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A Historical Analysis Of Influence Of The Indian Caste System

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A B S T R A C T

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.

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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. Despite 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 other 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,). It can also be defined as an endogamous and a 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,). 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,). The Brahmans, usually priests and scholars, are at the top. Brian K.

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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 is-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.

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 marry a woman of the same subdivision of Brahmans. 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 predominating, and the Brahmans occupy this position in both aspects.

Following the Brahmans are the Kshatriyas, or the 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". 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.

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

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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, the 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 is not the earliest. They do, however, contain the first mention and a continuous history of the factors that make up the caste system. 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 is dependable about the origins of the caste system are the Dravidians, but when that culture's document was put forwards, it had already been largely influenced by the Indo-Aryan tradition. 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 the jungles of mountains in north India.

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. 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.

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". 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", 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".

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 a 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. 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. 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 the goodwill and a change of heart among the upper-caste Hindus". 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"). 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 with the rate of implementation of the measures. He therefore resigned from the 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". 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.

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 are now less associated with caste than before, and land ownership 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 have 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 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. 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. 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.

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 from 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

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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. 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 cast 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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