

INDIAN CASTEISM AND ITS IMPACT ON TODAY

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ABSTRACT

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 Brahmins, 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.

INTRODUCTION

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

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interaction and behavior with people from another social status. Its history is massively related to one of the prominent religions in India, Hinduism, and has been altered in many ways during the Buddhist revolution and under British rule. This paper will be exploring the various aspects of the Indian caste system related to its hierarchy, its history, and its effects on India today.

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.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dumont, L, *et. al.*, (1975).

Have conducted studies into the depths of the caste system and specifically the Indian caste system. He discusses the definition of the word “caste” and continues to explain the necessity and undeniable need to have the caste system in relation to Hinduism in India. He also explains the caste system and the role it plays in the division of labor in the Indian society. This book will really help me dive into the Indian caste system and will provide me with an overall and deeper view into the many aspects of the caste system and its effects on India today.

**Ostor, A, L. Fruzzetti, and S. Barnett.
et. al., (1988)**

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In this book highlights the diversity of different parts of India in terms of kinship ties and marriage and the relationship of these cultural constructs with the caste system. The authors focus on Bengal, Tamilnadu, North India, Kashmir, and West India, as well as providing information on the great plights the “Untouchable” Chudras face. This book does a very good job keying in to the individual’s perspective in India and why the caste system is accepted on an individual level. One of the most interesting parts in this book is the fact that it explains the various languages of India and how these languages include words that dominantly allude to hierarchy. I will receive tremendous help from this book in looking in from a perspective that is normally not looked at from when viewing the caste system. It will provide me with many angles to write a more wholesome research paper.

Velassery, Sebastian *et. al.*, (2009)

Velassery provides a detailed explanation of what the caste system ideology is all about and

connects it with the concepts of religion and human rights. He then focuses on the Indian perspective of the caste system and looks at “the issue of Human Rights as a contemporary mode of the ancient metaphysical wisdom built of reflection upon what it means to be Dharma and the ways of existing according to Dharma.” He expresses the importance of this Dharma to Indians and how it contributes to wide acceptance of the caste system in India. This book will also provide me with a deeper perspective of what the caste system is to an Indian on an individual level.

Bouglé, Célestin *et. al.* (1971).

This collection of essays provides a detailed explanation of the Indian caste system as well as some interviews and feedback from Indians who support and oppose the caste system. Bouglé discusses the caste hierarchy and priesthood, and includes the effects of the caste system on race, law, economic

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consumption and production, and literature. What I found very interesting about these essays is the discussion of how the caste system was affected through the Buddhist revolution and under the British administration. I will be able to use this information to talk

about how India today has been shaped by the history of not only the caste system but the reformation of it from various outside influences.

CASTE STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERISTICS

Defining the word “caste” itself is harder than thought to be. Risley defines it as “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community”. It can also be defined as an endogamous and

hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions. Caste name is generally associated with a specific occupation and, as mentioned before, is a closed stratification, which makes it endogamous. The Indian 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. Leadership positions in society are monopolized by a few dominant castes (Pintane). The two upper castes are ritually considered as superior to the lower castes.

Following the Brahmans are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. They were the ruling class and often times collaborated with the Brahmans as they reigned over their kingdom. In ancient India, the rulers were bound by Holy Scriptures to govern their kingdoms with justice. A Hindu ruler was the protector of his subjects, and in order to protect his subjects the king needed to be an expert warrior. A Kshatriya is characterized by physical and martial strength. These qualities determined his relations with others: “the Kshatriya is charged with the protection of the higher Brahmin class with rule over (and unrestricted

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exploitation of) the lower Vaishyas”. The word ‘kshatra’ in Sanskrit means government, power, and dominion (Indianetzone). Kshatriyas are considered to be bold, alert and full of fortitude, generosity, discipline and modesty (Lahiri). Priests and warriors were said to be “better” than or “superior” to the other castes, and in general the Brahmans and Kshatriyas were regarded as united into a ruling class according to the populace at large. But although the Brahmans and Kshatriyas together proclaimed to be superior to the commoners, the Brahmans never hesitated to declare their own caste as higher than the Kshatriyas. The reason of this, according to the Vedas, is that Brahmans have been characterized as being self-sufficient, whereas the Kshatriyas are dependent on priests. Thus, it is said that Brahmans can live without rulers, but rulers cannot sufficiently execute their tasks without the aid of Brahmans.

Next are the Vaishyas, or merchants. A Vaishya's duty was to ensure the community's prosperity through agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. The Vaishyas were considered and expected to be weak in comparison to their rulers, and were infinitely exploitable and regenerative. These oppressions however, were usually not boycotted because this

was presented as a natural state of affairs in the social realm (Smith 49). Later, the Shudras took over agriculture and cattle rearing while the Vaishyas became traders and merchants. However, though they were “twice-born” and economically strong because they controlled commerce, Vaishyas were denied a high social status, for which they resented the upper castes. One expression of this resentment was their support of the anti-Brahminical sects that developed around the 6th century BC, like Buddhism and Jainism (Gurjari). Then come the Shudras, who are usually laborers, peasants, artisans, and servants. Shudras were thought to not have any special abilities and were considered only capable of serving as slaves to the upper three classes. Shudras enjoyed no rights or privileges, and were not permitted to perform any sacrifices or homa, read or learn the Vedas or recite the mantras (prayer rituals). They were also not allowed to enter temples and could only serve the upper three castes as a slave, barber, blacksmith or cobbler (Gurjari). They too supported the anti-Brahminical groups that came about.

A fourth idea is the belief of purity and pollution. Cleanliness is considered to be a very important value in Hinduism, and the caste system enforces this idea. Untouchability was thus a means of

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exclusivism, a social device that became religious only by being drawn into the pollution-purity complex. Therefore, it was believed that the higher castes were more pure and less polluted, while the lower castes were regarded as less pure and more polluted (Pyakurel). A final characteristic that is very important to the stabilization of the Indian caste system is the restriction of caste mobility, which was mentioned earlier. Birth in a particular caste confines a person to staying in this caste and restricts an individual's mobility up or down the hierarchy (Pyakurel).

Movements and Political Policies against Caste

There were many movements and governmental actions that took place pre- and post-independence in order to overcome and attempt to eliminate the inequalities and injustices associated with the caste system. During the national movement, Gandhi began using the term "Harijans" (God's people) to refer to the untouchables in order to encourage a shift towards positive attitude towards the lower castes. Many lower caste members, however, found the term

to be patronizing. The Census of India had started by the British in the late 19th century, and in 1935, "the British

Government of India came up with a list of 400 groups considered untouchable, as well as many tribal groups, that would be accorded special privileges in order to overcome deprivation and discrimination. Those groups included on this list came to be termed Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In the 1970s, however, many leaders of castes considered untouchable started calling themselves Dalits". The anti-caste Dalit

movement began with Jyotirao Phule in the mid-19th century, and he started a movement for education and the upliftment of women, Shudra's, and Dalits, and the movement spread to many parts of India. He also worked to abolish the idea of "untouchability," which meant getting rid of restrictions on entry into temples, and finding a place for Dalits within Hinduism. After 1910, however, Dalit leaders started focusing on distancing themselves from Hinduism and began to advocate for a separate electorate for the Dalits. But Gandhi, who was one of the leaders of the Indian National Congress, tried to instead encourage the incorporation of Dalits as part of reformed Hinduism.

In the 1960s, the reservation system for SCs and STs began, but the individual states were the ones that were

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to determine which would be identified as OBCs. Many southern states identified economically disadvantaged castes as OBCs, but there has been considerable opposition to implementing these policies in other Indian states. The Central Government appointed a commission headed by B.P. Mandal to look into the issue, and by 1978, the Mandal Commission report was completed. It was concluded that caste was the main contributing factor to social and economic backwardness. Many seats in state institutions were reserved for the three groups. The Commission recommended that 27 percent of seats be reserved for OBCs, in addition to 15 percent for SCs and 7 percent for STs. Unfortunately, the government did not implement these policies in fear of large scale opposition from the people, but in 1990, the Janata Dal government “attempted partial implementation of recommendations leading to widespread unrest and opposition from middle- and upper-caste youths, intellectuals, and elites”.

Modern India

Relationships between castes have become more relaxed today. There is more food sharing between castes and a lot more eating done at local restaurants where caste distinctions are less likely to

be made. One of the biggest changes that took place in India was occupational pursuits among men (and women later on). Earlier, most men did not veer away from their caste-linked occupations, such as blacksmithing and pottery making. Many have now taken up newer occupations that do not relate to their caste, such as government jobs, teaching, retail and services, and machine repair. Wealth and power in the village is now less associated with caste than before, and landownership has become more diversified. Also, the idea that purity and pollution is caused by the lower castes has diminished a good amount. It has, however, only somewhat diminished in the public, whereas behind closed doors and on ceremonial occasions, purification rituals related to caste status are still observed. Endogamy is still enforced among families, but not as strict as before. A women’s status is still significantly tied to the status of the male, but education and awareness of equalization for women has widely spread throughout India. In rural areas, movement out of caste specializing occupations and access to resources is still difficult and slow for the lower castes, but in urban areas, caste is now a less significant part of daily life. Although discrimination on the basis of caste has been outlawed in India, caste has become a means for competing for access to resources and

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power in modern India, such as educational opportunities, new occupations, and improvement in life chances. This trend is connected to India's preferential policies and the implementation of these policies.

Unfortunately, however, only a relatively small proportion of the lower castes have benefited from these preferential policies. Even though there is an increasing acceptance of lower-caste individuals, there is also more overt hostility and violence expressed against the lower castes and classes in many parts of India. For example, in parts of Bihar, which is a state in eastern India, upper-caste landowners formed a private army in 1994 called the Ranvir Sena to "protect" themselves from the lower castes. Although this was outlawed, the Ranvir Sena had carried out 20 massacres of Dalits by early 1999. Hostility is also expressed by the many people who support the removal of reserved government jobs and in institutions for technical education, particularly on the part of many from the traditionally higher castes who are economically disadvantaged. Individual achievements, merit, as well as economic position are also still significantly affected by caste.

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. Historically, India has been surviving as a nation for millennia with closed groups divided by caste, creed and language. Work was divided and each had his allotted task since birth, and heredity of occupation was a rule that played a big role in the economics of urban and rural life. Mobility of occupation or caste was restricted, and an individual leaving the occupation of his ancestors in order to follow his or her own path was rarely witnessed. It can be seen that caste continues to play an important role in the dynamic of social and political interactions within India. However, the relationship between caste and hereditary occupations has become less significant

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now, and there are fewer restrictions on social interaction among castes, especially in urban areas. The present Indian society is moving from its closed systems towards a state of change and progression marked by the assertion of the human spirit irrespective of castes and creeds. Numerous movements challenging the injustices associated with the caste system have encouraged individuals in India to be more civil towards other caste members. Many of the lower castes have gained a lot from the partial elimination of the caste system, and India should be applauded for its constant effort to eradicate this system of stratification from its culture. It is, however, important to look at the importance of how caste status has affected the quality of life and social mobility in India today.

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