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David Levinson • Karen Christensen, Editors



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**CASTE** "Caste" refers to a rigid system of ranked social inequality with significant barriers to mobility or to intimate associations between different strata. The word also refers to one of the ranked strata or subgroups that make up such a system. Traditional India is considered the classic example of a caste system, but the concept has also been used to describe extreme forms of racial, ethnic, and class segregation in other societies. "Caste" comes from the Portuguese *casta*, meaning lineage, breed, race, or category (first attested used in English in 1613).

### Caste in Traditional India

Hindus usually describe the caste system with one or both of two ancient concepts: *varna* and *jati*. *Varna* (color) refers to the categories that are described in the early Indian religious texts such as the Rig Veda (origins 1500–1200 BCE; present form c. 200 BCE) and the *Laws of Manu* (c. 200 BCE–100 CE). These texts describe four ranked categories: priests (Brahmans), warriors (Kshatriyas), farmers and merchants (Vaisyas), and laborers and servants (Sudras). The first three categories are considered "twice-born" (*dvijyas*) and are allowed to study the sacred scriptures. A fifth category of outcasts is referred to in *The Laws of Manu* as *chandala*. They are supposedly outside Hindu society, but historically are an integral part of it. Westerners have referred to this group as untouchables. They were usually associated with activities considered to be polluting, such as removing feces or dead animals. In contemporary India, the government refers to these groups as Scheduled Castes. Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi (1869–1948) called them *Harijans* (children of God). Many of them have adopted the name *Dalits* (the oppressed).

The actual social structure in India has long varied from the *varna* scheme described in the sacred texts. Society has been differentiated into several thousand named social categories usually referred to as *jatis* (lineage, species, race). Scholars do not know whether *jatis* developed from *varnas*. It is clear that the *varna* scheme has long served as a simplified indigenous model of the caste system, whose legitimacy was advocated primarily by Brahmans and other high-caste groups. The description of the *jati* system that follows attempts to summarize the information developed during the period that Britain ruled India (1848–1947 CE) and the views of social scientists in the first quarter-century after Indian independence.

Most *jatis* were associated with a particular traditional occupation or ritual activity, such as barber, drummer, cow herder, priest, and so forth. These categories were ranked in a rough hierarchy based to a

significant degree on their supposed ritual purity, with Brahmans at the top and untouchables at the bottom. Ritual purity was partly an attribute of birth, and partly due to the fastidiousness with which individuals and castes conformed to certain lifestyle norms. Bathing before meals, purification of cooking areas, being a vegetarian, minimizing associations with those of low caste, keeping women relatively secluded, not allowing widows to remarry, and avoiding manual work in the fields were a few of the behaviors usually associated with ritual purity. The status of a caste was also affected by the members' wealth, political power, and the *varna* category with which they were associated. For example, Rajputs, who are common in much of northern India, are usually classified as Kshatriyas and hence claim a higher status than the Vaisya or Sudra castes in their region.

These *jati* categories were divided into—or more accurately composed of—numerous regional subcastes, ranging from a few hundred families to tens of thousands. Subcastes were usually endogamous, (composed of families who intermarried with one another and refused to marry others). Because of endogamy, many members of a subcaste were kin by birth or marriage. Most castes also practiced commensality; that is, they ate only with members of their own or a higher caste.

Most castes participated in agricultural production or modern occupations. In only a few artisan and service castes, such as clothes washers, barbers, and goldsmiths, did most members earn their living by carrying out their traditional occupation. Many castes, however, performed their traditional functions on specific occasions. For example, drummer castes in south India serve as drummers for certain festivals or rituals. The great majority of castes were classified as Sudras, though their ritual status varied from quite high to very low. Some of the most common Sudra castes were barbers, carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, oilseed pressers, farmers, potters, cow herders, shepherds, flower growers, vegetable gardeners, grain parchers, sweetmeat makers, tailors, weavers, clothes washers, and bangle makers. The three higher *varnas*, as well as the category of untouchables or Scheduled Castes, each contained a number of distinct castes.

A typical village might include members of from five to twenty-five castes. There were nearly always some type of Brahman and an array of Sudra castes in a local area. In some places, there were castes that claimed to be Kshatriyas or Vaisyas, but in many areas of the South, those *varnas* were not represented. Typically, a dominant caste or coalition controlled most local political and economic resources—especially land and the labor needed to work it. While caste rank was associ-



## CASTE

Edgar Thurston's *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* is an attempt to provide a full accounting of all the castes of the region. Although incomplete, it remains the most comprehensive list. The following is a sample of the listings.

**Baita Kammara.**—The name, meaning outside blacksmiths, applied to Kamsala blacksmiths, who occupy a lowly position, and work in the open air or outside a village.

**Bajantri.**—A synonym of Mangala, indicating their occupation as professional musicians.

**Bakuda.**—A sub-division of Holeya.

**Balanollu.**—Balanollu and Badranollu are names of gotras of Ganigas, the members of which may not cut *Erythoxylon monogynum*.

**Balasantosha.**—The Balasantosha or Balasanta vandlu (those who are children) are described in the Kurnool Manual as "ballad reciters, whose chief stories are the Bobbili katha, or the story of the siege of the fort of Bobbili in Vizagapatam by Bussy"; the Kurnool settled in the Tamil district of Madura.

**Bovi.**—The name of the palanquin-bearing section of the Mogers of South Canara. Some Besthas from Mysore, who have settled in this district, are also called Bovi, which is a form of Boyi (bearer).

**Boya** (see Bedar).—Boya has also been recorded as a sub-division of Malam, a name for Ekari.

*Source:* Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari. (1909) *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. Madra, India: Government Press, 266–267.

ated with economic and political power, the correlation was very imperfect. In most areas, the controllers of land and labor were not Brahmans; frequently they were higher-status Sudra castes. The dominant caste was often able to mobilize considerable physical force to protect its interests. Members of this dominant group typically served as patrons (*jajmans*) for whom Brahman priests performed religious rites in return for gifts and fees. The dominant caste was also the patron of a variety of specialist castes—barbers, blacksmiths, sweepers, and so forth—who provided various goods and services. In return for their services, these clients were given a portion of the patron's grain at harvest time. Where the integration of the division of labor at a village level was accomplished by patron-client (*jajmani*) relationships, markets and extreme forms of coercion (for example, slavery or serfdom) may have been less prevalent. Scholars disagree about how extensive this system was.

In contrast to a caste, which was a category of people of similar rank and characteristics, a subcaste was

an actual social group or network. Families were linked to members of their subcaste in other villages in the region. In many areas, daughters had to marry men from other villages, creating intervillage networks of kin and in-laws. Many subcastes had a council of respected leaders (*panchayat*) who settled disputes and disciplined errant members. These regional subcastes were usually endogamous; that is, husbands and wives had to be from the same subcaste. In turn, their children were members of this subcaste. Endogamy was the primary determinant of subcaste boundaries. The exception was a number of castes in north India and a few in south India who practiced what anthropologists refer to as hypergamy. That is, males could marry women from a caste of slightly lower rank. In all castes, parents arranged most marriages. While a local *jati* or subcaste was a circle of peers, there were important variations in the status of the families in a subcaste. These differences were related to wealth, influence over other families, and lifestyle, especially ritual purity. A family's status could be increased if it arranged marriages with higher-status families.

Typically, a local caste category was segmented into several endogamous subcastes. For example, there was often more than one subcaste of cow herders in a given area or even in the same village. From the perspective of others, the cow herders belonged to the same caste; from their perspective, enough differences existed so that they neither intermarried nor ate with one another. Most people in a village knew the broad caste category of everyone else, though they often did not know their subcaste.

In principle, individuals and groups could not change their caste, but in practice there was considerable social mobility—usually involving small shifts in rankings. This typically occurred when a subcaste or lineage increased in wealth or political power. It then emulated the lifestyles of higher castes, adopted a new name, or claimed that it belonged to a higher *varna*. In a local area, the exact ranking of groups was subject to dispute and debate. Most disagreement was over whether a caste was just above or just below another local caste.

Most religious minorities in India, including Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs (who together make up about 15 percent of the population), also had caste-like divisions. Marriages were usually within these caste subgroups, and various forms of deference were shown to high-ranking strata. Non-Hindus are, however, usually less concerned about purity and pollution and commensality. The representation of these groups in any given area is, however, enormously variable. For example, in some areas of the Punjab, Sikhs constitute the overwhelming bulk of the population, while the same is true for Christians in a few areas of south India.

There have long been protests against the caste system, including those by the historical Buddha (563–483 BCE), the bhakti (devotional movements; 800–1800), and the anti-Brahman movement in south India (c. 1916–1940).

### Theories of Caste

Scholars have proposed various explanations for this system of inequality. Louis Dumont has argued that the patterns found in Hindu India are due to its unique ideology, which values hierarchy based on distinctions of ritual purity and pollution. This notion contrasts with Western ideology, which places a high value on equality and individualism. McKim Marriott has emphasized even more strongly the distinctive nature of the Hindu caste system. In contrast to the Western dualistic understanding of biology and morality, Hindus, according to Marriott, have a monistic concept; there is no clear line between biol-

ogy and morality. The substances that make up the body are inherited from parents. They affect not only one's physical capacities, but shape one's moral capacities. Conversely, the morality of an individual's behavior eventually affects the quality of the substances that make up the body. Both Dumont and Marriott have been criticized for overemphasizing the role and ideas of Brahmins and for neglecting the resistance of lower castes, alternative indigenous ideologies, and the frequent deviation of actual behavior from these largely Brahmanical ideals. Moreover, their theories provide little insight into the changes that are occurring in contemporary India.

Beginning with A. M. Hocart, another scholarly tradition sees those with significant political and economic power (kings, lesser rulers, and dominant castes) as the creators and sustainers of the caste system. Specialized groups of subordinates provide rulers and dominant castes with services, and eventually these groups develop into castes. Kings and local rulers enforce this division of labor and the related status distinctions. An obvious criticism of this theory is that while most agrarian societies have had kings and local rulers, only India developed an elaborate caste system. Gerald Berreman has suggested that castes emerged as tribal and ethnic groups were incorporated into larger state structures. Nicholas Dirks has argued that the extreme elaboration and rigidity of the caste system did not fully emerge until the *pax Britannia* of the early nineteenth century. The colonial regime gave upper castes nearly unqualified control of property and prevented lower castes from using force to resist upper caste domination and ideology. The government census attempted to record officially the ranking of castes, which made the system more rigid than it had been.

Murray Milner, Jr., argues that in traditional India, status was a crucial form of power and, relative to most societies, independent of economic and political power. Hence, castes are best understood as an extreme form of status group. Milner proposes a theory of status relationships based on four characteristics of status. Status is not expandable; hence, if some move up, others must move down; therefore, mobility tends to be restricted. Status is inalienable; property and wealth can be stolen or taken by force, but status is dependent on the opinion of others and cannot simply be appropriated. Hence, once status systems are institutionalized, they are relatively stable; some form of the caste system has existed in India for three thousand years. Status is acquired through conformity to the norms of the group; hence, those with high status tend to elaborate and complicate the norms to make conformity difficult. The extensive norms governing

## ENDING CASTE DISCRIMINATION

The founders of modern India believed that discrimination and the lack of opportunity for many Indians associated with the caste system was a serious hurdle to modernization and political stability. Caste discrimination was banned and "affirmative action" as a remedy was accepted in India's first Constitution, adopted on 26 January 1950.

*Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.*

(1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.

(2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to—

(a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or

(b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing *ghats*, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.

(3) Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children.

(4) Nothing in this Article or in Clause (2) of Article 29 shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.

*Source: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. (1957) India's Constitution. Delhi: The Ministry.*

purity and pollution are an obvious example of this process. Status is acquired through associations: associating with superiors increases your status; associating with inferiors decreases it. This is especially so for intimate associations. Eating and sex are symbols of intimacy in all societies: hence the strong emphasis on dining with and marrying those of similar status. (As the theory suggests, these behaviors are found in other caste-like systems such as aristocracies, racially segregated societies, and adolescent cliques.)

Feminist scholars have elucidated the role of women and gender differences in the understanding and significance of caste and the centrality of gender inequality and male dominance in the caste system. Male dominance may be a necessary but not sufficient condition of the caste system.

### **Caste in Contemporary India**

The Constitution of 1949 outlawed untouchability and government discrimination based on caste. Places in Parliament, universities, and government jobs were specifically reserved for the Scheduled Castes, or former untouchables. In 1990, the government expanded the number of government jobs and university admissions reserved for disadvantaged castes from 22.5 percent to 49 percent. In addition to Scheduled Castes, positions were reserved for Other Backward Classes (OBC), which includes mainly lower- and middle-status Sudra castes. The openings available to upper-caste members were significantly reduced—in a job market where there was already high unemployment. This action led to violent protests in many parts of India and to increased emigration of professional



Villagers view the victims of a massacre in India on 22 April 1999. The low caste villagers were killed by the Ranvir Sena militia in retaliation for the earlier killing of 35 upper caste farmers by Communist rebels. (AFP/CORBIS)

families to developed countries. The reservations program was upheld by the Indian Supreme Court, but it has accentuated the mobilization of castes as political entities.

In 1996, a coalition of parties called the United Front and dominated by OBC gained control of the government of India; the cabinet contained only one Brahman—an indication of the increased influence of lower castes. Political parties dominated by upper castes mobilized in the name of Hindu nationalism (*Hindutva*), and in March 1998 they gained control of the government. The emergence of Hindu nationalism was associated with the sometimes violent persecution of Muslims, Christians, and lower-caste groups. Similar caste-linked political struggles and conflict took place for control of many of the state governments. Hindu nationalist parties and organizations have recruited some lower-caste members into leadership positions. Of course, many factors (in addition to caste) shaped political coalitions and outcomes.

With greater urbanization and industrialization, it has become impractical for people to be overly concerned about who is sitting next to them in public restaurants or factory lunchrooms. Hence, the norms of commensality have been greatly weakened. Even in arranging marriages, wider categories of people are considered appropriate as potential spouses, and increased attention is paid to their education and financial resources rather than to their subcaste. Public statements about the superiority or inferiority of castes are now unusual and considered inappropriate, though in private they are still expressed and taken into account in arranging marriages. Subcaste councils (*panchayats*) have few effective sanctions for deviant members, though more inclusive caste associations (*shabhas*) are increasingly active in pressing the economic and political interests of their members. These changes are occurring in villages too, though their intensity varies by region and caste. Muslims and other minorities are even more likely to reject the legitimacy

or presence of castes within their communities, claiming that it is a Hindu institution. Just as Westerners differ greatly on the meaning of class or race, the very meaning of caste for Indians has become more variable and ambiguous.

Murray Milner, Jr.

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