

FUNDAMENTAL VIEWS ON CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

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Abstract

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.

Keywords: *Meaning of Caste, Origin and History, Caste and Class, Establishment, Code of Conduct, Non-Hindus in caste system, Caste system in India.*

Introduction

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" which means "race", "breed", or "lineage". Many Indians use the term "jati". There are 3,000 castes and 25,000 subcastes 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, but nutritional habits and interaction with members of other castes as well. Members of a high caste enjoy more wealth and opportunities while members of a low caste perform unskilled jobs. Outside of the caste system are the Untouchables. Untouchable jobs, such as toilet cleaning and garbage removal, require them to be in contact with physical liquid. They are therefore considered polluted and not to be touched. The importance of purity in the body and food is found in early Sanskrit literature. Untouchables have separate entrances to homes and must drink from separate wells. They are considered to be in a permanent state of impurity. Untouchables were named "Harijans" (Children of God) by Gandhi. He tried to raise their status with symbolic gestures such as befriending and eating with Untouchables. Upward mobility is very rare in the caste system. Most people remain in one caste their entire life and marry within their caste.

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 single basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige and also 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 is exploring the various aspects of the Indian caste system related to its hierarchy, its history, and its effects on India today.

Meaning of Caste

Caste, which is also known as 'Jati' or 'Varna,' can be defined as the traditional classes of Hindu society or the classification of individuals into hierarchically ranked classes that becomes the identity of an individual at the time of his/her birth. Going by the Hindu shastras, four traditional castes exist in India, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra.

The Brahmins are at the top of the caste hierarchy and comprise of scholars and priests. The next in line are Kshatriyas who are regarded to be soldiers and political leaders. These are followed by Vaishyas or merchants. The last in the hierarchy are Sudras who are usually servants, labourers, artisans or peasants. There are also the untouchables who are considered as outcaste and perform occupations like skinning dead animals and hunting. The untouchables do not fall in the ranked castes.

The people of these classes get their livelihood from specific occupations and the children born in their families follow the suit, acquiring the appropriate occupation as per their caste or jati, thus, maintaining the hierarchical ranking of occupations and genetic occupational specialization. Proper rituals, rules, and regulations govern the occupational pursuits and appropriate social behaviour of the people of these classes, including rules related to marriage as well.

Origin and History of Caste System in India

There are many theories relating to the origin of caste system in the country. While a few of these theories are historical, some are religious or biological. There is no universally accepted theory on caste system.

Going by the ancient Hindu book, the 'Rig Veda,' human body was created by 'Purush' by destroying himself. The different castes or varnas have been created from different parts of his body. It is said that the Brahmans were created from his head, Kshatriyas originated from his hands, Vaishias from his thighs and his feet created Sudras.

There is another theory pertaining to the origin of the caste system that states castes originated from the different body parts of 'Brahma', the Hindu divinity referred to as the 'Creator of the World.' Going by this theory, inter-caste marriages, mixture of blood or contact of members of different races is regarded as a terrible crime.

Historically, it is believed that the caste system began in India around 1500 B.C during the arrival of Aryans in the country. It is believed that the Aryans, who possessed fair skin, came from northern Asia and southern Europe that contrasted with the aboriginal natives of India. They started victorious regions all over north India and the locals were motivated south towards jungles of mountains in northern part of the country at the same time. Aryans followed a specific social ordering called Varna Vyavastha which eventually resulted in four hierarchical divisions of the society.

Differences between Caste and Class

While a caste is genetic, a class is non-genetic in nature. A class system allows both exogamy and endogamy, permits mobility either up or down the system, and allows an individual to remain in the status to which he was born. Thus a class is primarily based on socio-economic criteria. There are three major classes found: Upper, Middle, and Lower. Each class is divided into two sub-divisions. They are upper-upper and lower-upper; upper-middle and lower-middle; and upper-lower and lower-lower. A class is more open than the caste in the sense that mobility is allowed in the class system. It is not allowed that openly in the caste system. Further, caste system is based on ritual criterion whereas; class is based on secular criterion. Rituals criterion means it is based on religious myths, secular means non-religious criterion like economic, political and social criterion. However, in changing circumstances caste is also adapting to secular criteria. Consciousness is found in the class but not necessarily in the caste. However,

today castes are also changing into classes in urban areas particularly in terms of economic criterion.

The establishment of the caste system in India

There are different theories about the establishment of the caste system.

- The Religious-mystical theories.
- The Biological theories.
- The Socio-historical theories.

The religious theories explain how the four Varnas were founded, but they do not explain how the Jati in each Varna or the untouchables were founded. According the Rig Veda, the ancient Hindu book, the ancient man - Purush - destroyed himself to create a human society. The different Varnas were created from different parts of his body. The Brahmans were created from his head; the Kshatriyas from his hands; the Vaishias from his thighs and the Sudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created. 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, animated and in animated, and also basic three qualities in different allotment. Sattva qualities include wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness and other positive qualities. Rajas include qualities like passion, pride, valour and other passionate qualities. Tamas qualities include dullness, stupidity, lack of creativity and other negative qualities. People with different doses of these basic qualities adopted different types of occupation. According to this theory the Brahmans inborn Sattva qualities, Kshatrias and Vaisias inborn Rajas qualities and also the Sudras inborn Tamas qualities.

Like human beings, food also inborn different quantity of these qualities and it affects its eater's intelligence. The Brahmans and the Vaisias 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 Kshatrias who had Rajasic diet eat some kinds of meat like deer meat which is considered to have Rajasic qualities. Many Marathas who claim to be Kshatrias eat mutton. The drawback of this theory is

that in different parts of India the same food was sometimes qualified to have different quantity of inherent qualities. For example there were Brahmans who eat meat which is considered Tamasic food.

The social historical theory explains the creation of the Varnas, Jati 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 Negritos have physical features similar to people of Africa. The Mongoloid have Chinese features. The Austroloids have features similar the aboriginals of Australia. The Dravidians originate from the Mediterranean and they 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 and at the same time pushed the local people southwards or towards the jungles and mountains 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 Kshatria. The second group was of the priests and they were called Brahmans. These two groups struggled politically for leadership among the Aryans. In this struggle the Brahmans got to be the leaders of the Aryan society. The third group was of the farmers and craftsmen and they were called Vaisia. The Aryans who conquered and took control over parts of north India subdued the locals and made them their servants. In this process the Vaisias who were the farmers and the craftsmen became the landlords and the businessmen of the society and the locals became the peasants and the craftsmen of the society.

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. For example take Maharashtra. Maharashtra is in west India. This region is known by this name for hundreds of years. Many think that the meaning of the name Maharashtra is in its name, Great Land. But there are some who claim that the name, Maharashtra, is derived from the Jat called Mahar who are considered to be the original people of this region. In the caste hierarchy the dark skinned

Mahars were outcasts. 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 is the simple workers of the society. The Sudras consisted of two communities. One community was of the locals who were subdued by the Aryans and the other was the descendants of Aryans with locals. In Hindu religious stories there are many wars between the good Aryans and the dark skinned evil spirit and devils. The different Gods also have dark skinned slaves. There are stories of evil spirit women trying to seduce good Aryan men in misleading ways. There were also marriages between Aryan heroes and evil spirit women. Many believe that these incidences really occurred in which, the god and the positive heroes was people of Aryan origin. And the evil spirit, the devils and the dark skinned slaves were in fact the original residence of India whom the Aryans coined as enormous, devil, evil spirit and slaves.

As in most of the societies of the world, so in India, the son inherited his father's profession. And so in India there developed families, who professed the same family profession for generation in which, the son continued his father's profession. Later on as these families became superior, they were seen as communities or as they are called in Indian languages, Jati. Different families who professed the same profession developed social relations between them and organized as a common community, meaning Jati.

Later on the Aryans who created the caste system, added to their system non-Aryans. Different Jats who professed different professions were integrated in different Varnas according to their profession. Other foreign invaders of ancient India - Greeks, Huns, Scythians and others - who conquered parts of India and created kingdoms, were integrated in the Kshatria Varna (warrior castes). But probably the Aryan policy was not to integrate original Indian communities within them and therefore many aristocratic and warrior communities that were in India before the Aryans did not get the Kshatria status.

Most of the communities that were in India before the arrival of the Aryans were integrated in the Sudra Varna or were made outcast depending on the professions of these communities. Communities who professed non-polluting jobs were integrated in Sudra Varna. And communities who professed polluting professions were made outcasts. The Brahmins are very

strict about cleanliness. In the past people believed that diseases can also spread also through air and not only through physical touch. Perhaps because of this reason the untouchables were not only disallowed to touch the high caste communities but they also had to stand at a certain distance from the high castes.

The first three castes had social and economical rights which the Sudra and the untouchables did not have. The first three castes are also seen as 'twice born'. The purpose in these two births is to the natural birth and to the ritual entrance to the society at a much later age.

Each Varna and also the untouchables are divided into many communities. These communities are called Jat or Jati (The caste is also used instead of Jat). For example the Brahmans have Jati called Gaur, Konkanash, Sarasvat, Iyer and others. The outcasts have Jati like Mahar, Dhed, Mala, Madiga and others. The Sudra is the largest Varna and it has the largest number of communities. Each Jat is limited to professions worthy of their Varna. Each Jati is limited to the Varna diet. Each Jati members are allowed to marry only with their Jati members. People are born into their Jati and it cannot be changed. The caste system is supposed to be in its religious form. But in reality it is much more complicated and different from its religious form.

Code of Conduct

Besides the stratification of people in different castes, these castes also followed some strict rules and regulations which were followed by the members of the caste religiously. Rules especially pertaining to religious worship, meals and marriage dominated their lives. However, the least amount of restrictions and regulations were implemented on Brahmins and Vaishyas. The most suffered ones were the Sudras as most of the society laws were applicable on them. Some of them were –*Brahmins* could give food to anyone if they wished but the person from a lower caste was not allowed to even go near the place where a Brahmin was eating. *Sudras* were not allowed to enter the temples or other places of worship whereas the other three classes had full rights to worship and were not allowed taking water from ponds or wells as their touch would pollute the water. Inter-caste marriages were forbidden. In many cases even marriages within one's own sub-caste or jati was not allowed. Sudras were also pushed towards the border of the city and were not allowed to live anywhere near the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishias ,etc.

Untouchables

The untouchability feature in the caste system is one of the cruelest features of the caste system. It is seen by many as one of the strongest racist phenomenon in the world.

In the Indian society people who worked in dishonorable, polluting and unclean occupations were seen as polluting peoples and were therefore considered as untouchables. The untouchables had almost no rights in the society. In different parts of India they were treated in different ways. In some regions the attitude towards the untouchables was harsh and severe. In other regions it was less severe.

In regions where the attitude was less strict the untouchables were seen as polluting people and their dwellings were at a distance from the settlements of the four Varna communities. The untouchables were not allowed to touch people from the four Varnas. They were not allowed to enter houses of the higher Varnas. They were not allowed to enter the temples. They were not allowed to use the same wells used by the Varnas. In public occasions they were compelled to sit at a distance from the four Varnas. In regions where the attitude towards the untouchables were more severe, not only touching them was seen polluting, but also even a contact with their shadow was seen as polluting.

The orthodox Hindus treated anyone who worked in any kind of polluting job as untouchable and did not have any contact with them. According to orthodox rules anyone who does not belong to the four Varnas, meaning foreigners, are untouchables.

Discrimination: They often do not have the facility to electricity, sanitation facilities or water pumps in lower caste neighbourhoods. Access to better education, housing and medical facilities than that of the higher castes is denied.

Division of labour: They are restricted to certain occupations like sanitation work, plantation work, leather works, cleaning streets, etc.

Slavery: They are subjected to exploitation in the name of debt, tradition, etc., to work as labourers or perform menial tasks for generations together.

The caste system in India

The caste system in India is the paradigmatic ethnographic example of caste. It has origins in ancient India, and was transformed by various ruling elites in medieval, early-modern, and modern India, especially the Mughal Empire and the British Raj. It is today the basis of educational and job reservations in India. The caste system consists of two different concepts, *varna* and *jati*, which may be regarded as different levels of analysis of this system.

The caste system as it exists today is thought to be the result of developments during the collapse of the Mughal era and the rise of the British colonial regime in India. The collapse of the Mughal era saw the rise of powerful men who associated themselves with kings, priests and ascetics, affirming the regal and martial form of the caste ideal, and it also reshaped many apparently casteless social groups into differentiated caste and communities. The British Raj furthered this development, making rigid caste organisation a central mechanism of administration. Between 1860 and 1920, the British separate Indians by caste, granting administrative jobs and senior appointments only to Christians and people belonging to certain castes. Social unrest during the 1920s led to a change in this policy. From then on, the colonial administration began a policy of divisive as well as positive discrimination by reserving a certain percentage of government jobs for the lower castes. In 1948, negative discrimination on the basis of caste was banned by law and further protected in the Indian constitution; however the system continues to be practiced in India with devastating social effects. Caste-based differences have also been practiced in other regions and religions in the Indian subcontinent like Nepalese Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. It has been challenged by many reformists Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Christian.

New developments took place after India achieved independence, when the policy of caste-based reservation of jobs was formalized with lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Since 1950, the country has enacted many laws and social initiatives to protect and improve the socioeconomic conditions of its lower caste population. The Indian society is divided into various divisions and classes. This is because of the caste system which is prevalent in the country. The roots of the caste system go back to the ancient Vedas dividing people on the basis

of varna or occupation. It has brought many evils in the society. The Government is constantly motivated to overcome the troubles of the system and bring about true equality among the people.

The caste system is the bother for the Indian society. It divides the Indian society into sectarian groups and classes. Even today, it plays a predominant role in our society despite the growth of culture and civilisation. The terms ‘Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes’ (SC/ST) are the official terms used in government documents to identify former untouchables and tribes. However, in 2008 the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, noticing that the word ‘Dalit’ was used interchangeably with the official term ‘Scheduled Castes’, asked the State Governments to end the use of the word ‘Dalit’ in official documents by calling the term ‘unconstitutional’ and to replace it with the term ‘Scheduled Caste’ instead.

The roots of the caste system are traced back to the ancient ages. While one view discriminates between the castes as upper and lower castes on the basis of their origin, another view traces the origin of the castes to varnas which classifies the caste system on the basis of their functions. Since then, it was found that undue advantage was taken by the section of people having an upper hand and a say in the community, leading to discrimination and exploitation of the weaker sections of community. The people from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, referred to as ‘untouchables’ form one-sixth of India’s population or 160 million; they endure discrimination and segregation.

The Non-Hindus in caste system in India

Religiously anyone who does not belong to the four Varnas is an outcast and untouchable. It means, all foreigners and non-Hindus are all supposed to be untouchables. But in reality neither all foreigners nor non-Hindus were treated as untouchables. Foreigners and non-Hindus were treated differently in different parts of India. Some of the foreigners adopted Hinduism and included in the upper level of the Hindu hierarchy.

The Rajputs of Rajasthan belong to the Kshatria Varna (warrior castes). The Rajputs, more than any other Indian Jati, represent the warrior castes of India. Almost any Indian community which claims to be a warrior community claims a Rajput ancestry. But it is believed that many foreign

invaders of ancient India , like Scythians; Huns; Greeks and others, who adopted Hinduism, included in the Rajput community and acquired a Kshatria status (Sati - burning of the widow).

The Konkanash Brahmins of west India are also believed to have non- Indian descent. According to a Hindu legend, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, Parsuram, found on the Konkan beach some dead bodies which were washed to the shore. In order to cremate them Parsuram gathered them on a pyre. These dead bodies woke up on pyre, probably because they were not dead in the first place but were only unconscious. Parsuram converted these people to Hinduism and made them Brahmins. There are other theories about the origins of these Konkanash Brahmins. Many of these Brahmins have gray-green eyes. Some claim them to be Vikings or of other European origin. In the Konkan coast there is Jewish community called Bene Israel. Some claim that these Jews are from the 'Lost Tribes'. These Jews who arrived in India after their shipwrecked near the Konkan coast claim that they and the Konkanash Brahmins are descendants of the survivors from the same ship. And in their version, it was not an incarnation of Lord Vishnu who converted the Konkanash Brahmins but a local Brahmin. Anyway these Jews do not have gray-green eyes like the Konkanash Brahmins.

Different religion followers got different status in different parts of India. The Jews of west India (called Bene Israel) had a different status from Jews of south India (Cochini Jews). In general the Bene Israel had low status. The Bene Israels professed oil pressing and they had a status equal to a Hindu Jati called Somvar Teli, which also professed oil pressing and were part of Sudra Varna. Some orthodox Hindus treated anyone who was a non-Hindu or doing any type as polluting job as untouchable and therefore treated the Jews as untouchables. But even though the Jews in west India had low status there were among them some who were landlords, businessmen and high rank officers in local armies.

Comparing to the Bene Israels, the Jews in south India had higher status. The Jews in Kerala were the business community of Kerala. They even ruled a small kingdom. They had aristocratic rights, such as use of elephants and sedans. They even had servants whose job was to announce their coming to the streets so that the low castes could move away from their way.

The relations between the Jewish communities of India are sometimes explained as affected by the Indian caste system but these relations can also be explained according to Jewish religious

laws. There were three main Jewish communities in India. The Baghdadis, the Bene Israels and Cochins. The Baghdadi Jews were much severe about religious laws than the Bene Israel Jews. The Baghdadis did not mingle with Bene Israel Jews. The Baghdadis did not allow marriages between their children and the children of Bene Israel. They did not eat food prepared by Bene Israel and they refused to count the Bene Israel as part of the Minyan (the ten necessary to start a Jewish prayer). Many explain these relations as an influence of the Indian caste system on the Jewish communities. According to this explanation, the Baghdadi Jews referred to themselves as higher caste than the Bene Israel Jews and therefore did not mingle with them. But these relations between the Jewish communities can also be explained according to the Jewish Halacha laws. The Baghdadi Jews who were much severe about Jewish laws and diet did not mingle with the Bene Israels because the Bene Israels were secular Jews and they perceived in Bene Israel Jews as impure Jews.

The Muslims who arrived in India were strong and powerful to be treated as untouchables. Not only were they strong in the military sense, they also tried to enforce their religion on the Indians. The Indians who converted to Islam in most of the cases remained in the same social status as they had before their conversion to Islam. Hindus from the higher Varnas remained at the higher levels of Indian society. Hindus from the lower levels of the hierarchy thought that by converting to Islam they would come out from the Hindu hierarchy system, but in most of the cases they remained in the same hierarchy level after they converted. Among the Muslims of India there has developed a two-tier hierarchy. The upper class, called Sharif Jat, includes Muslims who belonged to the higher levels in caste hierarchy and also Muslims who arrived to India from foreign countries. The lower class, called Ajlaf Jat, includes Muslim converts from lower castes. As in the world, the upper classes do not have close social relations with lower classes; the same way the Sharif Jat do not normally have close social relations with Ajlaf Jat.

The different Christian communities of India were treated in different ways in different parts of India. The Syrian Christians of Kerala had a high status. Along with the Jews, they were the business communities of Kerala and they too had aristocratic rights. The Indians who were baptized from the 16th century by Christian missionaries remained mostly in the same status they had before. As in the Muslim community of India, the Christians also have a two-tier social

hierarchy. Many untouchables who converted to Christianity are still treated as untouchables, sometimes by other Christians.

The European Christians are also supposed to be untouchables to Hindus. Some Europeans in the 17th and 18th century even claimed that they were treated as untouchables. But later on with British rule over India it were the upper level Hindu castes, specially the Brahmans, who adopted the European democratic philosophy according to which all are equal and they introduced it to other Indians.

Other religions which were established in India - Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism - also have some marks of caste system, even though they oppose caste system. Sikhism rejects caste system. But different Jats who adopted Sikhism act according to traditional Jat lines. The different Jats normally marry within caste lines. The Jats which were the elite of the Punjab and converted to Sikhism do not give equal respect to Sikhs who belong to the lower levels of Indian hierarchy. The Jains also have separate communities who marry within the community lines. The Buddhist in India have a two-tier hierarchy and just like in the cases of Christians and Muslims it is also related to the status of the community to whom the person belongs. On the other hand the Mahar communities of west India, who were untouchables and converted mostly to Buddhism, prefer, because of different political reasons to recognize themselves as Mahars and not always as Buddhists.

Not all residents of India were part of the caste system. About 7% of India's populations are referred to as tribes and not as castes or Jats. These tribes are scattered all around India and they are descendants of communities who were not interested in the Varna hierarchy. They preferred to live away from the main societies deep in the jungles, forests and mountains of India. They survived mostly on fishing, hunting or simple agriculture, and also from stealing, robbing and plundering. These tribes had different religious beliefs and different gods. Some of them had simple beliefs, but others use to sacrifice human beings in their ceremonies. One such tribe, called Gond, had a strong kingdom in central India. Most of the tribes adopted Hinduism, others adopted Islam or Christianity. Some tribes in East India claim to Jewish origin.

Caste system in modern India

The leaders of independent India decided that India will be democratic, socialist and secular country. According to this policy there is a separation between religion and state. Practicing untouchability or discriminating a person based on his caste is legally forbidden. Along with this law the government allows positive discrimination of the depressed classes of India.

The Indians have also become more flexible in their caste system customs. In general the urban people in India are less severe about the caste system than the rural. In cities one can see different caste people mingling with each other, while in some rural areas there is still discrimination based on castes and sometimes also on untouchability. Sometimes in villages or in the cities there are violent clashes which, are connected to caste tensions. Sometimes the high castes strike the lower castes who dare to uplift their status. Sometimes the lower caste gets back on the higher castes.

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. The British who wanted to rule India efficiently made lists of Indian communities. They used two terms to describe Indian community to Castes and Tribes. The term caste was used for Jati and also for Varnas. Tribes were those communities who lived deep in jungles, forests and mountains far away from the main population and also communities who were hard to be defined as castes for example communities who made a living from stealing or robbery. These lists, which the British made, were used later on by the Indian governments to create lists of communities who were permitted for positive discrimination.

The castes, which were the elite 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 indigenous.

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. This category also includes in it migrant and tribes who made a living from criminal acts.

The central government, the state governments of India also follows a positive discrimination policy. Different states have different figures of communities entitled for positive discrimination based on the population of each state. Different state governments have different lists of communities permitted for positive discrimination. Sometimes a specific community is permitted for rights in a particular state but not in another state of India.

The caste identity has become a subject of political, social and legal interpretation. Communities who get listed as entitled for positive discrimination do not get out of this list even if their social and political conditions get better. In many cases the legal system is involved to decide if a certain person is entitled for positive discrimination. But with all this positive discrimination policy, most of the communities who were low in the caste hierarchy remain low in the social order even today. And communities who were high in the social hierarchy remain even today high in the social hierarchy. Most of the degrading jobs are even today done by the Dalits, while the Brahmans remain at the top of the hierarchy by being the doctors, engineers and lawyers of India. Although discrimination on the basis of caste has been outlawed in India, it still exists in the community today.

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-seven 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). 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 inequitable 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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