

Notions of class, status and caste and significant throughout asia

[Countries](#), [India](#)



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Asia is synonymous with one word: exotic. With its temperate climate, architectural wonders, tropical greenery, thriving urban communities, rich history, and a melting pot of ethnic groups, it truly is a gem. There is also one thing that makes Asia stand out- its culture and tradition. The Far East, as Asia is sometimes called, had been colonized by Western powers, such as Americans, Portuguese, British, Spanish, Dutch, and French. This gave rise to a diverse array of cultures, with influences brought by the outsiders interspersing with those of its local inhabitants. One interesting aspect of Asian culture is the caste system/society or social stratification.

Caste is a social classification system bestowed hereditarily (Bogard, et al, 1997). The word traces its roots from the Portuguese word *casta*, a feminine form of *casto*, derived from the Latin *castus*, which means pure (The American Heritage, 2000). India, for instance, is known for its caste society (McNeill, 1990). Dowling (2005) noted that the Aryans, warriors from Central Asia, were responsible for bringing the caste system into India. After defeating the Dravidians of Central India in 15000 BC, the Aryans created some form of social structure (2005). However, McNeill (1990) argued that the caste system started “ long ago”.

He stated, “ About 300 BC, a Greek ambassador to the court of Magadha, named Megasthenes, wrote a book about India in which he described seven hereditary classes into which, he said, Indian society was divided”. The caste system, he remarked, was probably created for members of any group to do things without any hindrance coming from other groups. The caste system allowed group members to “ keep most off their own ways and inner

values, and preserve private family customs, while still spending their lives in close daily contact with all sorts of people” (1990).

Aryans divided the caste system into four- Brahmin, composed of priests, teachers, and judges, Kshatriya or the warriors, Vaisya, consisted of merchants and farmers, and Sudras, or laborers (Dowling, 2005). Below the Sudras were the untouchables or outcastes (2005). The untouchables had the lowest position in the caste system. They were not allowed to enter temples and schools. They were even not allowed to get water from wells were higher castes obtained theirs (2005). Some untouchables converted to other religious denominations such as Islam and Christianity to avoid the plague of being outcastes (2005).

The foundation of the caste system was based on two things- samsara or reincarnation and karma or quality of action (Bogard, et al., 1997). The Brahmins believed that an infant inhabits the soul of another human being or an animal (McNeill, 1990). He explained: Souls that in former lives had gathered a heavy load of karma, then were born into babies of the lowest castes. Those who in former lives had accumulated only a little karma earned the right to be born as Brahmins; and those in-between caste status. Persons who lived well in whatever caste they had been born to could hope for rebirth higher on the scale.

Compliance with the rules may result in reincarnation into higher caste (Bogard, et al., 1997). Women, however, may “ have the privilege of coming back as an animal if they are good enough” (1997).

Other details on the creation of the Indian caste system, however, were not clear. McNeill (1990) noted that the Indian caste system was not just made up of four classes. The Brahmanas did not provide details of the establishment of the caste system. As McNeill noticed, “ In other words, we have here a theory rather than a description of what really existed”

However the case may be, India’s caste system has been deemed “ illegal” (Dowling, 2005, para. 5). It was officially abolished in 1947 (McNeill, 1990). But it is integral to Indian society and has molded India into what it is now (1990). McNeill added that the caste system “ allowed very primitive ideas and magical practices to survive indefinitely”.

But even with its abolition, the caste system still exists in some Indian communities, especially in rural ones (1990). Several measures have been taken up to reduce their effect on people and communities. The Indian government has introduced government privileges to the untouchables, now known as Harijan (2005). However, the Harijan still receive fewer opportunities, educational, and employment-wise.

Another Asian country that has stratified society is Indonesia, specifically the Balinese (Frederick and Worden, 1993). The Balinese reside in the islands of Bali and Lombok and some parts of Sumbawa (1993). The caste system dates back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the time when Javanese princes fled to Bali to avoid the “ advances of Islam” (1993). The Balinese has had, since then, mingled with the locals and asserted an anti-Islamic political perspective (1993).

The Balinese caste system was based on the Indian caste system (“ Social System,” 1998). The three classes were Brahman, Ksatriya, and Wesya. The three made up the Triwangsa, which means “ three peoples” (1998). The Triwangsa was the “ highest three societal stratification” (1998). The classes comprised 10 % of the populace and lived in puri (1998)

According to a Hindu myth (“ Social System,” 1998), Brahman or god, was separated. His mouth developed into the Brahman, his arms became the Ksatriya, his thighs were the Wesya class, and out of his feet borne the Sudra class. The classes are akin to the human being, different parts have different purposes but all need to work together to survive.

Brahman comprised priests, scholars and teachers (“ Social System,” 1998). They also had special privileges in burial rights and were entitled to a “ high level of ritualcommunication” (1998). The Ksatriya was represented by warriors, rajas or princes whereas merchants fell into the Wesya caste (1998). The majority of Balinese, however, belonged to the Shudra class (Frederick and Worden, 1993).

The Shudra or Sudra class consisted of the commoners (“ Social System,” 1998). Unlike their Indian counterpart, the Sudra caste was not considered untouchables (1998). The Sudra served as laborers for the three classes (1998). Since they did not know how to read or write, they depended on the upper classes to “ interpret religious texts and prayers” (1998).

Caste was based on birth (“ Social System,” 1998). Each caste followed certain rules. Caste rules were strictly observed. One rule involved

addressing the Triwangsa caste properly (1998). Another one was the responsibility of each caste member to offer assistance to other castes when needed (1998). Compared to the Indian caste system, the Balinese caste was not that rigid. Frederick and Worden (1993) pointed out that the Balinese caste system “ involves no occupational specializations or ideas about ritual contaminations between ranks” (1993). Marriage between ranks was not forbidden.

Today, the Balinese are caught between adhering to tradition and adapting to change (Frederick and Worden, 1993). They are starting to question the traditions and are caught in the middle of obeying years-old rules or completely junking them in favor of modernization.

If the Balinese are torn between tradition and urbanization, the Philippines have managed to phase out its own version of the caste system.

The Spaniards’ colonization of the Philippines gave birth to the concept of barangay (Cunanan, 1986). The barangay was considered the “ basic political unit” (1986). It consisted of thirty to fifty families. A chief datu, who came from the aristocrat clan called maharlika, led a barangay (1986). The maharlika had servants called “ aliping namamahay or aliping sagigilid” (1986). The aliping namamahay were responsible for building houses, tending the farms of the datu, among other things. On the other hand, the aliping sagigilid were house-bound (1986). They were either taken into forced custody or served as payments for debts (1986).

The barangays were soon integrated into a bigger unit called encomiendas (Cunanan, 1986). An encomienda was “ awarded to the conquistadores and religious orders for their meritorious services in the conquest of the native people” (1986). By 17th century, the encomiendas were completely wiped out in favor of creating provinces (1986).

At present, the Philippines have a modern version of the caste system: the superior-servant or household help type. In Western countries, it is interesting to note that only the rich and privileged have acquired household help. In the Philippines, household help is common, especially in urban communities. These people are employed in houses to tend for the inhabitants’ needs such as cooking their meals, doing laundry, and cleaning the house. Household help are usually those that did not finish school or came from poor families. The majority of them live with the families they tend to, with some slowly being recognized as family members.

For a country known for its homogeneity, Japan, surprisingly, had a caste system (Reischauer, 1988). The outcast group was called burakumin or hamlet people (1988). The burakumin roots back to the feudal era. They were known by different names but were popularly known as burakumin, an abbreviation from a form which means “ people of special hamlets” (1988).

They were no different from other Japanese but what set them apart was their occupation. Reischauer (1988) described them: This group, which accounts for less than 2 percent of the population, probably originated from various sources, such as the vanquished in wars or those whose work was

considered particularly demeaning. Clearly they included people engaged in leatherwork or butchery, since the Buddhist prejudice against the taking of all animal life made others look down of such persons, though, it should be noted, not on the butchers of human life in the feudal society dominated by a military elite.

Since 1871, the burakumin received legal equality but prejudice is still felt. Some Japanese are said to be “reluctant to have contact with them and are careful to check family records to ensure that they avoid intermarriage”. Nowadays, the burakumin are becoming “less recognizable”.

Asia is truly a mix of both worlds. The importance given to class, status, or society stratification is a direct reflection of its history and people. While some may say that social classes cause inequality in society, it has defined rules on how a society or system would work. Bringing discipline and order into society was important in a caste system. It has also fostered unity among class members.

Positive and negative effects are embedded in any social stratification system. But the very same diverse ideas and counterculture are the ones that helped shape Asia into what it is now- a wonderful hodgepodge that is deeply textured.

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