

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.^{[1][2][3][4]} It is today the basis of educational and job reservations in India.^[5] It consists of two different concepts, varna and jati, which may be regarded as different levels of analysis of this system.^[6]

The caste system as it exists today is thought to be the result of developments during the collapse of the Mughal era and the British colonial regime in India.^{[1][7]} 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 communities.^[8] The British Raj furthered this development, making rigid caste organisation a central mechanism of administration.^[7] Between 1860 and 1920, the British segregated Indians by caste, granting administrative jobs and senior appointments only to the upper castes. Social unrest during the 1920s led to a change in this policy.^[9] From then on, the colonial administration began a policy of positive discrimination by reserving a certain percentage of government jobs for the lower castes.

Caste-based differences have also been practised in other regions and religions in the Indian subcontinent like Nepalese Buddhism,^[10] Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.^{[11][12][13]} It has been challenged by many reformist Hindu movements,^[14] Islam, Sikhism, Christianity^[11] and also by present-day Indian Buddhism.^[15]

New developments took place after India achieved independence, when the policy of caste-based reservation of jobs was formalised 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. These caste classifications for college admission quotas, job reservations and other affirmative action initiatives, according to the Supreme Court of India, are based on heredity and are not changeable.^{[16][a]} Discrimination against lower castes is illegal in India under Article 15 of its constitution, and India tracks violence against Dalits nationwide.^[17]



Gandhi visiting Madras (now Chennai) in 1933 on an India-wide tour for Harijan causes. His speeches during such tours and writings discussed the discriminated-against castes of India.

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Definitions and concepts

***Varna*, *Jāti* and Caste**

Varna

Varna literally means *type*, *order*, *colour* or *class*^{[18][19]} and was a framework for grouping people into classes, first used in Vedic Indian society. It is referred to frequently in the ancient Indian texts.^[20] The four classes were the Brahmins (priestly people), the Kshatriyas (also called Rajanyas, who were rulers, administrators and warriors), the Vaishyas (artisans, merchants, tradesmen and farmers), and Shudras (labouring classes).^[21] The *varna* categorisation implicitly had a fifth element, being those people deemed to be entirely outside its scope, such as tribal people and the untouchables.^[22]

Jati

Jati, meaning *birth*,^[23] is mentioned much less often in ancient texts, where it is clearly distinguished from *varna*. There are four *varnas* but thousands of *jatis*.^[20] The *jatis* are complex social groups that lack universally applicable definition or characteristic, and have been more flexible and diverse than was previously often assumed.^[22]

Some scholars of caste have considered *jati* to have its basis in religion, assuming that in India the sacred elements of life envelop the secular aspects; for example, the anthropologist Louis Dumont described the ritual rankings that exist within the *jati* system as being based on the concepts of religious purity and pollution. This view has been disputed by other scholars, who believe it to be a secular

social phenomenon driven by the necessities of economics, politics, and sometimes also geography.^{[23][24][25][26]} Jeaneane Fowler says that although some people consider *jati* to be occupational segregation, in reality the *jati* framework does not preclude or prevent a member of one caste from working in another occupation.^[23] A feature of *jatis* has been endogamy, in Susan Bayly's words, that "both in the past and for many though not all Indians in more modern times, those born into a given caste would normally expect to find marriage partner" within his or her *jati*.^{[27][28]}

Jatis have existed in India among Hindus, Muslims, Christians and tribal people, and there is no clear linear order among them.^[29]

Caste

The term *caste* is not originally an Indian word, though it is now widely used, both in English and in Indian languages. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is derived from the Portuguese *casta*, meaning "race, lineage, breed" and, originally, "pure or unmixed (stock or breed)".^[30] There is no exact translation in Indian languages, but *varna* and *jati* are the two most proximate terms.^[31]

Ghurye's 1932 opinion

The sociologist G. S. Ghurye wrote in 1932 that, despite much study by many people,

we do not possess a real general definition of caste. It appears to me that any attempt at definition is bound to fail because of the complexity of the phenomenon. On the other hand, much literature on the subject is marred by lack of precision about the use of the term.^[32]

Ghurye offered what he thought was a definition that could be applied across British India, although he acknowledged that there were regional variations on the general theme. His model definition for caste included the following six characteristics,^[33]

- Segmentation of society into groups whose membership was determined by birth.^[34]
- A hierarchical system wherein generally the Brahmins were at the head of the hierarchy, but this hierarchy was disputed in some cases. In various linguistic areas, hundreds of castes had a gradation generally acknowledged by everyone.^[35]
- Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, with minute rules on the kind of food and drink that upper castes could accept from lower castes. There was a great diversity in these rules, and lower castes generally accepted food from upper castes.^[36]
- Segregation, where individual castes lived together, the dominant caste living in the center and other castes living on the periphery.^[37] There were restrictions on the use of water wells or streets by one caste on another: an upper-caste Brahmin might not be permitted to use the street of a lower-caste group, while a caste considered impure might not be permitted to draw water from a well used by members of other castes.^[38]
- Occupation, generally inherited.^[39] Lack of unrestricted choice of profession, caste members restricted their own members from taking up certain professions they considered degrading. This characteristic of caste was missing from large parts of India, stated Ghurye, and in these regions all four castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, ~~ash~~ *ash*hyas and Shudras) did agriculture labour or became warriors in large numbers.^[40]
- Endogamy, restrictions on marrying a person outside caste, but in some situations hypergamy allowed.^[41] Far less rigidity on inter-marriage between different sub-castes than between members of different castes in some regions, while in some endogamy within a sub-caste was the principal feature of caste-society.^[42]

The above Ghurye's model of caste thereafter attracted scholarly criticism^{[43][44]} for relying on the British India census reports,^{[32][45]} the "superior, inferior" racist theories of Risley,^[46] and for fitting his definition to then prevalent colonial orientalist perspectives on caste.^{[47][48][49]}

Ghurye added, in 1932, that the colonial construction of caste led to the livening up, divisions and lobbying to the British officials for favourable caste classification in India for economic opportunities, and this had added new complexities to the concept of caste.^{[50][51]} Graham Chapman and others have reiterated the complexity, and they note that there are differences between theoretical constructs and the practical reality.^[52]

Modern perspective on definition

Ronald Inden, the Indologist, agrees that there has been no universally accepted definition. For example, for some early European documenters it was thought to correspond with the endogamous *varnas* referred to in ancient Indian scripts, and its meaning corresponds in the sense of *estates*. To later Europeans of the Raj era it was endogamous *jatis*, rather than *varnas*, that represented *caste*, such as the 2378 *jatis* that colonial administrators classified by occupation in the early 20th century^[53]

Arvind Sharma, a professor of comparative religion notes that *caste* has been used synonymously to refer to both *varna* and *jati* but that "serious Indologists now observe considerable caution in this respect" because, while related, the concepts are considered to be distinct.^[54] In this he agrees with the Indologist Arthur Basham, who noted that the Portuguese colonists of India used *casta* to describe

... tribes, clans or families. The name stuck and became the usual word for the Hindu social group. In attempting to account for the remarkable proliferation of castes in 18th- and 19th-century India, authorities credulously accepted the traditional view that by a process of intermarriage and subdivision the 3,000 or more castes of modern India had evolved from the four primitive classes, and the term 'caste' was applied indiscriminately to both *varna* or class, and *jati* or caste proper. This is a false terminology; castes rise and fall in the social scale, and old castes die out and new ones are formed, but the four great classes are stable. There are never more or less than four and for over 2,000 years their order of precedence has not altered.^[20]

The sociologist Andre Beteille notes that, while *varna* mainly played the role of caste in classical Hindu literature, it is *jati* that plays that role in present times. *Varna* represents a closed collection of social orders whereas *jati* is entirely open-ended, thought of as a "natural kind whose members share a common substance." Any number of new *jatis* can be added depending on need, such as tribes, sects, denominations, religious or linguistic minorities and nationalities. Thus, "Caste" is not an accurate representation of *jati* in English. Better terms would be ethnicity ethnic identity and ethnic group.^[55]

Flexibility

Sociologist Anne Waldrop observes that while outsiders view the term caste as a static phenomenon of stereotypical tradition-bound India, empirical facts suggest caste has been a radically changing feature. The term means different things to different Indians. In the context of politically active modern India, where job and school quotas are reserved for affirmative action based on castes, the term has become a sensitive and controversial subject.^[56]

Sociologists such as M. N. Srinivas and Damle have debated the question of rigidity in caste and believe that there is considerable flexibility and mobility in the caste hierarchies.^{[57][58]}

Origins

Perspectives

There are at least two perspectives for the origins of the caste system in ancient and medieval India, which focus on either ideological factors or on socio-economic factors.

- The first school focuses on the ideological factors which are claimed to drive the caste system and holds that caste is rooted in the four *varnas*. This perspective was particularly common among scholars of the British colonial era and was articulated by Dumont, who concluded that the system was ideologically perfected several thousand years ago and has remained the primary social reality ever since. This school justifies its theory primarily by citing the ancient law book *Manusmriti* and disregards economic, political or historical evidence.^{[59][60]}

Caste system in 19th century India



- The second school of thought focuses on socio-economic factors and claims that those factors drive the caste system. It believes caste to be rooted in the economic, political and material history of India.^[61] This school, which is common among scholars of the post-colonial era such as Berreman, Marriott, and Dirks, describes the caste system as an ever-evolving social reality that can only be properly understood by the study of historical evidence of actual practice and the examination of verifiable circumstances in the economic, political and material history of India.^{[62][63]} This school has focused on the historical evidence from ancient and medieval society in India, during the Muslim rule between the 12th and 18th centuries and the policies of colonial British rule from 18th century to the mid-20th century.^{[64][65]}

Sikh chief	Arab soldier
Pages from <i>Seventy-two Specimens of Castes in India</i> according to Christian Missionaries in February 1837. They include Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Arabs as castes of India.	

The first school has focused on religious anthropology and disregarded other historical evidence as secondary to or derivative of this tradition.^[66] The second school has focused on sociological evidence and sought to understand the historical circumstances.^[67] The latter has criticised the former for its caste origin theory, claiming that it has dehistoricised and decontextualised Indian society.^{[68][69]}

Ritual kingship model

According to Samuel, referencing George L. Hart, central aspects of the later Indian caste system may originate from the ritual kingship system prior to the arrival of Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism in India. The system is seen in the South Indian Tamil literature from the Sangam period, dated to the third to sixth centuries CE. This theory discards the Indo-Aryan *varna* model as the basis of caste, and is centred on the ritual power of the king, who was "supported by a group of ritual and magical specialists of low social status," with their ritual occupations being considered 'polluted'. According to Hart, it may be this model that provided the concerns with "pollution" of the members of low status groups. The Hart model for caste origin, writes Samuel, envisions "the ancient Indian society consisting of a majority without internal caste divisions and a minority consisting of a number of small occupationally polluted groups".^[70]

Vedic varnas

The *varnas* originated in Vedic society (ca.1500–500 BCE). The first three groups, Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishya have parallels with other Indo-European societies, while the addition of the Shudras is probably a Brahmanical invention from northern India.^[71]

The *varna* system is propounded in revered Hindu religious texts, and understood as idealised human callings.^{[72][73]} The *Purusha Sukta* of the *Rigveda* and *Manusmriti*'s comment on it, being the oft-cited texts.^[74] Counter to these textual classifications, many revered Hindu texts and doctrines question and disagree with this system of social classification.^[22]

Scholars have questioned the *varna* verse in *Rigveda*, noting that the *varna* therein is mentioned only once. The *Purusha Sukta* verse is now generally considered to have been inserted at a later date into the *Rigveda*, probably as a charter myth. Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton, professors of Sanskrit and Religious studies, state, "there is no evidence in the *Rigveda* for an elaborate, much-subdivided and overarching caste system", and "the *varna* system seems to be embryonic in the *Rigveda* and, both then and later, a social ideal rather than a social reality".^[75] In contrast to the lack of details about *varna* system in the *Rigveda*, the *Manusmriti* includes an extensive and highly schematic commentary on the *varna* system, but it too provides "models rather than descriptions".^[76] Susan Bayly summarises that *Manusmriti* and other scriptures helped elevate Brahmins in the social hierarchy and these were a factor in the making of the *varna* system, but the ancient texts did not in some way "create the phenomenon of caste" in India.^[77]

Jatis

Jeaneane Fowler, a professor of philosophy and religious studies, states that it is impossible to determine how and why the *jatis* came in existence.^[78] Susan Bayly, on the other hand, states that *jati* system emerged because it offered a source of advantage in an era of pre-Independence poverty lack of institutional human rights, volatile political environment, and economic insecurity.^[79]

According to social anthropologist Dipankar Gupta, guilds developed during the Mauryan period and crystallised into *jatis*^[80] in post-Mauryan times with the emergence of feudalism in India, which finally crystallised during the 7–12th centuries.^[81] However, other scholars dispute when and how *jatis* developed in Indian history. Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, both professors of History, write, "One of the surprising arguments of fresh scholarship, based on inscriptional and other contemporaneous evidence, is that until relatively recent centuries, social organisation in much of the subcontinent was little touched by the four *varnas*. Nor were *jati* the building blocks of society"^[82]

According to Basham, ancient Indian literature refers often to *varnas*, but hardly if ever to *jatis* as a system of groups within the *varnas*. He concludes that "If caste is defined as a system of group within the class, which are normally endogamous, commensal and craft-exclusive, we have no real evidence of its existence until comparatively late times."^[20]

Untouchable outcastes and the varna system

The Vedic texts neither mention the concept of untouchable people nor any practice of untouchability. The rituals in the Vedas ask the noble or king to eat with the commoner from the same vessel. Later Vedic texts ridicule some professions, but the concept of untouchability is not found in them.^{[83][84]}

The post-Vedic texts, particularly Manusmriti mentions outcastes and suggests that they be ostracised. Recent scholarship states that the discussion of outcastes in post-Vedic texts is different from the system widely discussed in colonial era Indian literature, and in Dumont's structural theory on caste system in India. Patrick Olivelle, a professor of Sanskrit and Indian Religions and credited with modern translations of Vedic literature, Dharma-sutras and Dharma-sastras, states that ancient and medieval Indian texts do not support the ritual pollution, purity-impurity premise implicit in the Dumont theory. According to Olivelle, purity-impurity is discussed in the Dharma-sastra texts, but only in the context of the individual's moral, ritual and biological pollution (eating certain kinds of food such as meat, going to bathroom). Olivelle writes in his review of post-Vedic *Sutra* and *Shastra* texts, "we see no instance when a term of pure/impure is used with reference to a group of individuals or a *varna* or caste". The only mention of impurity in the *Shastra* texts from the 1st millennium is about people who commit grievous sins and thereby fall out of their *varna*. These, writes Olivelle, are called "fallen people" and considered impure in the medieval Indian texts. The texts declare that these sinful, fallen people be ostracised.^[85] Olivelle adds that the overwhelming focus in matters relating to purity/impurity in the Dharma-sastra texts concerns "individuals irrespective of their *varna* affiliation" and all four *varnas* could attain purity or impurity by the content of their character, ethical intent, actions, innocence or ignorance (acts by children), stipulations, and ritualistic behaviors.^[86]

Dumont, in his later publications, acknowledged that ancient varna hierarchy was not based on purity-impurity ranking principle, and that the Vedic literature is devoid of the untouchability concept.^[87]

History

Vedic period (1500–1000 BCE)

During the time of the Rigveda, there were two *varnas*: *arya varna* and *dasa varna*. The distinction originally arose from tribal divisions. The Vedic tribes regarded themselves as *arya* (the noble ones) and the rival tribes were called *dasa*, *dasyu* and *pani*. The *dasas* were frequent allies of the Aryan tribes, and they were probably assimilated into the Aryan society, giving rise to a class distinction.^[88] Many *dasas* were however in a servile position, giving rise to the eventual meaning of *dasa* as servant.^[89]

The *Rigvedic* society was not distinguished by occupations. Many husbandmen and artisans practised a number of crafts. The chariot-maker (*rathakara*) and metal worker (*karmara*) enjoyed positions of importance and no stigma was attached to them. Similar observations hold for carpenters, tanners, weavers and others.^[90]

Towards the end of the Atharvaveda period, new class distinctions emerged. The erstwhile *dasas* are renamed Shudras, probably to distinguish them from the new meaning of *dasa* as slave. The *aryas* are renamed *vis* or Vaishya (meaning the members of the tribe) and the new elite classes of Brahmins (priests) and Kshatriyas (warriors) are designated as new *varnas*. The Shudras were not only

the erstwhile *dasas* but also included the aboriginal tribes that were assimilated into the Aryan society as it expanded into Gangetic settlements.^[91] There is no evidence of restrictions regarding food and marriage during the Vedic period.^[92]

Later Vedic period (1000–600 BCE)

In an early Upanishad, Shudra is referred to as *Pūṣan* or nourisher, suggesting that Shudras were the tillers of the soil.^[93] But soon afterwards, Shudras are not counted among the tax-payers and they are said to be given away along with the lands when it is gifted.^[94] The majority of the artisans were also reduced to the position of Shudras, but there is no contempt indicated for their work.^[95] The Brahmins and the Kshatriyas are given a special position in the rituals, distinguishing them from both the Vaishyas and the Shudras.^[96] The Vaishya is said to be "oppressed at will" and the Shudra "beaten at will."^[97]

Second urbanisation (500–200 BCE)

Our knowledge of this period is supplemented by Pali Buddhist texts. Whereas the Brahmanical texts speak of the four-fold *varna* system, the Buddhist texts present an alternative picture of the society, stratified along the lines of *jati*, *kula* and occupation. It is likely that the *varna* system, while being a part of the Brahmanical ideology, was not practically operative in the society.^[98] In the Buddhist texts, Brahmin and Kshatriya are described as *jatis* rather than *varnas*. They were in fact the *jatis* of high rank. The *jatis* of low rank were mentioned as *chandala* and occupational classes like bamboo weavers, hunters, chariot-makers and sweepers. The concept of *kulas* was broadly similar. Along with Brahmins and Kshatriyas, a class called *gahapatis* (literally householders, but effectively propertied classes) was also included among high *kulas*.^[99] The people of high *kulas* were engaged in occupations of high rank, viz., agriculture, trade, cattle-keeping, computing, accounting and writing, and those of low *kulas* were engaged in low-ranked occupations such as basket-weaving and sweeping.^[100] The *gahapatis* were an economic class of land-holding agriculturists, who employed *dasa-kammakaras* (slaves and hired labourers) to work on the land. The *gahapatis* were the primary taxpayers of the state. This class was apparently not defined by birth, but by individual economic growth.^[100]

While there was an alignment between *kulas* and occupations at least at the high and low ends, there was no strict linkage between class/caste and occupation, especially among those in the middle range. Many occupations listed such as accounting and writing were not linked to *jatis*.^[101] Peter Masefield, in his review of caste situation in India states that anyone could in principle perform any profession. The texts state that the Brahmin took food from anyone, suggesting that strictures of commensality were as yet unknown.^[102] The Nikaya texts also imply that endogamy was not mandated.^[103]

The contestations of the period are evident from the texts describing dialogues of Buddha with the Brahmins. The Brahmins maintain their divinely ordained superiority and assert their right to draw service from the lower orders. Buddha responds by pointing out the basic facts of biological birth common to all men and asserts that the ability to draw service is obtained economically, not by divine right. Using the example of the northwest of the subcontinent, Buddha points out that *aryas* could become *dasas* and vice versa. This form of social mobility was endorsed by Buddha.^[104]

Classical period (320–650 CE)

The Mahabharata, whose final version is estimated to have been completed by the end of the fourth century, discusses the *varna* system in section 12.181, presenting two models. The first model describes *varna* as a colour-based system, through a character named Bhṛigu, "Brahmins *varna* was white, Kshatriyas was red, Vaishyas was yellow, and the Shudras' black". This description is questioned by Bharadvaja who says that colors are seen among all the *varnas*, that desire, anger, fear, greed, grief, anxiety, hunger and toil prevails over all human beings, that bile and blood flow from all human bodies, so what distinguishes the *varnas*, he asks. The Mahabharata then declares, "There is no distinction of *varnas*. This whole universe is Brahman. It was created formerly by Brahma, came to be classified by acts."^[105] The epic then recites a behavioral model for *varna*, that those who were inclined to anger, pleasures and boldness attained the Kshatriya *varna*; those who were inclined to cattle rearing and living off the plough attained the Vaishya *varna*; those who were fond of violence, covetousness and impurity attained the Shudra *varna*. The Brahmin class is

modeled in the epic as the archetype default state of man dedicated to truth, austerity and pure conduct.^[106] In the Mahabharata and pre-medieval era Hindu texts, according to Hiltebeitel, "it is important to recognise, in theory, *varna* is nongenealogical. The four *varnas* are not lineages, but categories."^[107]

Adi Purana, an 8th-century text of Jainism by Jinasena, is the first mention of *varna* and *jati* in Jainism literature.^[108] Jinasena does not trace the origin of *varna* system to Rigveda or to Purusha, but to the Bharata legend. According to this legend, Bharata performed an "ahimsa-test" (test of non-violence), and during that test all those who refused to harm any living beings were called as the priestly *varna* in ancient India, and Bharata called them *dvija*, twice born.^[109] Jinasena states that those who are committed to the principle of non-harming and non-violence to all living beings are *deva-Brahmanas*, divine Brahmins.^[110] The text Adipurana also discusses the relationship between *varna* and *jati*. According to Padmanabh Jaini, a professor of Indic studies, in Jainism and Buddhism, the Adi Purana text states "there is only one *jati* called *manusyajati* or the human caste, but divisions arise on account of their different professions".^[111] The caste of Kshatriya arose, according to Jainism texts, when Rishabha procured weapons to serve the society and assumed the powers of a king, while Vishya and Shudra castes arose from different means of livelihood they specialised in.^[112]

Late classical and early medieval period (650 to 1400 CE)

Scholars have tried to locate historical evidence for the existence and nature of *varna* and *jati* in documents and inscriptions of medieval India. Supporting evidence for the existence of *varna* and *jati* systems in medieval India has been elusive, and contradicting evidence has emerged.^{[113][114]}

Varna is rarely mentioned in the extensive medieval era records of Andhra Pradesh, for example. This has led Cynthia Talbot, a professor of History and Asian Studies, to question whether *varna* was socially significant in the daily lives of this region. The mention of *jati* is even rarer, through the 13th century. Two rare temple donor records from warrior families of the 14th century claim to be Shudras. One states that Shudras are the bravest, the other states that Shudras are the purest.^[113] Richard Eaton, a professor of History, writes, "anyone could become warrior regardless of social origins, nor do the *jati* - another pillar of alleged traditional Indian society - appear as features of people's identity. Occupations were fluid." Evidence shows, according to Eaton, that Shudras were part of the nobility, and many "father and sons had different professions, suggesting that social status was earned, not inherited" in the Hindu Kakatiya population in the Deccan region between the 11th and 14th centuries.^[115]

In Tamil Nadu region of India, studied by Leslie Orr a professor of Religion, "Chola period inscriptions challenge our ideas about the structuring of (south Indian) society in general. In contrast to what Brahmanical legal texts may lead us to expect, we do not find that caste is the organising principle of society or that boundaries between different social groups is sharply demarcated."^[116] In Tamil Nadu the Vellalar were during ancient and medieval period the elite caste who were major patrons of literature.^{[117][118][119]} They ranked higher in the social hierarchy than the Brahmins.^[120]

For northern Indian region, Susan Bayly writes, "until well into the colonial period, much of the subcontinent was still populated by people for whom the formal distinctions of caste were of only limited importance; Even in parts of the so-called Hindu heartland of Gangetic upper India, the institutions and beliefs which are now often described as the elements of traditional caste were only just taking shape as recently as the early eighteenth century - that is the period of collapse of Mughal period and the expansion of western power in the subcontinent."^[121]

For western India, Dirk Kolff, a professor of Humanities, suggests open status social groups dominated Rajput history during the medieval period. He states, "The omnipresence of cognatic kinship and caste in North India is a relatively new phenomenon that only became dominant in the early Mughal and British periods respectively. Historically speaking, the alliance and the open status group, whether war band or religious sect, dominated medieval and early modern Indian history in a way descent and caste did not."^[122]

Medieval era, Islamic Sultanates and Mughal empire period (1000 to 1750)

Early and mid 20th century Muslim historians, such as Hashimi in 1927 and Qureshi in 1962, proposed that "caste system was established before the arrival of Islam", and it and "a nomadic savage lifestyle" in the northwest Indian subcontinent were the primary cause why Sindhi non-Muslims "embraced Islam in flocks" when Arab Muslim armies invaded the region.^[123] According to this

hypothesis, the mass conversions occurred from the lower caste Hindus and Mahayana Buddhists who had become "corroded from within by the infiltration of Hindu beliefs and practices". This theory is now widely believed to be baseless and false.^{[124][125]}

Derryl MacLein, a professor of social history and Islamic studies, states that historical evidence does not support this theory, whatever evidence is available suggests that Muslim institutions in north-west India legitimised and continued any inequalities that existed, and that neither Buddhists nor "lower caste" Hindus converted to Islam because they viewed Islam to lack a caste system.^[126] Conversions to Islam were rare, states MacLein, and conversions attested by historical evidence confirms that the few who did convert were Brahmin Hindus (theoretically, the upper caste).^[127] MacLein states the caste and conversion theories about Indian society during the Islamic era are not based on historical evidence or verifiable sources, but personal assumptions of Muslim historians about the nature of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism in northwest Indian subcontinent.^[128]

Richard Eaton, a professor of History, states that the presumption of a rigid Hindu caste system and oppression of lower castes in pre-Islamic era in India, and it being the cause of "mass conversion to Islam" during the medieval era suffers from the problem that "no evidence can be found in support of the theory and it is profoundly illogical".^[124]

Peter Jackson, a professor of Medieval History and Muslim India, writes that the speculative hypotheses about caste system in Hindu states during the medieval Delhi Sultanate period (~1200 to 1500) and the existence of a caste system as being responsible for Hindu weakness in resisting the plunder by Islamic armies is appealing at first sight, but "they do not withstand closer scrutiny and historical evidence".^[129] Jackson states that, contrary to the theoretical model of caste where Kshatriyas only could be warriors and soldiers, historical evidence confirms that Hindu warriors and soldiers during the medieval era included other castes such as Vaishyas and Shudras.^[129] Further, there is no evidence, writes Jackson, that there ever was a "widespread conversion to Islam at the turn of twelfth century" by Hindus of lower caste.^[129] Jamal Malik, a professor of Islamic studies, extends this observation further, and states that "at no time in history did Hindus of low caste convert en masse to Islam".^[130]

Jamal Malik states that caste as a social stratification is a well-studied Indian system, yet evidence also suggests that hierarchical concepts, class consciousness and social stratification had already occurred in Islam before Islam arrived in India.^[130] The concept of caste, or '*qaum*' in Islamic literature, is mentioned by a few Islamic historians of medieval India, states Malik, but these mentions relate to the fragmentation of the Muslim society in India.^[131] Zia al-Din al-Barani of Delhi Sultanate in his *Fatawa-ye Jahandari* and Abu al-Fadl from Akbar's court of Mughal Empire are the few Islamic court historians who mention caste. Zia al-Din al-Barani's discussion, however, is not about non-Muslim castes, rather a declaration of the supremacy of *Ashraf* caste over *Ardhal* caste among the Muslims, justifying it in Quranic text, with "aristocratic birth and superior genealogy being the most important traits of a human".^{[132][133]}

Irfan Habib, an Indian historian, states that Abu al-Fadl's *Ain-i Akbari* provides a historical record and census of the *Jat* peasant caste of Hindus in northern India, where the *Taluqdars* and *Zamindars* (tax collecting noble classes), the armed cavalry and infantry (warrior class) doubling up as the farming peasants (working class), were all of the same *Jat* caste in the 16th century. These occupationally diverse members from one caste served each other, writes Habib, either because of their reaction to taxation pressure of Muslim rulers or because they belonged to the same caste.^[134] Peasant social stratification and caste lineages were, states Habib, tools for tax revenue collection in areas under the Islamic rule.^[135]

The origin of caste system of modern form, in the Bengal region of India, may be traceable to this period, states Richard Eaton.^[136] The medieval era Islamic Sultanates in India utilised social stratification to rule and collect tax revenue from non-Muslims.^[137] Eaton states that, "Looking at Bengal's Hindu society as a whole, it seems likely that the caste system – far from being the ancient and unchanging essence of Indian civilisation as supposed by generations of Orientalists – emerged into something resembling its modern form only in the period 1200–1500".^[136]

Post-Mughal period (1700 to 1850)

Susan Bayly, an anthropologist, notes that "caste is not and never has been a fixed fact of Indian life" and the caste system as we know it today, as a "ritualised scheme of social stratification," developed in two stages during the post-Mughal period, in 18th and early 19th century. Three sets of value played an important role in this development: priestly hierarchy, kingship, and armed ascetics.^[138]

With the Islamic Mughal empire falling apart in the 18th century, regional post-Mughal ruling elites and new dynasties from diverse religious, geographical and linguistic background attempted to assert their power in different parts of India.^[139] Bayly states that these obscure post-Mughal elites associated themselves with kings, priests and ascetics, deploying the symbols of caste and kinship to divide their populace and consolidate their power. In addition, in this fluid stateless environment, some of the previously casteless segments of society grouped themselves into caste groups.^[8] However, in 18th century writes Bayly, India-wide networks of merchants, armed ascetics and armed tribal people often ignored these ideologies of caste.^[140] Most people did not treat caste norms as given absolutes writes Bayly, but challenged, negotiated and adapted these norms to their circumstances. Communities teamed in different regions of India, into "collective classing" to mold the social stratification in order to maximise assets and protect themselves from loss.^[141] The "caste, class, community" structure that formed became valuable in a time when state apparatus was fragmenting, was unreliable and fluid, when rights and life were unpredictable.^[142]

In this environment, states Rosalind O'Hanlon, a professor of Indian History, the newly arrived colonial East India Company officials, attempted to gain commercial interests in India by balancing Hindu and Muslim conflicting interests, by aligning with regional rulers and large assemblies of military monks. The British Company officials adopted constitutional laws segregated by religion and caste.^[143] The legal code and colonial administrative practice was largely divided into Muslim law and Hindu law, the latter including laws for Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. In this transitory phase, Brahmins together with scribes, ascetics and merchants who accepted Hindu social and spiritual codes, became the deferred-to-authority on Hindu texts, law and administration of Hindu matters.^{[144][b]}

While legal codes and state administration were emerging in India, with the rising power of the colonial Europeans, Dirks states that the late 18th-century British writings on India say little about caste system in India, and predominantly discuss territorial conquest, alliances, warfare and diplomacy in India.^[146] Colin Mackenzie, a British social historian of this time, collected vast numbers of texts on Indian religions, culture, traditions and local histories from south India and Deccan region, but his collection and writings have very little on caste system in 18th-century India.^[147]

During British rule (1857 to 1947)

Although the *varnas* and *jatis* have pre-modern origins, the caste system as it exists today is the result of developments during the post-Mughal period and the British colonial regime, which made caste organisation a central mechanism of administration.^{[2][148][4]}

Basis

Jati were the basis of caste ethnology during the British colonial era. In the 1881 census and thereafter, colonial ethnographers used caste (*jati*) headings, to count and classify people in what was then British India (now India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma).^[149] The 1891 census included 60 sub-groups each subdivided into six occupational and racial categories, and the number increased in subsequent censuses.^[150] The British colonial era census caste tables, states Susan Bayly, "ranked, standardised and cross-referenced jati listings for Indians on principles similar to zoology and botanical classifications, aiming to establish who was superior to whom by virtue of their supposed purity, occupational origins and collective moral worth". While bureaucratic British officials completed reports on their zoological classification of Indian people, some British officials criticised these exercises as being little more than a caricature of the reality of caste system in India. The British colonial officials used the census-determined jatis to decide which group of people were qualified for which jobs in the colonial government, and people of which jatis were to be excluded as unreliable.^[151] These census caste classifications, states Gloria Raheja, a professor of Anthropology, were also used by the British officials over the late 19th century and early 20th century, to formulate land tax rates, as well as to frequently target some social groups as "criminal" castes and castes prone to "rebellion".^[152]

The population then comprised about 200 million people, across five major religions, and over 500,000 agrarian villages, each with a population between 100 and 1,000 people of various age groups, which were variously divided into numerous castes. This ideological scheme was theoretically composed of around 3,000 castes, which in turn was claimed to be composed of 90,000 local endogamous sub-groups.^{[1][153][154][155]}

The strict British class system may have influenced the British colonial preoccupation with the Indian caste system as well as the British perception of pre-colonial Indian castes. British society's own similarly rigid class system provided the British with a template for understanding Indian society and castes.^[156] The British, coming from a society rigidly divided by class, attempted to equate India's castes with British social classes.^{[157][158]} According to David Cannadine, Indian castes merged with the traditional British class system during the British Raj.^{[159][160]}

Race science

Colonial administrator Herbert Hope Risley, an exponent of race science, used the ratio of the width of a nose to its height to divide Indians into Aryan and Dravidian races, as well as seven castes.^{[161][162]}

Enforcement

Jobs for upper castes

The role of the British Raj on the caste system in India is controversial.^[164] The caste system became legally rigid during the Raj, when the British started to enumerate castes during their ten-year census and meticulously codified the system.^{[165][153]} Between 1860 and 1920, the British segregated Indians by caste, granting administrative jobs and senior appointments only to the upper castes.^[9]

Targeting criminal castes and their isolation

Starting with the 19th century, the British colonial government passed a series of laws that applied to Indians based on their religion and caste identification.^{[166][167][168]} These colonial era laws and their provisions used the term "Tribes", which included castes within their scope. This terminology was preferred for various reasons, including Muslim sensitivities that considered castes by definition Hindu, and preferred *Tribes*, a more generic term that included Muslims.^[169]

The British colonial government, for instance, enacted the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. This law declared everyone belonging to certain castes to be born with criminal tendencies.^[170] Ramnarayan Rawat, a professor of History and specialising in social exclusion in Indian subcontinent, states that the criminal-by-birth castes under this Act included initially Ahirs, Gurjars and Jats, but its enforcement expanded by the late 19th century to include most Shudras and untouchables, such as Chamars,^[171] as well as Sannyasis and hill tribes.^[170] Castes suspected of rebelling against colonial laws and seeking self-rule for India, such as the previously ruling families Kallars and the Maravars in south India and non-loyal castes in north India such as Ahirs, Gurjars and Jats, were called "predatory and barbarian" and added to the criminal castes list.^{[172][173]} Some caste groups were targeted using the Criminal Tribes Act even when there were no reports of any violence or criminal activity, but where their forefathers were known to have rebelled against Mughal or British authorities,^{[174][175]} or these castes were demanding labour rights and disrupting colonial tax collecting authorities.^[176]

The colonial government prepared a list of criminal castes, and all members registered in these castes by caste-census were restricted in terms of regions they could visit, move about in or people with whom they could socialise.^[170] In certain regions of colonial India, entire caste groups were presumed guilty by birth, arrested, children separated from their parents, and held in penal colonies or quarantined without conviction or due process.^{[177][178][179]} This practice became controversial, did not enjoy the support of all colonial British officials, and in a few cases this decades-long practice was reversed at the start of the 20th century with the proclamation that people "could not be incarcerated indefinitely on the presumption of [inherited] bad character".^[177] The criminal-by-birth laws against targeted castes was enforced until the mid-20th century, with an expansion of criminal castes list in west and south India through the 1900s to 1930s.^{[178][180]} Hundreds of Hindu communities were brought under the Criminal Tribes Act. By 1931, the colonial government included 237 criminal castes and tribes under the act in the Madras Presidency alone.^[180]



From the 1850s, photography was used in Indian subcontinent by the British for anthropological purposes, helping classify the different castes, tribes and native trades. Included in this collection were Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist (Sinhalese) people classified by castes.^[163] Above is an 1860s photograph of Rajputs, classified as a high Hindu caste.

While the notion of hereditary criminals conformed to orientalist stereotypes and the prevailing racial theories in Britain during the colonial era, the social impact of its enforcement was profiling, division and isolation of many communities of Hindus as criminals-by-birth.^{[171][179][181][c]}

Religion and caste segregated human rights

Eleanor Nesbitt, a professor of History and Religions in India, states that the colonial government hardened the caste-driven divisions in British India not only through its caste census, but with a series of laws in early 20th century.^{[182][183]} The British colonial officials, for instance, enacted laws such as the Land Alienation Act in 1900 and Punjab Pre-Emption Act in 1913, listing castes that could legally own land and denying equivalent property rights to other census-determined castes. These acts prohibited the inter-generational and intra-generational transfer of land from land-owning castes to any non-agricultural castes, thereby preventing economic mobility of property and creating consequent caste barriers in India.^{[182][184]}

Khushwant Singha a Sikh historian, and Tony Ballantyne a professor of History, state that these British colonial era laws helped create and erect barriers within land-owning and landless castes in northwest India.^{[184][185]} Caste-based discrimination and denial of human rights by the colonial state had similar impact elsewhere in British India.^{[186][187][188]}

Social identity

Nicholas Dirks has argued that Indian caste as we know it today is a "modern phenomenon,"^[d] as caste was "fundamentally transformed by British colonial rule."^[e] According to Dirks, before colonialism caste affiliation was quite loose and fluid, but the British regime enforced caste affiliation rigorously, and constructed a much more strict hierarchy than existed previously, with some castes being criminalised and others being given preferential treatment.^{[189][190]}

De Zwart notes that the caste system used to be thought of as an ancient fact of Hindu life and that contemporary scholars argue instead that the system was constructed by the British colonial regime. He says that "jobs and education opportunities were allotted based on caste, and people rallied and adopted a caste system that maximized their opportunity". De Zwart also notes that post-colonial affirmative action only reinforced the "British colonial project that ex hypothesi constructed the caste system".^[191]

Sweetman notes that the European conception of caste dismissed former political configurations and insisted upon an "essentially religious character" of India. During the colonial period, caste was defined as a religious system and was divorced from political powers. This made it possible for the colonial rulers to portray India as a society characterised by spiritual harmony in contrast to the former Indian states which they criticised as "despotic and epiphenomenal",^{[192][f]} with the colonial powers providing the necessary "benevolent, paternalistic rule by a more 'advanced' nation".^[193]

Further development

Assumptions about the caste system in Indian society, along with its nature, evolved during British rule.^{[164][g]} Corbridge concludes that British policies of divide and rule of India's numerous princely sovereign states, as well as enumeration of the population into rigid categories during the 10-year census, particularly with the 1901 and 1911 census, contributed towards the hardening of caste identities.^[196]

Social unrest during 1920s led to a change in this policy.^[9] From then on, the colonial administration began a policy of positive discrimination by reserving a certain percentage of government jobs for the lower castes.^[197]

In the round table conference held on August 1932, upon the request of Ambedkar, the then Prime Minister of Britain, Ramsay Macdonald made a Communal Award which awarded a provision for separate representation for the Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Anglo-Indians, Europeans and Dalits. These depressed classes were assigned a number of seats to be filled by election from special constituencies in which voters belonging to the depressed classes only could vote. Gandhi went on a hunger strike against this provision claiming that such an arrangement would split the Hindu community into two groups. Years later, Ambedkar wrote that Gandhi's fast was a form of coercion.^[198] This agreement, which saw Gandhi end his fast and Ambedkar drop his demand for a separate electorate, was called the Poona Pact.^[199]

After India achieved independence, the policy of caste-based reservation of jobs was formalised with lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Other theories and observations

Smelser and Lipset propose in their review of Hutton's study of caste system in colonial India the theory that individual mobility across caste lines may have been minimal in British India because it was ritualistic. They state that this may be because the colonial social stratification worked with the pre-existing ritual caste system.^[200]

The emergence of a caste system in the modern form, during the early British colonial rule in the 18th and 19th century, was not uniform in South Asia. Claude Markovits, a French historian of colonial India, writes that Hindu society in north and west India (Sindh), in late 18th century and much of 19th century, lacked a proper caste system, their religious identities were fluid (a combination of Saivism, Vaisnavism, Sikhism), and the Brahmins were not the widespread priestly group (but the *Bawas* were).^[201] Markovits writes, "if religion was not a structuring factor, neither was caste" among the Hindu merchants group of northwest India.^[202]

Contemporary India

Caste politics

Societal stratification, and the inequality that comes with it, still exists in India,^{[203][204]} and has been thoroughly criticised.^[205] Government policies aim at reducing this inequality by reservation, quota for backward classes, but paradoxically also have created an incentive to keep this stratification alive. The Indian government officially recognises historically discriminated communities of India such as the Untouchables under the designation of Scheduled Castes, and certain economically backward castes as Other Backward Class.^[206]

Loosening of caste system

Leonard and Weller have surveyed marriage and genealogical records to study patterns of exogamous inter-caste and endogamous intra-caste marriages in a regional population of India in 1900–1975. They report a striking presence of exogamous marriages across caste lines over time, particularly since the 1970s. They propose education, economic development, mobility and more interaction between youth as possible reasons for these exogamous marriages.^[207]

A 2003 article in *The Telegraph* claimed that inter-caste marriage and dating were common in urban India. Indian societal and family relationships are changing because of female literacy and education, women at work, urbanisation, the need for two-income families, and global influences through television. Female role models in politics, academia, journalism, business, and India's feminist movement have accelerated the change.^[208]

Caste-related violence

Independent India has witnessed caste-related violence. According to a 2005 UN report, approximately 31,440 cases of violent acts committed against Dalits were reported in 1996.^{[209][210]} The UN report claimed 1.33 cases of violent acts per 10,000 Dalit people. For context, the UN reported between 40 and 55 cases of violent acts per 10,000 people in developed countries in 2005.^{[211][212]} One example of such violence is the Khairlanji massacre of 2006.

Affirmative action



The massive 2006 Indian anti-reservation protests

Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits discrimination based on caste and Article 17 declared the practice of untouchability to be illegal.^[213] In 1955, India enacted the Untouchability (Offences) Act (renamed in 1976, as the Protection of Civil Rights Act). It extended the reach of law, from intent to mandatory enforcement. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was passed in India in 1989.^[214]

- The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was established to investigate, monitor, advise, and evaluate the socio-economic progress of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.^[215]
- A reservation system for people classified as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has existed for over 50 years. The presence of privately owned free market corporations in India is limited and public sector jobs have dominated the percentage of jobs in its economy. A 2000 report estimated that most jobs in India were in companies owned by the government or agencies of the government.^[216] The reservation system implemented by India over 50 years, has been partly successful, because of all jobs, nationwide, in 1995, 17.2 percent of the jobs were held by those in the lowest castes.
- The Indian government classifies government jobs in four groups. The Group A jobs are senior most, high paying positions in the government, while Group D are junior most, lowest paying positions. In Group D jobs, the percentage of positions held by lowest caste classified people is 30% greater than their demographic percentage. In all jobs classified as Group C positions, the percentage of jobs held by lowest caste people is about the same as their demographic population distribution. In Group A and B jobs, the percentage of positions held by lowest caste classified people is 30% lower than their demographic percentage.
- The presence of lowest caste people in highest paying, senior most position jobs in India has increased by ten-fold, from 1.18 percent of all jobs in 1959 to 10.12 percent of all jobs in 1995.^[217]
- In 2007, India elected K. G. Balakrishnan, a Dalit, to the office of Chief Justice.^[218]
- In 2007, Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state of India, elected Mayawati as the Chief Minister, the highest elected office of the state. BBC claims, "Mayawati Kumari is an icon for millions of India's Dalits, or untouchables as they used to be known."^[219]
- In 2009, the Indian parliament unanimously elected a Dalit,^[220] Meira Kumar, as the first female speaker

Recognition

The Indian government officially recognises historically discriminated communities of India such as the Untouchables under the designation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and certain economically backward Shudra castes as Other Backward Class.^[206] The Scheduled Castes are sometimes referred to as Dalit in contemporary literature. In 2001, Dalits comprised 16.2 percent of India's total population.^[221] Of the one billion Hindus in India, it is estimated that Hindu Forward caste comprises 26%, Other Backward Class comprises 43%, Hindu Scheduled Castes (Dalits) comprises 22% and Hindu Scheduled Tribes comprises 9%.^[222]

In addition to taking affirmative action for people of schedule castes and scheduled tribes, India has expanded its effort to include people from poor, backward castes in its economic and social mainstream. In 1990, the government reservation of 27% for Backward Classes on the basis of the Mandal Commission's recommendations. Since then, India has reserved 27 percent of job opportunities in government-owned enterprises and agencies for Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBCs). The 27 percent reservation is in addition to 22.5 percent set aside for India's lowest castes for last 50 years.^[223]

Mandal commission

The Mandal Commission was established in 1979 to "identify the socially or educationally backward" and to consider the question of seat reservations and quotas for people to redress caste discrimination.^[224] In 1980, the commission's report affirmed the affirmative action practice under Indian law, whereby additional members of lower castes—the other backward classes—were given exclusive access to another 27 percent of government jobs and slots in public universities, in addition to the 23 percent already reserved for the Dalits and Tribals. When V. P. Singh's administration tried to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in 1989, massive protests were held in the country. Many alleged that the politicians were trying to cash in on caste-based reservations for purely pragmatic electoral purposes.

Many political parties in India have indulged in caste-based votebank politics. Parties such as Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Samajwadi Party and the Janata Dal claim that they are representing the backward castes, and rely on OBC support, often in alliance with Dalit and Muslim support, to win elections.^[225]

Other Backward Classes (OBC)

There is substantial debate over the exact number of OBCs in India; it is generally estimated to be sizable, but many believe that it is lower than the figures quoted by either the Mandal Commission or the National Sample Survey^[226]

The reservation system has led to widespread protests, such as the 2006 Indian anti-reservation protests, with many complaining of reverse discrimination against the Forward Castes (the castes that do not qualify for the reservation).

In May 2011, the government approved a poverty, religion and caste census to identify poverty in different social backgrounds.^[227] The census would also help the government to re-examine and possibly undo some of the policies which were formed in haste such as the Mandal Commission in order to bring more objectivity to the policies with respect to contemporary realities.^[228] Critics of the reservation system believe that there is actually no social stigma at all associated with belonging to a backward caste and that because of the huge constitutional incentives in the form of educational and job reservations, a large number of people will falsely identify with a backward caste to receive the benefits. This would not only result in a marked inflation of the backward castes' numbers, but also lead to enormous administrative and judicial resources being devoted to social unrest and litigation when such dubious caste declarations are challenged.^[229]

In 20th century India, the upperclass (*Ashraf*) Muslims dominated the government jobs and parliamentary representation. As a result, there have been campaigns to include the Muslim untouchable and lower castes among the groups eligible for affirmative action in India under SC and STs provision act^[230] and have been given additional reservation based on the Sachar Committee report.

Effects of Government aid

In a 2008 study, Desai et al. focussed on education attainments of children and young adults aged 6–29, from lowest caste and tribal populations of India. They completed a national survey of over 100,000 households for each of the four survey years between 1983 and 2000.^[231] They found a significant increase in lower caste children in their odds of completing primary school. The number of dalit children who completed either middle-, high- or college-level education increased three times faster than the national average, and the total number were statistically same for both lower and upper castes. However, the same study found that in 2000, the percentage of dalit males never enrolled in a school was still more than twice the percentage of upper caste males never enrolled in schools. Moreover, only 1.67% of dalit females were college graduates compared to 9.09% of upper caste females. The number of dalit girls in India who attended school doubled in the same period, but still few percent less than national average. Other poor caste groups as well as ethnic groups such as Muslims in India have also made improvements over the 16-year period, but their improvement lagged behind that of dalits and adivasis. The net percentage school attainment for Dalits and Muslims were statistically the same in 1999.

A 2007 nationwide survey of India by the World Bank found that over 80 percent of children of historically discriminated castes were attending schools. The fastest increase in school attendance by Dalit community children occurred during the recent periods of India's economic growth.^[232]

A study by Darshan Singh presents data on health and other indicators of socio-economic change in India's historically discriminated castes. He claims:^[233]

- In 2001, the literacy rates in India's lowest castes was 55 percent, compared to a national average of 63 percent.
- The childhood vaccination levels in India's lowest castes was 40 percent in 2001, compared to a national average of 44 percent.
- Access to drinking water within household or near the household in India's lowest castes was 80 percent in 2001, compared to a national average of 83 percent.
- The poverty level in India's lowest castes dropped from 49 percent to 39 percent between 1995 and 2005, compared to a national average change from 35 to 27 percent.

The life expectancy of various caste groups in modern India has been raised; but the International Institute for Population Sciences report suggests that poverty not caste, is the bigger differentiation in life expectancy in modern India.^[234]

Influence on other religions

While identified with Hinduism, caste systems are found in other religions on the Indian subcontinent, including other religions such as Buddhists, Christians and Muslims.^{[235][236][237]}

Christians

Social stratification is found among the Christians in India based on caste as well as by their denomination and location.^[13] The caste distinction is based on their caste at the time that they or their ancestors converted to Christianity since the 16th century, they typically do not intermarry and sit separately during prayers in Church.^[13]

The earliest reference to caste among Indian Christians comes from Kerala. Duncan Forrester observes that "Nowhere else in India is there a large and ancient Christian community which has in time immemorial been accorded a high status in the caste hierarchy. ... Syrian Christian community operates very much as a caste and is properly regarded as a caste or at least a very caste-like group."^[238] Amidst the Hindu society, the Saint Thomas Christians of Kerala had inserted themselves within the Indian caste society by the observance of caste rules and were regarded by the Hindus as a caste occupying a high place within their caste hierarchy.^{[239][240]} Their traditional belief that their ancestors were high-caste Hindus such as Nambudiris and Nairs, who were evangelised by St. Thomas, has also supported their upper-caste status.^[241] With the arrival of European missionaries and their evangelistic mission among the lower castes in Kerala, two new groups of Christians, called Latin Rite Christians and New Protestant Christians, were formed but they continued to be considered as lower castes by higher ranked communities, including the Saint Thomas Christians.^[239]

Muslims

Caste system has been observed among Muslims in India.^[235] They practice endogamy, hypergamy, hereditary occupations, avoid social mixing and have been stratified.^[12] There is some controversy^[242] if these characteristics make them social groups or castes of Islam.

Indian Muslims are a mix of Sunni (majority), Shia and other sects of Islam. From the earliest days of Islam's arrival in South Asia, the Arabic, Persian and Afghan Muslims have been part of the upper, noble caste. Some upper caste Hindus converted to Islam and became part of the governing group of Sultanates and Mughal Empire, who along with Arabs, Persians and Afghans came to be known as Ashrafs (or nobles).^[12] Below them are the middle caste Muslims called Ajlafs, and the lowest status is those of the Arzals.^{[243][244][245]} Anti-caste activists like Ambedkar called the Arzal caste among Muslims as the equivalent of Hindu untouchables,^[246] as did the controversial colonial British ethnographer Herbert Hope Risley^[247]

In Bengal, some Muslims refer to the social stratification within their society as *qaum* (or Quoms),^[248] a term that is found among Muslims elsewhere in India, as well as in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Qaums have patrilineal hereditary, with ranked occupations and endogamy. Membership in a qaum is inherited by birth.^[249] Barth identifies the origin of the stratification from the historical segregation between *pak* (pure) and *paleed* (impure) - - defined by the family's social or religious status, occupation and involvement in sexual crimes. Originally, *Paleed/Paleet* qaum included people running or working at brothels, prostitution service providers or professional courtesan/dancers (*Tawaif*) and musicians. There is history of skin color defining Pak/Paleed, but that does not have historical roots, and was adopted by outsiders using analogy from Hindu Caste system.^[250]

Similarly, Christians in Pakistan are called "*Isai*", meaning followers of Isa (Jesus). But the term originates from Hindu Caste system and refers to the demeaning jobs performed by Christians in Pakistan out of poverty. Efforts are being made to replace the term with "*Masihi*" (Messiah), which is preferred by the Christians citizens of Pakistan.^[251]

Endogamy is very common in Muslims in the form of arranged consanguineous marriages among Muslims in India and Pakistan.^[252] Malik states that the lack of religious sanction makes qaum a quasi-caste, and something that is found in Islam outside South Asia.^[249]

Some assert that the Muslim castes are not as acute in their discrimination as those of the Hindus,^[253] while critics of Islam assert that the discrimination in South Asian Muslim society is worse.^[246]

Sikh

Although the Sikh Gurus criticised the hierarchy of the caste system, one does exist in Sikh community. According to Sunrinder S, Jodhka, the Sikh religion does not advocate discrimination against any caste or creed, however, in practice, Sikhs belonging to the landowning dominant castes have not shed all their prejudices against the Dalits. While Dalits would be allowed entry into the village gurudwaras they would not be permitted to cook or serve langar (the communal meal). Therefore, wherever they could mobilise resources, the Dalits of Punjab have tried to construct their own gurudwara and other local level institutions in order to attain a certain degree of cultural autonomy^[254]

In 1953, the Government of India acceded to the demands of the Sikh leader, Tara Singh, to include Sikh castes of the converted untouchables in the list of scheduled castes. In the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 20 of the 140 seats are reserved for low-caste Sikhs.^{[255][256]}

The Sikh literature from the Islamic rule and British colonial era mention *Varna* as *Varan*, and *Jati* as *Zat* or *Zat-biradari*. Eleanor Nesbitt, a professor of Religion and author of books on Sikhism, states that the *Varan* is described as a class system, while *Zat* has some caste system features in Sikh literature.^[257] In theory, Nesbitt states Sikh literature does not recognise caste hierarchy or differences. In practice, states Nesbitt, widespread endogamy practice among Sikhs has been prevalent in modern times, and poorer Sikhs of disadvantaged castes continue to gather in their own places of worship. Most Sikh families, writes Nesbitt, continue to check the caste of any prospective marriage partner for their children. She notes that all Gurus of Sikhs married within their *Zat*, and they did not condemn or break with the convention of endogamous marriages for their own children or Sikhs in general.^[182]

Jains

Caste system in Jainism has existed for centuries, primarily in terms of endogamy, although, per Paul Dundas, in modern times the system does not play a significant role.^[258] This is contradicted by Carrithers and Humphreys who describe the major Jain castes in Rajasthan with their social rank.^[259]

Distribution

Table 1 is the distribution of population of each Religion by Caste Categories, obtained from merged sample of Schedule 1 and Schedule 10 of available data from the National Sample Survey Organisation 55th (1999–2000) and 61st Rounds (2004–05) Round Survey^[222] The Other Backward Class (OBCs) were found to comprise 52% of the country's population by the Mandal Commission report of 1980, a figure which had shrunk to 41% by 2006 when the National Sample Survey Organisation's survey took place.^[260]

Table 1. Distribution of Population by Religion and Caste Categories

Religion/Caste	SCs	STs	OBCs	Forward Caste/Others
<u>Hinduism</u>	22.2%	9%	42.8%	26%
<u>Islam</u>	0.8%	0.5%	39.2%	59.5%
<u>Christianity</u>	9.0%	32.8%	24.8%	33.3%
<u>Sikhism</u>	30.7%	0.9%	22.4%	46.1%
<u>Jainism</u>	0.0%	2.6%	3.0%	94.3%
<u>Buddhism</u>	89.5%	7.4%	0.4%	2.7%
<u>Zoroastrianism</u>	0.0%	15.9%	13.7%	70.4%
Others	2.6%	82.5%	6.25	8.7%
Total	19.7%	8.5%	41.1%	30.8%

Criticism

There has been criticism of the caste system from both within and outside of India.^[261] Since the 1980s, caste has become a major issue in the politics of India.^[262]

Indian social reformers

The caste system has been criticised by many Indian social reformers.

Basava

Basava (1105–1167) Arguably one of the first social reformers, Basava championed devotional worship that rejected temple worship and rituals, and replaced it with personalised direct worship of Shiva through practices such as individually worn icons and symbols like a small linga. This approach brought Shiva's presence to everyone and at all times, without gender, class or caste discrimination. His teachings and verses such as Káyakavé Kailása (~~W~~rk is the path to Kailash (bliss, heaven), or ~~W~~rk is Worship) became popular

Jyotirao Phule

Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) vehemently criticised any explanations that the caste system was natural and ordained by the *Creator* in Hindu texts. If *Brahma* wanted castes, argued Phule, he would have ordained the same for other creatures. There are no castes in species of animals or birds, so why should there be one among human animals. In his criticism Phule added, "Brahmins cannot claim superior status because of caste, because they hardly bothered with these when wining and dining with Europeans." Professions did not make castes, and castes did not decide one's profession. If someone does a job that is dirty, it does not make them inferior; in the same way that no mother is inferior because she cleans the excreta of her baby. Ritual occupation or tasks, argued Phule, do not make any human being superior or inferior.^[263]

Vivekananda

Vivekananda similarly criticised caste as one of the many human institutions that bars the power of free thought and action of an individual. Caste or no caste, creed or no creed, any man, or class, or caste, or nation, or institution that bars the power of free thought and bars action of an individual is devilish, and must go down. Liberty of thought and action, asserted Vivekananda, is the only condition of life, of growth and of well-being.^[264]

Gandhi

In his younger years, Gandhi disagreed with some of Ambedkar's observations, rationale and interpretations about the caste system in India. "Caste," he claimed, has "saved Hinduism from disintegration. But like every other institution it has suffered from excrescences." He considered the four divisions of Varnas to be fundamental, natural and essential. The innumerable subcastes or Jatis he considered to be a hindrance. He advocated to fuse all the Jatis into a more global division of Varnas. In the 1930s, Gandhi began to advocate for the idea of heredity in caste to be rejected, arguing that "Assumption of superiority by any person over any other is a sin against God and man. Thus caste, in so far as it connotes distinctions in status, is an evil."^[265]

He claimed that Varnashrama of the shastras is today nonexistent in practice. The present caste system is theory antithesis of varnashrama. Caste in its current form, claimed Gandhi, had nothing to do with religion. The discrimination and trauma of castes, argued Gandhi, was the result of custom, the origin of which is unknown. Gandhi said that the customs' origin was a moot point, because one could spiritually sense that these customs were wrong, and that any caste system is harmful to the spiritual well-being of man and economic well-being of a nation. The reality of colonial India was, Gandhi noted, that there was no significant disparity between the economic condition and earnings of members of different castes, whether it was a Brahmin or an artisan or a farmer of low caste. India was poor, and Indians of all castes were poor. Thus, he argued that the cause of trauma was not in the caste system, but elsewhere. Judged by the standards being applied to India, Gandhi claimed, every human society would fail. He acknowledged that the caste system in India spiritually blinded some Indians, then added that this did not mean that every Indian or even most Indians blindly followed the caste system, or everything from ancient Indian scriptures of doubtful authenticity and value. India, like any other society, cannot be judged by a caricature of its worst specimens. Gandhi stated that one must consider the best it produced as well, along with the vast majority in impoverished Indian villages struggling to make ends meet, with woes of which there was little knowledge.^[266]

B. R. Ambedkar

B. R. Ambedkar was born in a caste that was classified as untouchable, became a leader of human rights in India, a prolific writer, and a key person in drafting modern India's constitution in the 1940s. He wrote extensively on discrimination, trauma and what he saw as the tragic effects of the caste system in India.^[270]

In his writings "Castes in India: Their mechanism, genesis and development", Ambedkar traces the origin of caste system to origin of the practise of endogamy. Later the custom spread among other groups too due to imitation. He wrote that initially, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras existed as classes wherein choice of occupation was not restricted by birth and exogamy was prevalent. But Brahmins started the custom of endogamy and enclosed themselves. Thus Ambedkar defines caste as "enclosed class". After Brahmins enclosed themselves, they had to deal with the problem of surplus women and surplus men. He says that, roughly the population of both the sexes is distributed equally across age groups. So, surplus women is the one who lost her husband. If she tries to remarry, she will be a competition for other girls of marriageable age. If she tries to marry outside the caste, it will violate endogamy and end the caste system. Thus the customs of Sati and enforced widowhood were created to take care of surplus women. Likewise surplus men is the one whose wife has died. Men are considered as an asset to the group and hence can't be isolated or burnt. Hence the custom of child marriage was created in which men were given a girl of lesser than marriageable age. Alternatively, they were made to choose celibacy. Thus the 3 main customs Sati, enforced widowhood and child marriages originated among the Brahmin caste. Shastras were used to glorify these practices so that they are observed without being questioned. Later, other caste groups imitated these customs. Thus Ambedkar, uses the psychological approach of psychologist Gabriel Tarde to indicate how caste system spread. But he also explains in the same article that, Brahmins or Manu can't be blamed for the origin of the caste system. He also discredits theories which trace the origin of caste system in races and emphasizes that Endogamy is the main and peculiar feature of the caste system.^[271]



A 1922 stereograph of Hindu children of high caste, Bombay This was part of Underwood & Underwood stereoscope journey of colonial world. This and related collections became controversial for staging extreme effects and constructing identities of various colonised nations. Christopher Pinney remarks such imaging was a part of surveillance and imposed identities upon Indians that were resented.^{[267][268][269]}

Caste politics

Economic inequality

Economic inequality seems to be related to the influence of inherited social-economic stratification. A 1995 study notes that the caste system in India is a system of exploitation of poor low-ranking groups by more prosperous high-ranking groups.^[203] A report published in 2001 note that in India 36.3% of people own no land at all, 60.6% own about 15% of the land, with a very wealthy 3.1% owning 15% of the land.^[204] A study by Haque reports that India contains both the largest number of rural poor, and the largest number of landless households on the planet. Haque also reports that over 90 percent of both scheduled castes (low-ranking groups) and all other castes (high-ranking groups) either do not own land or own land area capable of producing less than \$1000 per year of food and income per household. However, over 99 percent of India's farms are less than 10 hectares, and 99.9 percent of the farms are less than 20 hectares, regardless of the farmer or landowner's caste. Indian government has, in addition, vigorously pursued agricultural land ceiling laws which prohibit anyone from owning land greater than mandated limits. India has used this law to forcibly acquire land from some, then redistribute tens of millions of acres to the landless and poor of the low-caste. Haque suggests that Indian lawmakers need to reform and modernise the nation's land laws and rely less on blind adherence to land ceilings and tenancy reform.^{[272][273]}

In a 2011 study, Aiyar too notes that such qualitative theories of economic exploitation and consequent land redistribution within India between 1950 and 1990 had no effect on the quality of life and poverty reduction. Instead, economic reforms since the 1990s and resultant opportunities for non-agricultural jobs have reduced poverty and increased per capita income for all segments of Indian society.^[274] For specific evidence, Aiyar mentions the following

Critics believe that the economic liberalisation has benefited just a small elite and left behind the poor, especially the lowest Hindu caste of dalits. But a recent authoritative survey revealed striking improvements in living standards of dalits in the last two decades. Television ownership was up from zero to 45 percent; cellphone ownership up from zero to 36 percent; two-wheeler ownership (of motorcycles, scooters, mopeds) up from zero to 12.3 percent; children eating yesterday's leftovers down from 95.9 percent to 16.2 percent ... Dalits running their own businesses up from 6 percent to 37 percent; and proportion working as agricultural labourers down from 46.1 percent to 20.5 percent.

Cassan has studied the differential effect within two segments of India's Dalit community. He finds India's overall economic growth has produced the fastest and more significant socio-economic changes. Cassan further concludes that legal and social program initiatives are no longer India's primary constraint in further advancement of India's historically discriminated castes; further advancement are likely to come from improvements in the supply of quality schools in rural and urban India, along with India's economic growth.^[275]

Apartheid and discrimination

The maltreatment of Dalits in India has been described by some authors as "India's hidden apartheid".^{[205][276]} Critics of the accusations point to substantial improvements in the position of Dalits in post-independence India, consequent to the strict implementation of the rights and privileges enshrined in the Constitution of India, as implemented by the Protection of Civil rights Act, 1955.^[277] They also argue that the practise had disappeared in urban public life.^[278]

Sociologists Kevin Reilly, Stephen Kaufman and Angela Bodino, while critical of caste system, conclude that modern India does not practice apartheid since there is no state-sanctioned discrimination.^[279] They write that casteism in India is presently "not apartheid. In fact, untouchables, as well as tribal people and members of the lowest castes in India benefit from broad affirmative action programmes and are enjoying greater political power"^[280]

A hypothesis that caste amounts to race has been rejected by some scholars.^{[281][282][283]} Ambedkar, for example, wrote that "The Brahmin of Punjab is racially of the same stock as the Chamar of Punjab. The Caste system does not demarcate racial division. The Caste system is a social division of people of the same race." Various sociologists, anthropologists and historians have rejected the racial origins and racial emphasis of caste and consider the idea to be one that has purely political and economic undertones. Beteille writes that "the Scheduled Castes of India taken together are no more a race than are the Brahmins taken together. Every social group cannot be regarded as a race simply because we want to protect it against prejudice and discrimination", and that the 2001 Durban conference on racism hosted by the U.N. is "turning its back on established scientific opinion".^[283]

In popular culture

Mulk Raj Anand's debut novel, *Untouchable* (1935), is based on the theme of untouchability. The Hindi film *Achhut Kanya* (Untouchable Maiden, 1936), starring Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani, was an early reformist film. The debut novel of Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997), also has themes surrounding the caste system across religions. A lawyer named Sabu Thomas filed a petition to have the book published without the last chapter, which had graphic description of sexual acts between members of different castes.^[284] Thomas claimed the alleged obscenity in the last chapter deeply hurts the Syrian Christian community, the basis of the novel.^[285]

See also

- Caste systems in Africa
- Caste system in Sri Lanka
- Manual scavenging- a caste-based activity in India, officially abolished but still ongoing
- Social class
- Social class in the United States

Notes

- a. These initiatives by India, over time, have led to many lower caste members being elected to the highest political offices including that of president, with the election of K. R. Narayanan, a Dalit, from 1997 to 2002.^[16]
- b. Sweetman notes that the Brahmin had a strong influence on the British understanding of India, thereby also influencing the British rule and western understandings of Hinduism, and gaining a stronger position in Indian society.^[145]
- c. Karade states, "the caste quarantine list was abolished by independent India in 1947 and criminal tribes law was formally repealed in 1952 by its first parliament".^[178]
- d. Dirks, Castes of Mind (2001 p. 5): "Rather, I will argue that caste (again, as we know it today) is a modern phenomenon, that it is, specifically the product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule. By this I do not mean to imply that it was simply invented by the too clever British, now credited with so many imperial patents that what began as colonial critique has turned into another form of imperial adulation. But Burman suggesting that it was under the British that 'caste' became a single term capable of expressing, organising, and above all 'systematising' India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organisation. This was achieved through an identifiable (if contested) ideological canon as the result of a concrete encounter with colonial modernity during two hundred years of British domination. In short, colonialism made caste what it is today
- e. Dirks, Scandal of Empire (2006 p. 27): "The institution of caste, for example, a social formation that has been seen as not only basic to India but part of its ancient constitution, was fundamentally transformed by British colonial rule."
- f. Sweetman cites Dirks (1993), *The Hollow Crown*, University of Michigan Press, p.xxvii
- g. For example, some British believed Indians would shun train travel because tradition-bound South Asians were too caught up in caste and religion, and that they would not sit or stand in the same coaches out of concern for close proximity to a member of higher or lower or shunned caste. After the launch of train services, Indians of all castes, classes and gender enthusiastically adopted train travel without any concern for so-called caste stereotypes.^{[194][195]}

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