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The Indian Caste System: A system of Social Stratification and its Implications on the Indian Society

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ABSTRACT

Every society is defined by some kind of socio-economic class structure in which individuals are segregated on the basis of attributes which are external to them. In Ancient India, the segregation was based on Hindu scriptures. These scriptures formed the basic framework which defined the roles and occupations of different individuals in society. This paper examines the Indian Caste System as an institution which is external to these individuals. It also includes the concept of social stratification and goes on to the historicity of the Indian Caste System. The concepts of 'purity' and 'pollution' are also highlighted in this paper.

The Indian Caste System is one that divides Hindus into different categories which then decides their fate for their lifetime. In this system Hindus are differentiated into social factors concerned with class, language, religion, gender and so forth. When it comes to defining the caste system, different sociologists have different views on it. Celestin Bougle defines it as

The caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics: separation in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food); division of labour, in each group having, in theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only within certain limits; and finally hierarchy, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another. (1908, p. 21)²

On the other hand, Sebastian Velassery defines the caste system as “An endogamous and hereditary subdivision on an ethnic unit occupying of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions.” (Velassery, 2005).³ Simply put, the Caste System

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² BOUGLE, C. (1927). *Essais sur le regime des castes* (Pocock, D.F., Trans.) Paris, Alcan: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1908)

³ VELASSERY, S. *Casteism and Human Rights: toward an Ontology of the Social Order*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005. Print.

is a system which divides society and ranks people in different categories.

The Indus Valley Civilization was one of the first civilizations in history. After the disappearance of the Indus Valley Civilization in around 1500 BC, India saw a huge Aryan migration down to the Indo-Gangetic Plain. (Sharma, 2005).⁴ The Aryans left different religious texts, the primary one being the ‘Vedas’. The word ‘Veda’ has a literal meaning which is knowledge. The Vedas were further divided into four parts- Rig-Veda, Sama-Veda, Atharva-Veda and Yajur-Veda.⁵ The Caste System found its mention in the Rig-Veda, particularly the Purusha Sukta. In the 12th verse of the Purusha Sukta it has been mentioned that when the Cosmic Being or ‘Brahma’ is divided His mouth gave rise to the Brahmins, His arms gave rise to the Kshatriyas, and His thighs were the Vaisyas and His feet, the Shudras. Brahmins came from Brahma’s mouth because he held the power to communicate with God and Kshatriyas came from His arms so that they could engage in warfare.

Throughout history, the caste system in India had four divisions or ‘varnas’ – the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas and the Shudras. The Brahmins were the priests or the teachers, the Kshatriyas were the ruling class or the warriors, the Vaisyas were businessmen and merchants and the Shudras were the farmers and labourers. There was a fifth caste that was not accounted for in the caste system, the Dalits or Untouchables. It is interesting to note that even in the Purusha Sukta, Dalits have no place on the Cosmic Being’s body. These ‘varnas’ were the ranks, which defined a person’s position, power, occupation and wealth in society. Their role in society was pre-decided. Brahmins held the highest position in the caste system. The word ‘Brahmins’ comes from the word Brahman which means magical force.⁶ Their duties included educating students, performing rituals from marriage to death and protecting the Holy Scriptures. Brahmins were followed by the Kshatriyas. ‘Kshatriya’ originates from the word ‘Kshatra’ which means rule or authority⁷. According to the Holy Scriptures, Kshatriyas were the protectors of the kingdoms. Their duty was to defend their kingdoms in times of war and govern it at peaceful times. The Brahmins and Kshatriyas often integrated their duties which lead to a creation of a rift between the two upper castes and the two lower castes. Next were the Vaisyas. Vaisyas were the merchants and it was their duty to ensure prosperity for the upper

⁴ SHARMA, A. (2005). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on the Aryan Invasion and the Emergence of the Caste System in India. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73(3), 843-870. Retrieved November 2, 2020, from <http://jguelibrary.informaticsglobal.com:2074/stable/4139922>

⁵ Veda. (n.d.) In [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com/browse/veda). Retrieved from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/veda>

⁶ The Caste System (Brahmin and Kshatriya). (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/re1100hinduism/2015/11/25/the-caste-system-brahmin-and-kshatriya/>

⁷ The Caste System (Brahmin and Kshatriya). (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/re1100hinduism/2015/11/25/the-caste-system-brahmin-and-kshatriya/>

castes. Vaisyas were considered to be socially weak in the community. However, they were economically strong because they controlled the trade and the markets. Then there were the Shudras. The Shudras were the labourers who were only expected to work for others as servants or slaves. Being the lowest in the caste system there were certain actions the Shudras were forbidden to do. They had no rights or privileges to exercise.

Below the Shudras, at the lowest position were the Dalits or the untouchables. They were considered to be the outcasts of society and were only assigned work that was considered to be foul and impure. They were responsible for scavenging and skinning animals.⁸ (Deshpande, 2010). It was a crime for Dalits to enter certain roads because upper castes were stationed there. Dalits and Adivasis were considered to be an inferior group of individuals known as 'Candalas'. Candalas were defined as people who will pollute the twice-born by either direct or indirect contact.⁹ (Yamakazi, 1997). To further segregate the castes, what was known as 'Divjati' and 'Ekjati' were brought into action. The top three castes were considered to be Divjati or 'born twice' and were allowed to take part in religious congregations. The second birth was the initiation into the Vedic Studies which they performed while they were young.¹⁰ (Yamakazi, 1997). On the other hand, Shudras were considered to be Ekjati because they were born only once from their mother's womb.¹¹ (Yamakazi, 1997).

The concept of 'purity' and 'impurity' was relevant in the caste system. In fact, the word 'caste' is derived from the Latin word 'chaste' meaning pure. The society was divided into hereditary groups, with different groups placed on two ends of the spectrum. The Brahmins were 'pure' and they occupied the most important rank in the caste system while Candalas were so 'impure' that they were segregated outside the villages. An individual's caste controlled his or her purity. Untouchability was a common practice in the caste system, which was based off of the concept of purity and pollution. This concept of purity in the caste system was justified by hygienic associations, where Candalas were considered to be unhygienic because of the work assigned to them. The work assigned gave Candalas this permanent impurity which worked as a ground for discrimination. Candalas were considered to be "untouchables" because of the work they were employed in. With impurity came certain religious and social restrictions. Candalas could not use the same wells and temples as the upper caste individuals, they were forced to live on the outskirts of the village so that their presence would not pollute the environment. On the

⁸ DESHPANDE, M. S. (2010). History of the Indian caste system and its impact on India today. *California polytechnic State University*. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/socssp/44/>

⁹ YAMAKAZI, G. (1997). *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*. (H. Kotani Ed.).

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

other hand, there were certain castes which was never considered to be impure. The king and the Brahmins belonged to this category. If a Brahmin were to come in contact with a Candala or Dalit, he would become 'polluted'. Not just Dalits, exposure to urine, feces, menstruating women or dead bodies had the potential to pollute a Brahmin and the only way to rid their body off this pollution was purification rituals. The Code of Law book for ancient India or Dharmashastra constantly reinforced this idea of maintaining personal purity particularly for the upper castes which was threatened by the existence of these polluting factors.

The Indian Caste System can be characterized by its extreme inequality and rigidity. The reason why these inequalities were allowed to exist was because of the belief in society that the system in place was fair. It is this belief that allows for a system of social stratification to exist. Social stratification is system which categorizes people and ranks them in a hierarchy. (Crash Course, 2017, 0:52).¹² It exists in every society. Social stratification is what characterizes a society. Charles Tilly defined social stratification as the differentiation of different classes into hierarchal superposed classes and that the very basis of it is unequal distribution of rights and privileges. (1959)¹³. Contrary to the common notion it is not dependent on the intrinsic capabilities of an individual. It is not something that naturally exists in society. The reason for this is the impact of social stratification on individuals which is independent of their traits or personal choices. (Cancian, 1976)¹⁴ However, societies allow for some degree of social mobility or changes of position within the social hierarchy to exist. (Crash Course, 2017).¹⁵ Stratification systems can be closed or open. Closed systems of stratification tend to be extremely rigid and allow for little or no social mobility. In this system, an individual's social position is based on an ascribed status or the position that is inherited by the individual at birth. (Crash Course, 2017).¹⁶ On the other side of the coin, open systems of stratification allow for more social mobility and an individual's social position is not inherited by them, it is achieved. A classic example of closed stratification system would be the Indian Caste System. There existed endogamy, where an individual had to marry within their caste and was forbidden from marrying outside. (Dumont, 1966, pp. 112).¹⁷ The principle of separation was deeply ingrained in the caste system. There were other rules concerning contact and food. Another comparison

¹² Crash Course. (2017, August 8). *Social Stratification: Crash Course Sociology #21* [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlkIKCMt-Fs&t=449s>

¹³ SOROKIN, P. (1959). *Social Mobility*. Harper and Brothers.

¹⁴ CANCIAN, F. (1976). Social Stratification. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 5, 227-248. Retrieved November 3, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2949312>

¹⁵ *Supra* 12.

¹⁶ *Supra* 12.

¹⁷ DUMONT, L. (1966). *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its implication*. Chicago, CH: University of Chicago Press.

would be the Feudal system in Europe. In the Feudal system, the society was divided into three 'estates' - the clergy, the noblemen and the commoners. (Hall, 1992)¹⁸ Both these systems were based on ancestry and inheritance. There was another system that divided the society on the basis of race, this was the Apartheid System. It segregated black people from white people in South Africa. (Tilly, 1998).¹⁹ The common notion binding all these systems together was inequality, specifically inequality with respect to their standing in society. Class system is an illustration of an open system of stratification. It is based on the principles of meritocracy and exists in a capitalist society. Unlike the caste system, the class system allowed for upward and downward mobility. Individuals could move up a class or down a class with respect to their position in society. It ultimately boiled down to an individual's skills and efforts to earn a place in society. Social stratification may seem fair to the common masses. This is because of their societies' ideologies. Ideology is a system of shared beliefs which a group of people interpret and impart meaning to events. (Conley, 1994).²⁰ Simply put, ideology includes the beliefs of a society's pattern of inequality.

Caste can also be considered to be a form of institutionalization. Institutionalization is a process which intends to regulate societal behavior within organizations or even societies, which is dynamic in nature. (Barley, 1997).²¹ Jepperson (1991) defined institution as a social pattern that is regulated with sanctions and rewards.²² Institutionalization occurs when individuals in society accept common knowledge and it turns into shared knowledge. It is something that is external to the individual. It exists before the birth of an individual and continues to exist even after his or her death. The Indian Caste System was, therefore, an institution. The caste of a person was determined before the birth of an individual, the individual took after their father's caste. It continued to exist even after their death, when it was passed down to their next generation. Human beings are socialized into a system which internalizes in them. The concept of 'habitualisation' precedes institutionalization. Habitualisation refers to an action that is repeated frequently that it becomes a pattern which can be reproduced with an economy of effort.²³ (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The process of habitualisation can be co-related with the psychological gain that an individual's choices can be narrowed down. It provides the

¹⁸ HALL, S. and Gieben, B. (1992) *Formations of Modernity* (pp. 17-69), Oxford: Open University with Polity

¹⁹ TILLY, C. (1998). *Durable Inequality*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

²⁰ CONLEY, J. M., *The social science of ideology and the ideology of social science*, 72(5) N.C. L. Rev. 1249 (1994).

²¹ BARLEY, S. R., & Tolbert, P. S. (1997). *Institutionalization and Structuration: Studying the Links between Action and Institution*. *Organization Studies*, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/017084069701800106>

²² JEPPEPERSON, R.L. (1991). "Institutions, institutional effects, and institutionalism," pp. 143-163 in Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio (eds.), *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²³ BERGER, P.L., & LUCKMANN T. (1991). *The social construction of reality*. Penguin books.

individual a relief from making ‘all those decisions’.²⁴ (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Institutionalization occurs from the reciprocal typification of habituation.²⁵ (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Habituation, institutionalization and typification is a cyclical process where all the concepts are intertwined.

The Indian Caste System lay the groundwork for permanent social inequality. (Sutar, 2010).²⁶ Being a closed system of stratification, there was almost no mobility in the caste system. Social mobility has to do with the vertical movement of individuals in ‘social space’ or their movement from one class to another.²⁷ (Joslyn, 1927). The higher caste were placed in a position of prominence. They promoted their own well-being and economic interests in society. The lower castes, on the other hand, were marginalized. Marginalization is the process by which established or emerging elites create superior versus subordinate/dependent socio-economic relations through manipulations of labor and distributions of social resources.²⁸ (Subedi, 2013). With the rising power of the elites or the higher castes, the lower castes were forced to do labour intensive tasks for economic sustenance. There was almost no upward mobility for the lower castes. They were stuck doing the same work their fathers and grandfathers did whilst the higher classes profited off their exploitation. The higher castes gained more power and wealth than the lower castes which, in turn, brought them more power and prestige. It was a cyclical formation with no place for the lower castes. Thus the Dalit men were forced to continue their work to sustain themselves and afford food, clothing and shelter. (Dumont, 1966).²⁹

Often Rig Veda has been used to justify the hierarchical nature of class division in the Indian society. It is believed that it is natural since it is derived from the Cosmic Being himself. (Kuruvachira, n.d.).³⁰ This literal interpretation of the Cosmic Being has normalized exploitation and discrimination in the Indian society and is still used to justify the abuse against the lower castes. Some scholars even believe that the literal interpretation was done intentionally to justify the Caste System. The myth of the creation of Rig Veda which sanctions

²⁴ BERGER, P.L., & LUCKMANN T. (1991). *The social construction of reality*. Penguin books

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ SUTAR, A. (2010). Caste in South Asia. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(49), 4-5. Retrieved November 3, 2020, from <http://jguelibrary.informaticsglobal.com:2074/stable/27917918>

²⁷ JOSLYN, C. (1927). Sorokin on Social Mobility. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 42(1), 130-139. Retrieved November 20, 2020, from <http://jguelibrary.informaticsglobal.com:2074/stable/1885368>

²⁸ SUBEDI, M. (2013). Some Theoretical Consideration on Caste. *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol.7, pp. 51-86.

²⁹ DUMONT, L. (1966). *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its implication*. Chicago, CH: University of Chicago Press.

³⁰ KURUVACHIRA, J. (n.d.). *Religious Justification of the Caste System: An Analysis of the Myth of Creation in Rig Veda 10:90*. https://www.academia.edu/28864588/RELIGIOUS_JUSTIFICATION_OF_CASTE_SYSTEM_An_Analysis_of_the_Myth_of_Creation_in_Rigveda_10_90

the caste system is one of the most foundational myths of Hinduism. (Kuruvachira, n.d.)³¹ The myth was brought into existence to prove that the division of society into castes is natural and has been pre-decided by the Gods themselves. The wrong interpretation is that human beings are not equal. This interpretation has led to abuse of power, discrimination, exploitation and marginalization. In the Indian Caste System, the Rig Veda probably hinted at division of labour. Its wrong interpretation led to the creation and continuance of the caste system. (Kuruvachira, n.d.)³²

Every caste had organs of government within their community. Having said that, it is important to note that it was common for the superior caste to settle internal conflicts or internal matters of the dependent caste. As far as justice is concerned, the classical texts clearly mention that the king, advised by Brahman specialists in Dharma, metes out justice in full sovereignty. (Dumont, 1966).³³ The king had authority over the castes. It was his duty to ensure that the Varna system was preserved and to prevent the different castes from mixing. The king was considered to be the supreme judge. He also had supreme authority in caste conflicts. He was accompanied by a committee of Brahmin experts of Dharma and the king had the power to delegate his authority to one of them. (Dumont, 1966).³⁴ The king could directly step in to check and fix the ranks of different castes and sub-castes. The king also had the authority to promote a caste or change an individual's caste, but this power was seldom used. There was also a caste assembly which had the supreme authority within the caste. This assembly was known as 'Panchayat'. There were three cases related to the caste assembly. There was either no caste assembly, a permanent caste assembly or a non-permanent caste assembly. The upper castes had significant influence over political power. Even after the caste system was abolished its implications were still prevalent in society. The Zamindars system was introduced in India in the 18th century which was an extension of the caste system. The rich were in positions of power which enabled them to exploit the poorer sections of society. The upper castes also had access to more opportunities because of their place in society. The lower castes, on the other hand, were devoid of every such opportunity.

In the present day scenario, the importance placed on an individual's caste has diminished significantly. The relationship between the castes and the restrictions placed on them are more relaxed. Multiple government plans have been brought into action pre and post-independence

³¹ *ibid*

³² *ibid*

³³ DUMONT, L. (1966). *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its implication*. Chicago, CH: University of Chicago Press.

³⁴ *ibid*

to combat the social inequality created by the caste system. Occupational roles have been relaxed. In the former days, an individual's role was confined to their occupation. A Shudra could not participate in trade and business. This has now changed. The occupational restrictions have now been removed. One of the policies formulated provided a Reservation system. One of the first Reservation Policies was formulated by Chhatrapati Shahu and was implemented in 1902. It stated that fifty per cent of the vacancies in all offices must be filled by backward classes. (Chavan, 2019).³⁵ At that time, the backward classes included Non-Brahmins. Article 341 of the Indian Constitution provides reservation for Scheduled Castes. Even after seventy years of independence, after formulating policies for the upliftment of individuals, discrimination on the basis of caste is still prevalent. In 2019, ten cases of rape of Dalit women were reported every day, according to the data released by the National Crime Records Bureau. Dalits are still forced to manually scavenge to earn a decent living even after India banned manual scavenging in 1993. The media takes it a step further by romanticizing these jobs instead of shunning the practice of manual scavenging. The crimes committed against Dalits keep sky rocketing every year. Even though we have entered a new renaissance, there are still patches of old beliefs and customs of casteism which exist in society. Equality being the new motto of the twenty-first century, it is baffling to see that society has still not progressed from its old discriminatory and unjust practices.

³⁵ CHAVAN, A. (2019). The First Reservation in India. Retrieved from <https://www.livehistoryindia.com/history-daily/2019/01/17/the-first-reservations-in-india>

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