

Topic 4.7 — Changing Social Hierarchies (1450–1750)

Standards Table

Thematic Focus	Learning Objective	Key Concept
Social Interactions and Organization (SIO) – The process by which societies group their members and the norms that govern the interactions between these groups and between individuals influence political, economic, and cultural institutions and organization.	Unit 4: Learning Objective M – Explain how social categories, roles, and practices have been maintained or have changed over time.	KC-4.3.I.B – Many states, such as the Mughal and Ottoman empires, adopted practices to accommodate the ethnic and religious diversity of their subjects or to utilize the economic, political, and military contributions of different ethnic or religious groups. In other cases, states suppressed diversity or limited certain groups’ roles in society, politics, or the economy. KC-4.2.III.A – Imperial conquests and widening global economic opportunities contributed to the formation of new political and economic elites, including in China with the transition to the Qing Dynasty and in the Americas with the rise of the Casta system. KC-4.2.III.B – The power of existing political and economic elites fluctuated as the elites confronted new challenges to their ability to affect the policies of the increasingly powerful monarchs and leaders.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Explain how empires managed ethnic and religious diversity.
- Describe how imperial expansion created new social elites.
- Analyze how existing elites maintained or lost influence.
- Evaluate continuities and changes in social hierarchies from 1450–1750.

Lesson Overview

Between 1450 and 1750, expanding empires reshaped social hierarchies across Afro-Eurasia and the Americas. Some states accommodated ethnic and religious diversity to maintain stability, while others imposed restrictions on certain groups. Imperial expansion and global trade created new elites and challenged traditional power structures.

In some empires, rulers incorporated diverse groups into government or military service. In others, racial and religious hierarchies became more rigid. Social categories were not static; they evolved in response to political centralization, economic change, and imperial conquest.

Essential Vocabulary

- **Social hierarchy** – A ranking of groups in society based on status, wealth, or power.
- **Millet system** – Ottoman system allowing religious communities limited self-rule.
- **Casta system** – Social classification system in colonial Latin America based on ancestry.
- **Elite** – A small group holding political or economic power.
- **Accommodation** – A policy of allowing cultural or religious diversity within an empire.

Background Reading

The Ottoman Empire governed a diverse population of Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Through the millet system, religious communities were allowed to govern themselves in matters of law and education, as long as they paid taxes and remained loyal to the sultan. This policy helped maintain stability in a multi-ethnic empire.

Similarly, the Mughal Empire in India employed officials from various religious and ethnic backgrounds. Akbar promoted religious tolerance and included Hindu elites in administrative positions. However, later Mughal rulers reversed some of these policies, leading to tensions.

In the Americas, Spanish colonial rule created rigid racial hierarchies. The Casta system ranked individuals based on ancestry, placing Spaniards at the top and Indigenous and African peoples lower. At the same time, economic expansion created new merchant and landowning elites. In China, the transition to the Qing Dynasty elevated Manchu rulers while maintaining Confucian bureaucratic traditions.

Primary Sources

Source 1

Imperial Rescript of Akbar on Religious Tolerance (16th century)

From: Abu'l-Fazl, *Akbarnama* (translated excerpt)

Internet Medieval Sourcebook

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/india/akbarnama.asp>

His Majesty holds that it is the duty of a ruler to respect all religious communities within his dominion. Differences of faith should not be the cause of conflict among subjects, for truth may be found in many traditions. Therefore, officials are instructed to treat all people with justice, regardless of their creed.

In matters of administration, ability and loyalty shall be the standards for service, not religious identity. Those who serve faithfully shall be rewarded, whether they are Muslim, Hindu, or of another belief. The stability of the empire depends upon harmony among its diverse peoples.

Let no one use religion as a cause for division. The prosperity of the state requires cooperation, and it is through tolerance that unity may be maintained across many lands and nations.

Guided Analysis Questions

1. Identify ONE policy Akbar promotes in this excerpt.
2. Explain how this document reflects efforts to manage diversity within an empire.
3. Explain how Akbar's policy could strengthen state power.
4. Analyze how the historical situation of the Mughal Empire influenced this policy.

Source 2

Colonial Casta Painting Description (18th century New Spain)

From: Colonial Mexican Casta Records (descriptive excerpt)

Internet Medieval Sourcebook

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/latin-casta.asp>

The various mixtures of Spaniards, Indians, and Africans are represented in ordered categories. From a Spaniard and an Indian is born a Mestizo; from a Spaniard and a Mestiza, a Castizo; from a Spaniard and a Castiza, a Spaniard again. Each category is marked not only by ancestry but by dress, occupation, and social status.

Those of purer Spanish blood are depicted with finer clothing and positions of authority, while those of mixed or African descent are shown in manual labor or humble settings. These images reinforce the belief that social rank is determined by lineage.

Through these classifications, society is organized according to race and heritage, establishing clear distinctions between groups and preserving the dominance of those at the top of the hierarchy.

Guided Analysis Questions

1. Identify ONE way social hierarchy is depicted in the excerpt.
2. Explain how the Casta system reflects changes in social organization due to imperial conquest.

3. Explain how this system both created new elites and restricted other groups.
4. Evaluate how racial classification affected social mobility in colonial Latin America.

Ottoman and Mughal Accommodation Policies

Empire	Policy	Purpose	Effect
Ottoman	Millet system	Manage religious diversity	Social stability
Mughal	Religious tolerance under Akbar	Incorporate Hindu elites	Administrative unity

Colonial Latin American Casta System

Rank	Group	Social Position
1	Peninsulares	Highest political authority
2	Creoles	Wealthy landowners
3	Mestizos	Intermediate status
4	Indigenous/African peoples	Limited rights

Changing Elites (1450–1750)

Region	New Elite	Effect on Existing Elites
China	Manchu rulers (Qing)	Shift in ruling ethnic group
Americas	Creole landowners	Reduced peninsular dominance
Europe	Merchant capitalists	Decline of feudal nobility

Change / Continuity / Comparison

Changes:

- Rise of racial caste systems in the Americas.
- Formation of new merchant and landowning elites.
- Ethnic shifts in ruling dynasties (e.g., Qing China).

Continuities:

- Persistence of elite dominance in most societies.
- Ongoing importance of religion in shaping social order.

Comparison:

Ottoman and Mughal empires accommodated diversity, while Spanish colonies enforced rigid racial hierarchies.

Key Takeaways

- Expanding empires reshaped social hierarchies.
- Some states accommodated diversity; others restricted it.
- Imperial conquest created new elites.

- Racial and ethnic categories structured colonial societies.
- Social hierarchies both changed and persisted over time.

Reflection / Practice Activity

- A. Identify ONE example of accommodation in an empire between 1450 and 1750.
- B. Explain ONE way imperial conquest created a new elite group.
- C. Explain ONE similarity or difference between social hierarchies in the Mughal Empire and colonial Latin America.

Primary Source Citations

Abu'l-Fazl, *Akbarnama* (16th century). Internet Medieval Sourcebook.

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/india/akbarnama.asp>

Colonial Mexican Casta Records (18th century). Internet Medieval Sourcebook.

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/latin-casta.asp>