma is considered to be a divine law. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, caste dharma is "the duty one has to perform" and "the law of one's being." Many Hindus believe that this obligation tends to enhance the spiritual development of the individual. Because of it, each person learns from an early age to overcome selfish desires and instead focus on group goals and ideals.
Why does the system persist?

The concept of karma helps to explain differences in status that might otherwise be considered unfair. Because one's caste membership is thought to be a result of actions in a previous life, a person tends to accept this status rather than complain about it. By the same token, a successful performance of caste duty will improve one's karma and perhaps lead to improved status in the next life.
Why does the system persist?

The caste system also returns certain practical benefits to the individual. Being a member of a *jati* gives each person a sense of identity and of belonging to a well-defined group within society. The members of a *jati* have much in common. They share a job specialty and abide by the same rules concerning diet and religion. Because of the rules of endogamy, each *jati* is also an extended family, for most members are related by blood.
In 1950, the writers of independent India's Constitution adopted a policy of reserving jobs in the government and seats in state-funded educational institutes for the "scheduled castes and tribes," as the people marginalized by the caste system were then known.

India sets aside 22.5% of its government jobs for the lowest castes, and an additional 27% for what are called the other "backward" castes, the next step up in the caste system.
The Reservation System

Sparks flew in spring 2006 when the Indian government pushed to extend the same quotas to university admissions. Students took to the streets of New Delhi to protest the plan.

(Currently, out of the 36,000 undergraduate seats at Delhi University, nearly 8,000 are reserved for lower-caste students. Today an estimated 36 percent of the population falls under the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) category, the group receiving the new reservations.)
Is it Fair?

India’s constitution guarantees “equal rights.”

• **Article 14** says that the state gives to every person “equality before the law” and “equal protection of the laws.”
• **Article 15** prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, etc.
• **Article 16** guarantees equality of opportunity in matters of public employment, etc.
Is it Fair?

At the same time, the constitution provides for a "reservation system."

**Article 46** says “The state shall promote with special care the education and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.”

Respond: Does India’s reservation system contradict (go against) her constitution’s promise of “equal rights”? 