

A Very Rudimentary Summary on the Caste System: Background, Religious infractions, and Social Implications

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Introduction

The culture of India is one of the oldest and unique in the globe. The societies ideologies and systems, it holds are complex, even confusing at times, with multi layers of social stratification, which are instutalized to all work together to maintain social practises such as caste [1]. The origin of caste system in India is, arguably, attributed to the functional division of labor [2]. The population was divided into classes on the basis of functions or occupations of particular families and groups. However, throughout history, these divisions between various sections of the society became very rigid [1]. The caste system also stems from ancient Hindu tradition with strong ties into their religious structures [4]. The actual term caste was first used by Portuguese travelers who came to India in the 16th century [4]. Caste comes from the Spanish and Portuguese word "casta" which means "breed", or "lineage" [4]. Many Indians use the term "jati" when referring to castes, which are also categorized as subgroups within the over aching caste groupings [5]. These different castes are countless but typically fall under four basic Varnas:

Brahmins: priests & teachers

Kshatriyas: warriors & rulers

Vaishyas: farmers, traders & merchants

Shudras: laborers

Background

The history of the caste system in India is as old as its civilisation and culture. Achivally, there is evidence that the caste system began with the arrival of the 'Aryans' in India around 1500 BC [4]. With many cultures and ideologies flourishing in India, the literary records of the Indo-Aryan culture are not the earliest [5]. However, their writings contain the first mention and continuous history of the factors that make up the caste system [5]. The Aryans intruders possessed a particular principle of social ordering which was called Varna Vyavastha, which was based on the four hierarchical divisions of function in society [5]. These were then placed in order of decreasing importance of that time: religious and educational functions, military and political functions, economic functions, and menial functions [5]. These were further broken down under three groups [4]. The first group Kshatriya were the warriors, which were followed

by the Brahmans, who were the priests [5]. Between these two groups there was constant struggle for political power which eventually was positioned to the Brahmans which became the leaders of the Aryan society within India [5]. Members of a high caste enjoy more wealth and opportunities while members of a low caste perform menial jobs [4]. Last group consisted of craftsmen, farmers, traders, and merchants who were labeled the Vaishyas [5]. “The Aryan conquerors subdued the locals and made them servants. In this process, the Vaishyas became the landlords and businessmen of the society and the locals became the peasants and craftsmen” [5]. Living within the outcasts and the three Aryan Varnas were the fourth and lowest caste called the Shudras, who were simple workers of the society [5]. Within this caste, Shudras had two main communities. The first was one of locals who were ne community was of the locals who were sidelined by the Aryans; the second were a mix Aryan’s and local descent [5]. An effect that lasted throughout the Aryan influence, was the impact of a regulation that excluded the Shudras from their religious worship [5]. The various factors reinforced characterize caste-society was a direct result of the result of the upholders, and political leaders, of the Brahmanic civilization to exclude the aborigines and the Shudras from religious and social communion within themselves, which furthered their power over them [5].

As established, the caste system provided a base for a relevant and effective way which judged the socio-economic conditions of individuals [4]. The discrimination was used as an effective way to implement a sense of untouchability in Indian society, similar to the race issues that were seen in North America [4]. In the Indian society people who worked in ignominious, polluting and unclean occupations were seen as polluting peoples and were therefore considered as untouchables. The untouchables had almost no rights in the society. The untouchability feature in the caste system is one of the cruelest features of the caste system. The idea of superiority of one's self based on a factor at birth, providing a fundamental sense of social inequality and social gap within the population. The high caste people expect the low-caste people to view them with honor [3]. The high caste people do not give equal treatment to low-caste people [3].

Outside of the caste system are the Untouchables. Untouchable hold polluted or unclean jobs, such as toilet cleaning and garbage removal, which require them to be in contact with

bodily fluids [4] . They are therefore considered polluted and not to be touched [5]. Each Varna (and also the untouchables) are divided into many communities known as Jat or Jati [5]. Untouchables historically have had separate entrances to homes and must drink from separate wells [5]. They are considered to be in a permanent state of impurity. Untouchables called "Harijans" (Children of God) by Gandhi, who implemented efforts to end the horrific treatment and segregation of this group of people [4]. He tried to raise their status with symbolic gestures such as befriending and eating with untouchables [5]. Gandhi believed in the basis of an egalitarian society, one where people would not be discriminated [5]. One important attribute of varna that he highlighted was that while it is determined by birth, it can be retained only by observing its obligations [8]. A person who fails to do so loses their title to that varna [5]. On the other hand, someone who was born in one varna, but displaying the predominant characteristics of another, is regarded as belonging to the second varna [7]. There is a lot of ambiguity in Gandhi's stance as he is talking about varna being determined by birth, but he recognizes the possibility of a person being born in one varna and belonging to another by virtue of his qualities [7]. Through his extensive writings, Gandhi aided in the country's conscience to turn against the crimes that were committed in the name of tradition and religion in order to better India as a whole [8].

Religious Infractions

The division of castes constitutes one of the most fundamental features of India's social structure [5]. The stratification of the caste system of in India was legitimized through classical Hindu religious texts, especially as interpreted by Brahmins [5]. It is a social institution within that of Hindu traditions and religion, where it derives sanctions, intertwining the social practice of the caste system with physical practice. In Hinduism's religion there exists the four castes like those established by the Aryan settlers, and is arranged in similar hierarchy [4]. Anyone who does not belong to one of these castes is an outcasted [4].

Near the 6th century, there was a movement of many lower caste turning to Buddhism as they were fed up with the suppression and treatment of the higher ups [5]. Buddhism actually began as a reaction to the violence of Hindu society, including the psychological and physical

brutality of the caste system [5]. The aspects of Buddhism that really spoke to the lower caste was from the theory of Karma [5]. Karma in Hindu context rationalized the caste system since it was based on birth; it supports the argument that individuals of the lower castes have to blame themselves for their troubles and low status because of their 'bad' Karma in their past life [5]. Where present thoughts, decisions, and actions determine your future life events, and these events can alter one's Karma through natural, moral decision and action [5]. Karma states the present condition of your soul is based on your decisions in your past and thus you, as an individual, have made yourself what you are based on your actions [5]. This mind set was shadowed on to the idea that the castes had no one else to blame for their current dispositions then themselves [5]. Buddhism concentrates not on the society, but on the person, separating religion from the interests of the ruling and dominance [5]. In Buddhism, one is no longer born into a position due to prior injustices [5]. Buddhism sees one's life as a series of suffering and reincarnation, where this furthers the cycle of suffering, but there is the possibility of escape [6]. Buddhism utterly rejects any system of caste, and it actually reached high levels of support during the rule of Ashoka, who had adopted the Buddhist concept of non violence, to attempt to achieve greater equality [5]. The Buddha himself questioned the priests who claimed to be superior, he criticized the theological basis of the system, and welcomed into his community people of all castes, including outcasts and untouchables [5 & 6].

Social Implications of caste system in India

Membership of a caste is compulsory and is practically impossible to move up or down the caste hierarchy [2]. Each caste is given a certain set of traditions and cultures in which they try to preserve; each of these customs are different from those of other castes and can even contrast each other [4]. These perimeters of the caste comes with a certain set of rules regarding aspects of life like: marriage and divorce, food, birth, religious commencement, and even death [4]. In Hindu society, caste divisions play a part in both actual social interactions and in the ideal scheme of values [4].

The social interaction between castes has its own laws [5]. There are strict barriers when it comes to the mixing of a superior caste with one of an inferior caste [5]. Under the caste

system every caste abides by well established customs and well defined norms of interactions. This is to keep the castes from having social bonds which could threaten the system.

A large importance is granted to marriage, after all marriage results in children and the continuation of caste lineage falls within that [5]. Upward mobility is very rare and difficult to achieve in the caste system [4]. Henceforth, it is expected for one to marry inside their own caste, however there is some leniency if the groom is from a higher caste and the bride is from lower caste, this is somewhat acceptable (depending on gap between caste hierarchy), this is supporting the male dominated patriarchal society [4]. However if the bride is from upper caste and groom is from lower caste, there is huge resistance, and violence may be inflicted against them for having violated rules the entire society subscribes to [4]. Due to this families have a further refusal to support their children in an inter-caste marriage, since they themselves may be boycotted within their caste or worse, violence falling on them as well [4].

Hinduism has many strict dietary rules [5]. In general the higher castes tend to be more strict about their dietary customs than the lower castes [5]. The Brahman caste has the most strict dietary customs, they will not eat in lower castes homes or even with lower people (because of this reason many restaurants hired Brahmin cooks) [5]. The Brahman diet is supposed to include only vegetarian food, making it a vegetarian caste [5]. Sub castes who claimed Brahman status adopted vegetarian diet of the Brahmans as well [5]. But there are some Brahmin castes who traditionally eat meat, fish, chicken and egg (which is considered non-vegetarian) [5]. Within the food restriction there are four categories. There are two types of food: *Pacca*, where food is prepared with *ghee* (or melted butter), and *Kachcha*, which is food prepared with mostly water [5]. According to the castes, there are only certain kinds of foods permitted to be exchanged between certain castes [5]. For instance, Brahmans can accept only *Pacca* food from a Shudra, but *Kachcha* food can only be accepted from a person of one's own caste or of a higher caste [5].

Conclusion

Since India's independence from Britain in 1947, there has been considerable relaxation of rules related to the caste system. After independence, the Indian constitution made illegal to discriminate against someone based on caste however, this system of identification still prevails in the country to this day. It is one thing to change a law but another to internally change a

culture and mindset, that has roots in history and religion. With most of the communities who were low in the caste hierarchy remain low in the social order even today. And communities who were high in the social hierarchy remain even today high in the social hierarchy. Most of the degrading jobs are even today done by the the bottom of the caste pyramid, while the Brahmans remain at the top of the hierarchy by being the doctors, engineers, lawyers and priests of modern day India.

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