



The Hindu Caste System in India

One of the most controversial topics regarding India's society and culture is its stringent caste system. To be born a Hindu in India is to enter the caste system, one of the world's longest surviving forms of social stratification.

Part of India's culture from the hoary past (several thousands of years), the ranks in Hindu society come from ancient scriptures called the Vedas in which the main groupings, or *Varnas*, emerge from a Primordial Being, or God. Caste was conceived of as the Cosmic Person Himself manifesting as human society. From the head come the Brahmins who are the priests and teachers. From the shoulders and arms come the Kshatriyas - the rulers, warriors, and landowners. From the thighs come the Vaisyas - the merchants and traders. From the feet come the Sudras - the artisans, agriculturalists, and laborers. Just as each limb is important and has a function of its own, but is interdependent on the others, so too all these castes were considered equally important in working together for the good of the whole. The Vedic Religion of India clearly laid down that appearance alone, or birth in a family alone cannot decide caste. It has to be determined on the basis of character and occupation. The castes were originally not based on race or birth but on innate nature, inclinations and tendencies of the individual concerned, and profession adopted and pursued.

The Varna system was formed because of the need to form a social order in ancient India, in order to promote the expansion of human achievement by fostering the trends and traits of each person. The duties of each community were also specified. Broadly, Brahmins would be models of humility, concerned mainly with teaching and the preservation of the Vedic scriptures and guiding people and country with advice - timely, impartial and most conducive to the common good. The Kshatriyas would defend and govern the country, the Vaisyas would be concerned with trade and commerce, while the Sudras would take care of what today we might perhaps call the service sector. People had their own place in society in accordance with their inclinations and skills and accepted that the system kept society from disintegrating into chaos. It maintained a sense of order and peace among the people.

While the roles of each of the four Varnas might have varied, there was nothing inferior or superior about any particular caste; that aberration crept in later. Systems have a way of getting corrupted and atrophied and that precisely is what happened to the Varna system. As spiritual values and ideals eroded, the Varna system degenerated into the infamous rigidly hereditary caste system. Each Varna evolved into hundreds of hereditary castes, or *jatis*, and sub-castes with their own pecking orders. This is the present form of the caste system. Within each of these castes people are born, marry, and die. The caste system maintains social hierarchy generation after generation and allows little mobility out of the position to which a person is born.

Untouchability is a social evil that seems to have developed over the last 2000 years or so. Harijans, or Dalits, comprise the fifth group that describes the people who are *achuta*, or untouchable. These people are considered outside the caste system. The origin of the Dalit community is marked by mystery and debate; many theories have been floated speculating on how the Dalit community might have come into being. Although the Indian constitution makes caste discrimination illegal, the Dalits, as they are commonly referred, live at the bottom of

society. They are subjected to indignities and are bounded in ways that keeps them in their place. Historically, they could not receive formal education that would enable them to climb the societal ranks, and lived in poverty with scarce means of amenities, food, and health care. However, today, more and more Dalits receive education and employment. Academic scholarships have increased their literacy rate increase from 10.3% in 1961 to 21.4% in 1981. This has led to the emergence of educated Dalits holding higher positions in the work force, even white-collar jobs.

Intercaste relations can be viewed as either economically cooperative or exploitative. In the prior perspective, the lower castes perform jobs as farmers, carpenters, shoemakers, and potters for the upper castes who own land and businesses and are able to pay them. In the latter perspective, the high-ranking castes have both social and economic power, and are able to economically exploit or discriminate the lower classes.

Inequalities amongst castes are a part of the ordained natural order. Disparities are explained or justified in terms of purity and pollution. High-caste status is associated with purity and low-castes status, with pollution. This explains the distances upper and lower castes maintain in terms of their relationships. Strict rules and regulations regarding these relationships serve as a constant reminder of the multi-ranked caste society.

However, it is important to note that caste affiliations are no longer obvious and the observance of purity-pollution regulations is negligible. The growth of urbanization (approximately 26 percent of the population now lives in cities) is having a far-reaching effect on caste practices, not only in cities but in villages. Among anonymous crowds in urban public spaces and on public transportation, caste affiliations are unknown. Restrictions on interactions with other castes are becoming more relaxed, and observance of pollution rules is declining, especially those concerning birth, death, and menstruation. Several growing Hindu sects draw members from many castes and regions, and communication between cities and villages is expanding dramatically. As new occupations open up in urban areas, the correlation of caste with occupation is declining.

The caste system has been around for centuries and is deeply rooted in Indian culture. It is still very prevalent in modern India, and the values of the system are still held strongly. Most high-caste Indians claim that they do not follow the system, and it does not exist anymore. Even though people of all castes mix together, it does not mean that the caste system does not exist. The observance of caste as can be witnessed in the continued emphasis on marrying someone in the same caste. In addition, caste associations still organize activities in quest of building numbers and thus influential power in society.

Generally, the system is used more in social matters of kinship and marriages than in impersonal day-to-day interaction, such as taking the bus. Having been around for centuries, it is highly doubtful that the caste system will die out completely. The main factor that may be slowly changing the caste system is the younger generations, who are more educated and open-minded. Many of them do not give much importance to the system. If the system will survive, it will depend on the upcoming generations to carry on the tradition or the walls of the caste system will crumble.

Online information sources for this report include:

The Varna and Jati Systems by Terence Callaham and Roxanna Pavich located at <http://www.csuchico.edu/~cheinz/syllabi/asst001/spring98/india.htm>;

The Caste System in India located at <http://itrs.scu.edu/hinduism/>;

The Library of Congress' Country study on India's Intercaste Relations located at http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?cstdy:3:./temp/~frd_iEJi;

India's Culture: Hindu Religion at the Foundation located at: <http://www.globalvolunteers.org/1main/india/indiaculture.htm>;

Untouchable by Tom O'Neil located on the web at <http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0306/feature1/>.