HISTORY OF THE INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM

AND

ITS IMPACT ON INDIA TODAY

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Research Proposal

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, is still exists in the community today.

Annotated Bibliography

Sekhon, Joti. *Modern India*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000. Print.

> In this book, Sekhon describes India in its modern state and how the history of the country has shaped it into what it is today. She provides insight on the history of the country, its religions, its social stratification system, its economic status and role in the global economy, gender relations, its political institutes, and social changes that have taken place in India. The book will aid me in retrieving information on India's history, its complex caste system, and how religion, economic, and politics play a role in shaping the stratification system of India.

Dumont, L. *Homo hierarchicus: the caste system and its implications*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1970. Print.

> Dumont does a brilliant job in going 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. (1982). *Concepts of a person: kinship, caste, and marriage in india*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982. Print.

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. *Casteism and Human Rights: toward an Ontology of the Social Order*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005. Print.

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.

Smith, Brian K. *Classifying the Universe: the Ancient Indian Varṇa System and the Origins of Caste*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.

In this book, Smith dives into the various aspects of division found in the caste system like food, gods, time, animals, and even seasons. The book goes into detail by describing how everything in the universe is classified from an Indian's point of view in relation to the Hindu religion. It also describes the origins of the caste system that have derived from cosmogonic myths, which carry considerable weight. They explain what could not otherwise be known; they relate how things were "in the beginning" and how this relates to why things are the way they are now. The time of beginning is considered the "time of perfection." Smith explains the "varnas or classes that comprise Indian society, as well as realms in the natural, supernatural, and ritual worlds, were supposedly created in the beginning, often by the procreative act of the creator god." This book will facilitate my discussion of the origins of the caste system from the ancient Vedic texts in my research paper.

Bouglé, Célestin. *Essays on the Caste System*. London: Cambridge UP, 1971. Print.

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. Bougle discusses the caste hierarchy and priesthood, and includes the effects of the caste system on race, law, economic 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.

Béteille, André. *Caste, Class, and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*. Berkeley: University of California, 1965. Print.

> In this book, Béteille does an excellent job giving the reader a detailed view on the physical structure of the village in India and an easy to understand explanation on the caste structure. He also highlights the economic organization of the caste system and social class, as well as an overview on the distributions of power within the caste system. This book will help me be able to tie caste, power, and economic organization together in order to get a better understanding of their relatedness.

Ghurye, G. S. *Caste and Race in India*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969. Print.

> This book gives a very thorough description about the characteristics of the caste system and the nature of caste-groups, as well as a historical walkthrough of how the caste system came about. Ghurye goes into the relationship between race and caste, the origins of the system and even focuses on caste, sub-caste, and kin. This book will aid me in receiving a thorough background of the system and will also give me insight on the caste system during the British and how politics plays a huge role in the shaping of caste.

Hutton, J. H. *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function and Origins*. Bombay: Indian Branch, Oxford UP, 1963. Print.

Hutton gives us a detailed description of how caste plays a role in different parts

of India. He covers its structure, its sanctions, and its functions in the daily lives

of Indians, including endogamous units of society, the avoidance of pollution

through water, and the use of temples. He also talks about the traditional origins

of the caste system. This book will guide me through the vastly diverse cultures

found in India and how the caste system differs in these villages.

Lahiri, R. K. "Caste System in Hinduism by Dr. RK Lahiri, PhD." *Boloji.com - A Study in*

Diversity - News, Views, Analysis, Literature, Poetry, Features - Express Yourself. 20

Nov. 2005. Web. May 2010.

This article describes the various characteristics and criteria needed to be met in

every caste and their important roles in society. This article will help me gain

more insight on the classifications of caste and will show me what each caste

deals with in terms of occupation, marriage, and discrimination. The article also

talks about the origins of the caste system and the misinterpretation of the *Vedas*.

Outline

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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 (Sekhon, 39). 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 (Sekhon, 39). 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.

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" (Hutton, 47). 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 (Velassery, 2). Caste name is generally associated with a specific

occupation and, as mentioned before, is a closed stratification, which makes it endogamous (Hutton, 47). 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 (Smith, 43). The Brahmans, usually priests and scholars, are at the top. Brian K. Smith, the author of *Classifying the Universe*, explains his definition of the Brahman caste:

> The Brahmin class is essentially defined by its supposed priority (as the class created first by the creator god), by knowledge of the Veda, and by the monopoly this class holds on the operation of sacrifice. These traits justify the social position of the class vis-à-vis others: they are predominant because they are prior, and they claim to stand outside of the power relations that govern social life for others because of their superior knowledge and sole possession of the ultimate "weapons," sacrificial techniques (48).

There are, however, varying "degrees" of Brahmans, such as Kanya-Kubja, Tamil, Tanjore, and others who are part of numerous villages (Pintane). These sub-castes, called *jatis*, are very specifically endogamous, so that a Brahman is not only restricted to marrying another Brahman, but to marrying a woman of the same subdivision of Brahmans (Hutton, 47). 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*. Separation of these Brahmans from others is one of several indications of social status, which include material goods, social power or influence, and social skills (Pintane). In modern India, economic competition and education are predominate, and the Brahmans occupy this position in both aspects (Sekhon, 44).

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 (Smith, 48). These qualities determined his relations with others: "the Kshatriya is charged with the protection of the higher Brahmin class with rule over (and unrestricted exploitation of) the lower Vaishyas" (Smith, 48-9). 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 (Smith, 42).

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.

At the very bottom are those considered the "untouchables." These individuals performed occupations that were considered unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and are considered outcastes. The Hindu law books insisted that there were only four varnas and never a fifth, which was used as a reason to not accept the tribal people of India (Velassery, 8). They were therefore not considered to be included in the ranked castes. In some cases, the untouchables could face criminal charges if they polluted certain things with their presence. For example, it was a criminal offense for a member of an excluded caste knowingly to pollute a temple by his presence (Hampton). They were also forbidden to enter the streets in which the houses of the upper castes were situated, and there were many customs and laws that kept them beyond the villages and towns. Since they were rated outside the caste system, they were destined to only in the outskirts of the village and were never an integral part of village community. Their services, however, were still essential to the health of the community and therefore still had to be part of the system in order to serve the upper castes (Velassery, 8).

Caste includes three elements: repulsion, hierarchy, and hereditary specialization. According to Velassery, "a society is characterized by such a system if it is divided into a large number of hereditarily specialized groups, which are hierarchically superposed and mutually opposed. It does not tolerate the principle of rising in the status of groups' mixture and of changing occupation" (2). There are many rules in the Indian caste system which caste members must adhere to in order to avoid being shunned from their caste members or, according to Hinduism, being born less fortunate in their next life. The two most important characteristics of the Indian caste system have to do with endogamy and occupational restriction. Every member of a caste or sub-caste is required to marry within their own caste. Any violation of this results in excommunication from one's family and caste. When it comes to occupation, every caste is associated with a particular one to which its members are required to follow. Another characteristic is that every caste imposes restrictions on its members with regards to diet and has its own laws which govern the food habit of the members. There are two types of food: *Pacca*, which is food prepared with ghee (melted butter), and *Kachcha*, which is food prepared with water (Pyakurel). According to the castes, only certain kinds of foods can be exchanged between certain castes. For example, a Brahman 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 (Pyakurel). Another is the social interaction between castes. There are strict barriers when it comes to the mixing of a superior caste with an inferior caste. Hence, under the caste system every caste abides by well established customs and well defined norms of interactions.

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 exclusivism, a social device that became religious only by being drawn into the

pollution-purity complex (Velssasery, 8). 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 and individual's mobility up or down the hierarchy (Pyakurel).

The caste system very much impacted the economic structure in the Indian village. The village was essentially a food-providing unit, where each family of the craft or service caste was linked with one or more of the land owning-farmer-caste family. This system was known as the jajmani system, which survived in India up to the arrival of the British. W.H. Wiser in his Hindu Jajmani System shows the mutuality of relationship in a village community based on the exchange of goods and services between different castes (Velassery, 7). In the village that Wiser studied, he found that "there were twenty-four castes fixed by birth—priest and teacher, bard and geologist, accountant, goldsmith, florist vegetable grower, rice grower, carpenter, ironworker, barber, water-bearer, shepherd, grain parcher, seamster, potter trademan, oil-presser, washerman, mat-maker, leather worker, sweeper and cess pool cleaner, Mohammedan beggar, Mohammedan glass bangle seller, Mohammedan cotton-carder, and Mohammedan dancing girl" (Velassery, 7). Each individual had a fixed economic and social status. Even the beggar, for example, had a fixed status. Giving alms to the beggar was considered as a religious duty so that it could be demanded as of right and each was related to others in employed-employer relationship. Basically, the same individual who was an employer in one relationship was the employed in another (Velassery, 7). It can be seen from the above list of caste distinctions that the web of economic stability and security that was provided by an individual's respective caste and by

those relationships the individual acquired through his or her occupation was essential to village live. The caste system is what drives these relationships and these relationships are one of the reasons the caste system stays intact.

Origins and History

The origin of the Indian caste system has many theories behind it. Some of them are religious, while others are biological. The religious theories explain that according to the *Rig Veda*, which is the ancient Hindu book, the primal man, Purush, destroyed himself to create a human society and the different parts of his body created the four different varnas. The Brahmins were from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created (Daniel). For example, Brahmans, who were derived from the head of Purush, are considered the intelligent and most powerful varna because of their wisdom and education and are a representation of the brain. In the same way, Kshatriyas, considered the warrior caste, were created by arms, which represent strength. Another religious theory claims that the Varnas were created from the body organs of Brahma, who is the creator of the world in Hinduism.

The biological theory claims that all existing things inherit three one of three categories of qualities. Varna means different shades of texture or color and represents mental temper. There are three Gunas: *Sattva, Rajas and Tamas*. *Sattva* is white, *Rajas* is red, and *Tamas* is black. These in combination of various proportions constitute the group or class of people all over the world with temperamental differences (Lahiri). *Sattva* qualities include characteristics

related to wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness, and other positive qualities. *Rajas* include qualities such as passion, pride, and valor. *Tamas* are considered to acquire qualities that include dullness, stupidity, lack of creativity, and other negative qualities (Daniel). People with different amounts of these inherent qualities end up adopting the appropriate occupation. According to this theory, the Brahmans usually inherit the *Sattva* qualities. They are serene and self-controlled and possess the quality of austerity. They are considered to have purity, uprightness and forbearance. Brahmans also have the will to acquire knowledge, wisdom, and faith (Lahiri). The Kshatriyas and Vaishyas inherit the *Raja* qualities, and the Shudras inherit the *Tamas* qualities (Daniel). The type of one's actions, the quality of ego, the color of knowledge, the texture of one's understanding, the temper of fortitude, and the brilliance of one's happiness defines one's Varna (Lahiri).

Historically, however, it is believed that the caste system began with the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 BC (Daniel). Of the many cultures that flourished in India, the literary records of the Indo-Aryan culture are not the earliest. They do, however, contain the first mention and a continuous history of the factors that make up the caste system (Ghurye, 162-63). The Aryans came from southern Europe and northern Asia with fair skin that contrasted with the indigenous natives in India. When they arrived, their main contact was with the Dravidians. The only other culture whose records are dependable about the origins of the caste system are the Dravidians, but when that culture's documents were put forwards, it had already been largely influenced by the Indo-Aryan tradition (Ghurye, 63). Unfortunately, the Aryans completely disregarded their local cultures and began conquering regions all over north India (Daniel). At the same time, the local people were pushed south towards jungles of mountains in north India.

The Aryans possessed a particular principle of social ordering called *Varna* Vyavastha, which was based on the four hierarchical divisions of function in society. They were placed in order of decreasing importance: religious and educational functions, military and political functions, economic functions, and menial functions (Velassery, 2). The Aryans organized themselves in three groups. The first group, Rajayana (later changed to Kshatriya) were the warriors, which were followed by the Brahmans, who were the priests (Daniel). These two groups constantly struggled for political leadership among the Aryans. Eventually, the Brahmans became the leaders of the Aryan society. The final group consisted of the farmers and craftmen, and were called the Vaishyas (Daniel). 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 (Daniel).

In order to secure their status, the Aryans laid out social and religious rules which stated that only they were allowed to become priests, warriors, and businessmen of the society (Daniel). Maharashtra, which is a state located in west India, is a great example. This region has been known by this name for hundreds of years, and many think that the meaning of its name is Great Land. But there are some who claim that the name Maharashtra is derived from the category called Mahar, who are considered to be the original people of this region (Daniel). These individuals were forced to adhere to the social and religious rules the Aryans laid out. In the caste hierarchy, the Mahars were outcasts because they were dark-skinned compared to the light-skinned Aryans. Skin color was an important indicator in determining an individual's caste (Daniel). As mentioned before, the word *varna* does not mean caste or class, but color (Ghurye, 163). Having come across people who were very dark in color and had rather snub noses, the

Aryans described the earlier settlers as "dark color," as people without noses, and applied them to the term *dasa*, which in Iranian stood for "enemy" (Ghurye, 165).

Between the outcasts and the three Aryan *varnas* were the Shudras, who were simple workers of the society. The Shudras consisted of two communities: one community was of the locals who were subdued by the Aryans, and the other was the mix of Aryan and local descent (Daniel). One of the main regulations the Aryans began with was the exclusion of these Shudras from their religious worship. Very early in their Indian history, the Aryans enjoined that the Shudras shall not practice the religious worship developed by them (Ghurye, 172). The various factors that characterize caste-society were the result of the attempts on the part of the upholders of the Brahmanic civilization to exclude the aborigines and the Shudras from religious and social communion with themselves (Ghurye, 172). In Hindu religious stories, there are many wars between the good Aryans and the dark-skinned demons. Stories of demon women trying to seduce good Aryan men in deceptive ways are very prominent. Many believed that these incidences really occurred in which the Gods and the positive heroes were of Aryan origin and the demons were in fact the original residents of India who the Aryans themselves coined as devils and demons (Daniel).

As most of the societies in the world, India had a patriarchal system. Most of the time, the son inherited his father's profession, which led to developing families, who acquired the same family profession for generations (Daniel). Later on, as these families got bigger, they were seen as communities, or *jat*. Different families who professed the same profession developed social relations between them and organized as a *jat* (Daniel). After a while, the Aryans who had created the caste system slowly began to add non-Aryans to their statuses. Different *jats* were integrated into the various *varnas* according to their profession. Other foreign invaders of ancient

India—Greeks, Huns, Scythains, and others—conquered parts of India and created kingdoms. These were integrated with the Kshatriyas. Most of the communities that were in India before the arrival of the Aryans were categorized with the Shudras or were made outcasts depending on their occupations (Daniel). The beginning of the Dalit *varna* began here, where the communities exercising polluting professions were made outcastes and considered as "untouchables." Brahmans are very strict about cleanliness, and in the past people believed that diseases could be spread not only through physical touch but through the air as well. This is one of the reasons why Dalits were not allowed to touch the high caste community and were required to stand a certain distance away from the higher castes (Daniel).

Around the 6th century, many individuals of the lower castes who were getting fed up of suppression turned to Buddhism. Buddhism actually began as a reaction to the violence of Hindu society, including the brutality of the caste system (Essortment). Buddhism concentrates not on the society, but on the individual, thus separating religion from the interests of the ruling and dominance. In Buddhism, one is no longer born into a position due to past injustice. Although Buddhism does see life as pain and suffering and reincarnation as a renewal of this suffering, there is a potential escape (Essortment). The Buddha, himself born into the warrior caste, was a severe critic of the caste system. Buddhism utterly rejects any system of caste, and it actually reached high levels of support during the rule of Ashoka, who adopted the Buddhist concept of ahimsa, or non violence, and its tendency toward greater equality (Essortment). He ridiculed the priests who claimed to be superior, criticized the theological basis of the system, and he welcomed into his community people of all castes, including outcasts (Malalasekera and Jayatilleke). His most famous saying on the subject was, "Birth does not make one a priest or an outcaste. Behavior makes one either a priest or an outcaste" (Malalasekera and Jayatilleke). Even

during the time when Buddhism was decaying in India and Tantrayana (another sect of Buddhism practiced after the 7th century) had adopted many aspects of Hinduism, it continued to welcome all castes (Malalasekera and Jayatilleke).

The fluidity of the caste system was affected by the arrival of the British. The British brought with them their own traditional form of government, and as Christians, they did not have much sympathy for the Hindu institutions (Ghurye, 270). During the initial days of the British East India Company's rule, caste privileges and customs were encouraged, but the British law courts began to disagree with the discrimination against the lower castes (Alavi, 5). However, British policies of divide and rule contributed towards the hardening of caste identities (Corbridge and Harriss, 8). As British civilization multiplied in India, however, it was fatal for the members of different castes, affecting the beliefs they have about contact and "using the same instruments at the cost of traditional repulsion" (Bouglé, 81). For example, when the British government wanted to install a water system in Bombay, there was a great outcry at first from the upper castes. They could not believe that pure and impure, twice-born and Shudra, were going to be drinking from the same taps as themselves (Bouglé, 81). This was, however, resolved by the panchayat, which is an assembly of five wise and respected elders chosen and accepted by the village community. They claimed that the tax raise by the British administration for this canalization could be considered as reparation and that it would redeem the sins to which this sharing of taps would expose them to (Bouglé, 81). Britain did not only affected the Hindu people by indirect means. A certain number of traditional caste-linked crafts were made impossible to make because of the large number of importing manufactured goods from the metropolis. Because of this, many weavers had to turn to agriculture. In other places, occupations that had been passed down from generation to generation had to be closed down because of

newly opened factories (Bouglé, 81). From these events, not only were occupations changed, but the very social situations between the castes were affected. The three supporting pillars of the caste system—hereditary specialization, the sacred hierarchy, and mutual repulsion—were basically directly undermined by the British administration (Bouglé, 82).

Religion, Culture, and Caste

The division of castes constitutes one of the most fundamental features of India's social structure. In Hindu society, caste divisions play a part in both actual social interactions and in the ideal scheme of values. Members of different castes are expected to behave differently and to have different values and ideals (Béteille, 45). These differences are sanctioned by the Hindu religion.

Traditionally, the caste system of stratification in India was legitimized through classical Hindu religious texts, especially as interpreted by Brahmans (Sekhon, 45). Hinduism is "as much of a social system as a religion…Its social framework has from very early times been the caste system, and this has…become…increasingly identified as Hinduism as such" (Smith, 9). The caste system was rationalized in ancient India on various grounds. One of them was the justification in the Vedas. The caste system would not have found approval among the vedic people unless there was some reference to it in the Vedas. The Purushu Sukta in the 10th Mandala of the Rigveda describes how the castes came into existence: from different parts of the Purusha, the Cosmic Soul, at the time of a grand sacrifice performed by the gods (Jayarama V). As mentioned earlier, the Brahmins came out of his mouth, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaiyshas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet. Another justification derives from the

theory of Karma. This concept rationalizes the caste system based on birth. It supports the argument that people of the lower castes have to blame themselves for their troubles and low status because of their bad Karma in their past life (Jayarama V). The law of Karma states that the present condition of your soul, for example, confusion or serenity, is based on your decisions in the past and that you, as an individual, have made yourself what you are based on your actions. Also, your present thoughts, decisions, and actions determine your future life events, and these events can alter one's Karma through natural, moral decision and action (Oriental Philosophy). Therefore, it is the notion that "one's particular duty is calibrated to the class into which one was born and the stage of life one is presently passing through" (Smith, 10), and that one of the main entailments of the caste system is "the belief in *karma* and the cycle of rebirth whereby ones social position in this life is ethically determined by moral actions in past lives" (Smith, 10).

Since one of the main beliefs in Hinduism is that the consequences of your past decisions have determined your present state, reincarnation plays a huge role in the prevention of people revolting against the caste system. Reincarnation was created by the Aryans in order to justify the oppressive behavior they were imposing on the natives and to keep the people from rising up against the system. Reincarnation bolsters caste oppression in two ways. It justifies injustice, and deflects hopes for progress from this life to a "next life" (JoT). For the people on top of the caste system (the Brahmins), reincarnation justifies why they get the privilege of high-class birth. Those privileges were earned through virtuous behaviors in their past lives, and a privileged birth proves that one deserves privilege. For the people on the bottom, the Shudras and the untouchables, reincarnation justifies why they suffer for their low birth. They must have earned their suffering through sinful acts in past lives. In order to avoid a low-caste birth in their next

life, Hindus who are born as Shudras or untouchables learned to support rather than oppose their own oppression. Hinduism teaches low-caste people that the way to improve their position in their next life is by leading a virtuous life this time around with no acts of deviance towards the caste system (JoT).

As mentioned before, many in India who were oppressed (like the Shudras and the "untouchables") joined anti-Brahmanical movements in order to take a stance against the discriminatory acts they were facing. Even in 1950, one of the primary reasons for the conversion to Buddhism in India during the 1950s under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar was the caste system and the plight of the oppressed "untouchables" (Sekhon, 45). Conversion to Buddhism seemed to be believed as the only means of emancipation from the injustices associated with the caste system. This is where the term Dalit derived from; those termed untouchables referred to themselves as the oppressed people, and the term is used to denote both pride in their community as well as resistance to exploitation (Sekhon, 45-6). Sometime the oppressed Shudra castes and tribal groups also refer to themselves as Dalit. These Dalit activists rejected being defined as Hindus and supported the movement against social and economic injustice (Sekhon, 46).

It is unfortunate that although the original intent of Varnas was not to create caste, it has evolved into emphasizing the idea of the caste system. Varnas are conditioned with one's actions and desires based on Gunas, but people have mistaken Varnas for caste and treat them as identical. Varnas are God created, whereas caste is man-made; it is simply a social institution and can easily be changed and modified according to changing needs of society (Lahiri). Caste-by-birth was never the original intent nor was it ever the basis upon which the Varnas were constituted; it was meant to have individuals engaging only in a field of activity that they are

capable of doing (Lahiri). The Varna System stood on the basis of Gunas and karmas of the individual and has nothing to do with birth (Lahiri).

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" (Sekhon, 48). 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 (Sekhon, 48). 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.

Another prominent movement was the Dalit movement under B.R. Ambedkar, which began between the 1920s and 1930s. He campaigned for greater rights for Dalits in British India, and even after independence (Sekhon, 48). Both Ambedkar and Gandhi were advocates for the abolishment of the caste system, but they disagreed on the means to go about it. Gandhi believed "untouchability to be a moral issue that could be abolished through goodwill and change of heart among the upper-caste Hindus" (Sekhon, 48). Ambedkar, however, believed that "the subordination of Dalits was primarily economic and political, and could only be overcome by changing the social structure through legal, political, and educational means" (Sekhon, 48). Ambedkar did receive constitutional guarantees after independence that reserved a certain percentage of seats in elections for Dalits, but by the mid-1950s, Ambedkar was not satisfied by the rate of implementation of the measures. He therefore resigned from government and began to recruit Dalits to seek rights. In 1956, he encouraged around six million Dalits to convert to Buddhism "as a means of escaping the social stigma of untouchability within the Hindu caste system" (Sekhon, 49). During the 1970s, the Dalit Panthers movement sprouted up among the younger generation of Dalits along with other social movements in India, and their movement expressed their anger and frustration at the failure of implementation regarding policies that would eliminate acts of violence against Dalits by upper-caste Hindus in many parts of urban and rural India (Sekhon, 49).

There are three main categories of people that have been identified as eligible for preferential policies that reserve seats in legislatures, in government jobs, in public sector enterprises, and in state-supervised educational institutions, in terms of their population

proportion in their area. They have also been promised special programs (such as health care legal assistance, allotment of land, scholarships, loans, and grants) and are legally protected against discrimination (such as debt, forced labor, and untouchability) (Sekhon 49). The first group is the Scheduled Castes (SCs), which includes communities who are considered to be untouchables (Daniel). The second are the Scheduled Tribes (STs). This category includes in it those communities who did not accept the caste system and preferred to reside deep in the jungles, forests, and mountains of India, away from the main population. The Scheduled Tribes are also called *Adivasi*, meaning aboriginals (Daniel). The third is the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), which includes in it castes who belong to the Shudra Varna, former untouchables who converted from Hinduism to other religions, and nomads and tribes who made a living from criminal acts (Daniel). They are considered to be affected by "backwardness" based on social and economic disadvantages. It is not clear, however, what criterion identifies OBCs and there is an ongoing disagreement over whether to assign people this status on the basis of caste or on economic criteria. The problem with this is that caste and economic status have been largely correlated in the past, and even now, caste-based prejudice and discrimination hinder economic advancement for the lower castes (Sekhon, 49).

In the 1960s, the reservation system for SCs and STs began, but the individual states were the ones that were 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 (Sekhon, 50). 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 (Sekhon, 50). 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" (Sekhon, 50).

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 (Sekhon, 43) (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 (Sekhon, 44). 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 (Sekhon, 44). 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 power in modern India, such as educational opportunities, new occupations, and

improvement in life chances (Sekhon, 45). This trend is connected to India's preferential policies

and the implementation of these policies.

Implementation has been very uneven in the midst of debates and controversies over the

preferential policies, but they have still had a very significant impact on many sections among

the lower castes and classes (Sekhon, 50). There has been an increase in representation of SCs,

STs, and OBCs in elected offices and they have acquired strong local support. They have also

become an important element in electoral politics and have gone on to form strong political

parties in various regions. People from these disadvantaged groups have largely made their way

into government jobs as well as all levels of educational institutions (Sekhon, 50).

Unfortunately, however, only a relatively small proportion of the lower castes have

benefited from these preferential policies. Even thought 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 (Sekhon, 51). 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 (Sekhon, 51).

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 (Velassery, xi). 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 now, and there are fewer restrictions on social interaction among castes, especially in urban areas (Sekhon, 55). 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 (Velassery, xii). 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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