

# The Origins and Effects of Caste System in India: a Sociological Analysis

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to study how the **caste system in India is the paradigmatic ethnographic** example of caste with its origins in **ancient India** still influential. Even today, most Indian languages use the term "*jati*" for the system of hereditary social structures in South Asia. When Portuguese travelers to 16th-century India first encountered what appeared to them to be race-based social stratification, they used the Portuguese term "*casta*" — which means "race" — to describe what they saw. Today, the term "caste" is used to describe stratified societies based on hereditary groups not only in South Asia but throughout the world. Although born into the Kshatriya caste, Mahatma Gandhi spent much of his life working to bring the Untouchables equality. It was Gandhi who first named the Untouchables "Harijans," meaning "children of God."

Others might present a biological explanation of India's stratification system, based on the notion that all living things inherit a particular set of qualities. Some inherit wisdom and intelligence, some get pride and passion, and others are stuck with less fortunate traits. Proponents of this theory attribute all aspects of one's lifestyle — social status, occupation, and even diet — to these inherent qualities and thus use them to explain the foundation of the caste system. The idea of an "Aryan" group of people was not proposed until the 19th century. After identifying a language called Aryan from which Indo-European languages are descended, several European linguists claimed that the speakers of this language (named Aryans by the linguists) had come from the north — from Europe. Thus, according to this theory, European languages and cultures came first and were therefore superior to others. This idea was later widely promoted by Adolf Hilter in his attempts to assert the "racial superiority" of so-called light-skinned people from Europe over so-called dark-skinned people from the rest of the world — and thus provide justification for genocide. But 20th-century scholarship has thoroughly disproved this theory. Most scholars believe that there was no Aryan invasion from the north. In fact, some even believe that the Aryans — if they did exist — actually originated in South Asia and spread from there to Europe. Regardless of who the Aryans were or where they lived, it is generally agreed that they did not single-handedly create South Asia's caste system.

*Key words: jati, India, caste, Varnas , racist culture*

## Introduction

In ancient India, the ranked occupational groups were referred to as *varnas*, and the hereditary occupational groups within the *varnas* were known as *jatis*. Many have immediately assumed that ascribed social groups and rules prohibiting intermarriage among the groups signify the existence of a racist culture. But this assumption is false. *Varnas* are not racial groups but rather classes.

Four *varna* categories were constructed to organize society along economic and occupational lines. Spiritual leaders and teachers were called Brahmins. Warriors and nobility were called Kshatriyas. Merchants and producers were called Vaishyas. Laborers were called Sudras. In addition to the *varnas*, there is a fifth class in Hinduism. It encompassed outcasts who, literally, did all the dirty work. They were referred to as "untouchables" because they carried out the miserable tasks associated with disease and pollution, such as cleaning up after funerals, dealing with sewage, and working with animal skin.

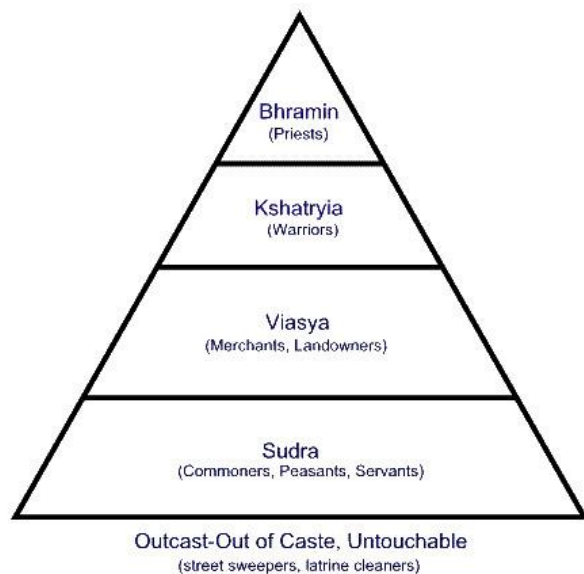
Brahmins were considered the embodiment of purity, and untouchables the embodiment of pollution. Physical contact between the two groups was absolutely prohibited. Brahmins adhered so strongly to this rule that they felt obliged to bathe if even the shadow of an untouchable fell across them. Although the political and social force of the caste system has not disappeared completely, the Indian government has officially outlawed caste discrimination and made widespread reforms. Particularly through the efforts of Indian nationalists such as Mohandas Gandhi, rules preventing social mobility and cross-caste mingling have been loosened.

Gandhi renamed the untouchables *Harijans*, which means "the people of God." Adopted in 1949, the Indian Constitution provided a legal framework for the emancipation of untouchables and for the equality of all citizens. Thus, it has been impossible to determine the exact origins of the caste system in South Asia. In the midst of the debate, only one thing is certain: South Asia's caste system has been around for several millennia and, until the second half of the 20th century, has changed very little during all of that time. In recent years, the Untouchables have become a politically active group and have adopted for themselves the name Dalits, which means "those who have been broken."

## Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze **social historical context that helped creation of the Varnas**, and of the untouchables. The caste system that began with division of labor and still holding sway

## Jati: The Caste System in India



Travelers to India have commented on caste for more than two thousand years. In Indian society the group comes first, unlike our own society that gives so much importance to the individual personality. After a person's family, the caste commands an individual's major loyalty. Indians still often identify themselves by the community they belong to and caste is still a factor in marriage selection. In addition, caste has allowed countless groups that have migrated into India to find a place and to play an important role.

The caste system, as it actually works in India is called jati. The term jati appears in almost all Indian languages and is related to the idea of lineage or kinship group. There are perhaps more than 3000 jatis in India and there is no one all-Indian system of ranking them in order of status. Yet in each local area jati ranking exists and is very much related to purity and pollution. Each jati has some unique job, but not everyone in the jati performs it. Thus there are barbers who do not shave, carpenters who do not build, and Brahmins who do not act as priests. A jati is identified in a local setting by whom its members will accept food and water from and to which jatis its members will give food and water. People will try to marry their sons and daughters to members of their same jati and will give their major loyalty to their jati. A jati will usually be organized into a biradari (a brotherhood), and this organization carries out the business and oversees the working of the jati and has the power to exclude an offender from the jati.

### Social Equality and Equal Access to Public Areas

The jati system is not static in which all groups stay in the same position. There is mobility in the system and jatis have changed their position over the centuries of Indian history. However, the jati moves up the social scale as a group and not as individuals. A jati can improve its position in the class system by advancing economically and emulating social groups with money and power. At the same time, a jati can also move up in the caste hierarchy.

Mobility in the caste system has been termed “Sanskritization” by the scholar M.N. Srinivas. To gain position in this process, a lower jati copies the habits and behavior patterns of the dominant jati in the area. This may mean a lower jati will change its name to one of a higher jati, adopt vegetarianism, observe more orthodox religious practices, build a temple, and treat its women in a more conservative way. The type of emulation will depend on the habits of the dominant jati being copied. If the jati can gain acceptance for its new name, new history, and new status, it will then marry its daughters to members of the jati in which it is seeking to gain membership. In due time the new position on the social scale will be solidified and accepted by other jatis. This practice is not totally unlike that of immigrant groups coming to America and copying the habits of the WASPs who were in control. In your own community you could probably identify the most prestigious group of people and observe other members of the community copying their behavior in ways such as sending their children to dancing classes and summer camps, and putting braces on their teeth.

The Indian Constitution has outlawed the practice of Untouchability and the Indian Government has established special quotas in schools and Parliament to aid the lowest jatis. Caste discrimination is not permitted in gaining employment and access to educational and other opportunities. But this does not mean that caste is illegal or has faded away. Caste groups as political pressure groups work very well in a democratic system. Caste may provide psychological support that people seem to need. Economists and political scientists are finding that caste is no real barrier to economic development or political democracy.

The Indian society is divided into various sects and classes. This is because of the caste system which is prevalent in the country. The roots of the caste system go back to the ancient Vedas dividing people on the basis of varna or occupation. It has brought many evils in the society. The Government is constantly striving to overcome the harms of the system and bring about true equality among the people.

The caste system is the bane for the Indian society. It divides the Indian society into sectarian groups and classes. Even today, it plays a predominant role in our society despite the growth of culture and civilisation.

- The terms ‘Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes’ (SC/ST) are the official terms used in government documents to identify former untouchables and tribes. However, in 2008 the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, noticing that the word ‘Dalit’ was used interchangeably with the official term ‘Scheduled Castes’, asked the State Governments to end the use of the word ‘Dalit’ in official documents by calling the term ‘unconstitutional’ and to replace it with the term ‘Scheduled Caste’ instead.
- The roots of the caste system are traced back to the ancient ages. While one view discriminates between the castes as upper and lower castes on the basis of their origin, another view traces the origin of the castes to varnas which classifies the caste system on the basis of their functions. Since then, it was found that undue advantage was taken by the section of people having an upper hand and a say in the community, leading to discrimination and exploitation of the weaker sections of community.

- The people from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, referred to as ‘untouchables’ form one-sixth of India’s population or 160 million; they endure discrimination and segregation.

## **Evil faces of this system**

### Untouchability

Many villages are separated by caste and they may not cross the line dividing them from the higher castes. They also may not use the same wells or drink in the same tea stalls as higher castes.

### Discrimination

They often do not have the facility to electricity, sanitation facilities or water pumps in lower caste neighbourhoods. Access to better education, housing and medical facilities than that of the higher castes is denied.

### Division of labour

They are restricted to certain occupations like sanitation work, plantation work, leather works, cleaning streets, etc.

## **Slavery**

They are subjected to exploitation in the name of debt, tradition, etc., to work as labourers or perform menial tasks for generations together.

## **Government Initiatives**

The Indian Government has enacted laws to remove untouchability and has also brought in many reforms to improve the quality of life for the weaker sections of society. Few among them are:

- Constitutionally guaranteed fundamental human rights
- Abolition of ‘untouchability’ in 1950
- Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989
- Provision of reservation in places like educational institutions, for employment opportunities etc.
- Establishing social welfare departments and national commissions for the welfare of scheduled castes and tribes

These measures adopted by the government have brought some relief to the weaker sections of society. The urban areas have shown good amount of impact and some improvement. However, people in rural areas and villages still face extreme discrimination. We indeed have a long way to go in achieving the objectives set to eradicate and abolish discrimination, on the basis of caste and creed. It now depends on our efforts and a change in our mindset is sure to see a perpetual change, bringing about equality for all.

## **Right to Equality**

The fundamental rights are guaranteed to protect the basic human rights of all citizens of India and are put into effect by the courts, subject to some limitations. One of such fundamental rights is the Right to Equality. Right to Equality refers to the equality in the eyes of law, discarding any unfairness on grounds of caste, race, religion, place of birth sex. It also includes equality of prospects in matters of employment, abolition of untouchability and abolition of titles. Articles 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18 of the Constitution of India highlight the Right to Equality in detail. This fundamental right is the major foundation of all other rights and privileges granted to Indian citizens. It is one of the chief guarantees of the Constitution of India. Thus, it is imperative that every citizen of India has easy access to the courts to exercise his/her Right to Equality.

## **Equality Before Law**

Equality before law is well defined under the Article 14 of the Constitution which ensures that every citizen shall be likewise protected by the laws of the country. It means that the State will not distinguish any of the Indian citizens on the basis of their gender, caste, creed, religion or even the place of birth. The state cannot refuse equality before the law and equal defense of the law to any person within the territory of India. In other words, this means that no person or groups of people can demand for any special privileges. This right not only applies to the citizens of India but also to all the people within the territory of India. The right of Social Equality and Equal Access to Public Areas is clearly mentioned under the Article 15 of the Constitution of India stating that no person shall be shown favoritism on the basis of color, caste, creed language, etc. Every person shall have equal admittance to public places like public wells, bathing ghats, museums, temples etc. However, the State has the right to make any special arrangement for women and children or for the development of any socially or educationally backward class or scheduled castes or scheduled tribes. This article applies only to citizens of India. Article 16 of the Constitution of India clearly mentions that the State shall treat everyone equally in the matters of employment. No citizen shall be discriminated on the basis of race, caste, religion, creed, descent or place of birth in respect of any employment or office under the State. Every citizen of India can apply for government jobs. However, there are some exceptions to this right. The Parliament may pass a law mentioning that specific jobs can only be filled by candidates who are residing in a particular area. This requirement is mainly for those posts that necessitate the knowledge of the locality and language of the area.

Article 17 of the Constitution of India abolishes the practice of untouchability in India. Practice of untouchability is declared as a crime and anyone doing so is punishable by law. The Untouchability Offences Act of 1955 (and now Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976) states punishments for not allowing a person to enter a place of worship or from taking water from a well or tank.

## India's caste system: Weakened, but still influential

The Indian Caste System is historically one of the main dimensions where people in India are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. Although this or other forms of differentiation exist in all human societies, it becomes a problem when one or more of these dimensions overlap each other and become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige. The Indian Caste System is considered a closed system of stratification, which means that a person's social status is obligated to which caste they were born into. There are limits on interaction and behavior with people from another social status. This paper will be exploring the various aspects of the Indian caste system and its effects on India today. The caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked castes called varnas. They are classified according to occupation and determine access to wealth, power, and privilege. The Brahmans, usually priests and scholars, are at the top. Next are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. They are followed by the Vaishyas, or merchants, and the fourth are the Shudras, who are usually laborers, peasants, artisans, and servants. At the very bottom are those considered the untouchables. These individuals perform occupations that are considered unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and are considered outcastes. They are not considered to be included in the ranked castes. The varnas are then divided into specialized sub-castes called jatis. Each jati is composed of a group deriving its livelihood primarily from a specific occupation. People are born into a certain caste and become members.

They then acquire the appropriate occupation according to their jati. Maintaining this hereditary occupational specialization and hierarchical ranking of occupations is said to be done through an elaborate ritual system regulating the nature of social interactions between the jatis. Vedic texts from the Hindu religion, which have been compiled, legitimized, and interpreted by the Brahmans, provide the rationale for the hierarchical classification and the rituals governing social behavior. There were, and still are, rules that are laid down concerning appropriate occupational pursuit, appropriate behavior within and between castes, as well as rules related to marriage. Since India's independence from Britain in 1947, there has been considerable relaxation of rules related to the caste system. There was more sharing between members of the middle and upper castes, but those in the lowest castes continued to eat separately from the rest. There was also a significant change in occupational goals and pursuits among men from 1954 to 1992. Earlier, most men were dedicated to their traditional caste related jobs, but by 1992, most had taken up newer occupations. Although some caste-based prejudice and ranking still existed, wealth and power was now less associated with caste. Caste became a lot less significant part of daily lives of people who lived in urban areas compared to rural areas, but its significance still varies by social class and occupation. Among urban middle-class professionals, caste is not openly discussed and is pretty insignificant, except when it comes to marital arrangements. Even then, there are adjustments made with considerations towards education, occupation, and income, as well as religion and language. Although discrimination on the basis of caste has been outlawed in India, it still exists in the community today.

## Conclusion

The Indian caste system has played a significant role in shaping the occupations and roles as well as values of Indian society. Religion has been the constant push towards this stratification system for centuries, beginning with the Aryans and continuing down a long road of unfortunate discrimination, segregation, violence, and inequality. Hinduism was the backbone of the purity pollution complex, and it was the religion that influenced the daily lives and beliefs of the Indian people. Even after sixty-three years of independence, Indians continue to be in the grip of caste consciousness. The 'Right to Equality' should not only remain on papers. This right should be properly exercised; otherwise it will lose its essence if all the citizens of India, especially the weaker and backward classes do not have equal rights and equality before law. Apart from this, the State may also set aside some posts for members of backward classes, scheduled castes or scheduled tribes which are not properly represented in the services under the State to uplift the weaker sections of the society. Also, a law may be passed which may entail that the holder of an office of any religious institution shall also be a person professing that specific religion. Though, this right shall not be granted to the overseas citizens of India as directed by the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2003.

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