

The Caste System

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Description of Module

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The Caste System: The Caste system has aroused more controversy than any other aspect of Indian life and thought. Since the days of the British rule, both historians and anthropologists referred to India as a ‘caste society’.

Definition of Caste: Caste as “a Hindu hereditary class of socially equal persons, united in religion and usually following similar occupations, distinguished from other castes in the Society.

Jāti and Varna: The term Caste is commonly used to refer to two distinct concepts of The ‘Jāti’ (Caste by birth group) and the Varna (Caste by profession).

Jati: The term Jāti is used for millions of people with whom one may identify oneself for such purposes as marriage. There are thousands of titles associated with specific Jātis in different parts of the country:

Varna : The concept of Varna involves a scheme with only four divisions. Thus what would now be called Hindu society is conceived of as being Divisible into four very large units. These are: Brāhmana, Katriya, Vaisya and Sudra. They are commonly understood as a ranked order of precedence. Then there is another caste called the ‘fifth’ one (called Pañcama), the so-called ‘untouchable’ (the hill and forest population who are called tribal’s, inclusive). This group occupies a place below, outside this Varna scheme.

The Brāhmanas are commonly identified with those who fulfill the calling of priests. The Katriyas (the ‘protectors’) are usually rulers and warriors. The Vaisyas are those who have commercial livelihood, and wealth-creators as well. The Sudras are labours and artisans. People belonging to the ‘fifth’ group perform ‘unclean’ services such as killing animals for food, etc.

The earliest beginnings:

The Rgveda (X.90) (@ 5000 B.C.) contains the first symbolic reference to the emergence of the four castes, Brāhmanas, (Ksatriyas), Vaisyas and Sudras, from the mouth, shoulders, thighs and feet respectively.

Heredity or birth : As a matter of fact, the **Hindu castes** are not related to heredity or birth. Manu the Law Giver explains the principle of caste as a universal law of life. The key principle of 'caste Hindu' thought is understood as the **code of duty**. He also laid down the Aśrama Dharmas -- duties of celibates (brahmacārins), householders (gruhasthas), forest-recluses (vānaprasthas) and ascetics (sanyāsins).

Classification of castes: Manu also explains that the classification of castes **based on profession**, does not disqualify the members to inter-marry. He speaks of marriages (in the descending order) according to which a man belonging to the higher order may marry a woman belonging to the lower order. The Varna classification was of course, not rigid or inflexible.

In the Rāmāyana for instance, Parasurāma who was a Brahmin by birth but behaved as a Katriya. Visvāmitra who was a king by birth became a Brahmin by virtue of his spiritual attainments. Drona and K.rupa in the Mahābhārata were Brahmins by Jāti but became Katriyas by profession.

One may claim to have been born in a particular Jāti and consider oneself as 'Suddha' (pure) or 'Subha' (auspicious). But the division in terms of caste by profession (varna) remains flexible. E.g., professions as those of Doctors, Lawyers, Engineers, Professors and Musicians. Those born in any Jāti can take up any of the above professions. That was the original import and intention of ancient scriptures and law-texts. But in India, in the middle ages, people began to think of only one type of caste, i.e., caste by birth or Jāti. An individual began to think of himself or herself as superior or inferior to others. This is the chief cause of malady in India.

Caste System: The caste system in India is an important part of ancient Hindu tradition and dates back to 1200 BCE. The term caste was first **used by Portuguese** travelers who came to India in the 16th century. Caste comes from the Spanish and Portuguese word "**casta**". Many Indians use the term "jati". There are 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub castes in India, each related to a specific occupation. These different castes fall under four basic varnas: Brahmins--priests & teachers, Kshatriyas--warriors & rulers, Vaishyas— farmers, traders & merchants, Shudras—laborers. Caste not only dictates one's occupation, Members of a high caste **enjoy more wealth** and opportunities while members of a low caste perform boring jobs. Outside of the caste system are the Untouchables. **Untouchable jobs**, such as toilet cleaning and garbage removal, They are therefore considered polluted and not to be touched.

The Beginning of the caste system

Theories : There are different theories about the establishment of the caste system. There are religious-mystical theories. There are biological theories. And there are socio-historical theories.

The religious theories: explain how the four Varnas were founded. According to the Rig Veda, the ancient [Hindu](#) book, the primal man - **Purush - destroyed himself** to create a human society. The different Varnas were created from different parts of his body. The Brahmins were created from his head; the Kshatriyas from his hands; the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Sudras from his feet. Other religious theory claims that the Varnas were created from the **body organs of Brahma**, who is the creator of the world.

The biological theory: claims that all existing things, , inherent three qualities. **Sattvic** qualities include wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness and other **positive qualities**. **Rajas** include qualities like **passion, pride**, Tamas qualities include dullness, stupidity, lack of creativity and other **negative qualities**.

According to this theory the Brahmins inherent Sattva qualities. Kshatriyas and Vaishyas inherent Rajas qualities. And the Sudras inherent Tamas qualities.

Food also inherent different dosage of these qualities and it affects its eater's intelligence. The Brahmins and the Vaishyas have Sattvic diet which includes fruits, milk, honey, roots and vegetables. Most of the meats are considered to have Tamasic qualities. Many Sudra communities eat different kinds of meat (but not beef) and other Tamasic food. But the Kshatriyas who had Rajasic diet eat some kinds of meat like deer meat which is considered to have Rajasic qualities

The social historical theory : explains the creation of the Varnas, Jatis and of the untouchables. According to this theory, the caste system began with **the arrival of the Aryans in India**. The Aryans arrived in India around 1500 BC. The fair skinned Aryans arrived in India from south Europe and north Asia. Before the Aryans there were other communities in India of other origins. Among them Negrito, Mongoloid, Austroloid and Dravidian.

The Dravidians were the largest community in India. When the Aryans arrived in India their main contact was with the Dravidians and the Austroloids. The Aryans disregarded the local cultures. They began conquering and taking control over regions in north India.

The Aryans organized among themselves in three groups. The first group was of the warriors and they were called Rajayana, later they changed their name Rajayana to Kshatriya. The second group was of the priests and they were called Brahmins. These two groups struggled politically for leadership among the Aryans. In this struggle the Brahmins got to be the leaders of the Aryan society. The third group was of the farmers and craftsmen and they were called Vaishya. Vaishyas who were the farmers and the craftsmen became the landlords and the businessmen of the society. The Aryans who occupied and took control over parts of north India the locals and made them their servants. In order to secure their status the Aryans resolved some social and religious rules which, allowed only them to be the priests, warriors and the businessmen of the society.

Varna: The skin color was an important factor in the caste system. The meaning of the word "Varna" is not class or status but skin color. Between the outcasts and the three Aryan Varnas there is the Sudra Varna who are the simple workers of the society.

Caste system in modern India:

Castes and Tribes.: In modern India the term caste is used for Jati and also for Varna. The term, caste was used by the British who ruled India until 1947. They used two terms to describe Indian communities. Castes and Tribes. The term caste was used for Jatis and also for Varnas. Tribes were those communities who lived deep in jungles, forests and mountains far away from the main population

High Caste and Lower Classes: The castes, which were the best of the Indian society, were classified as high castes. The other communities were classified as lower castes or lower classes. The lower classes were listed in three categories. The first category is called Scheduled Castes. This category includes in it communities who were untouchables. In modern India, untouchability exists at a very low extent. The untouchables call themselves Dalit, meaning depressed. Until the late 1980s they were called Harijan, meaning children of God. This title was given to them by Mahatma Gandhi who wanted the society to accept untouchables within them.

The second category is Scheduled Tribes. 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

The third category is called sometimes Other Backward Classes or Backward Classes. This category includes in it castes who belong to Sudra Varna and also former untouchables who converted from Hinduism to other religions.