

Good research paper  
on what is the  
foundation and  
purpose of the caste  
system and...

[Economics](#), [Trade](#)



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## **Introduction**

The Caste System is synonymous with Ancient Indians. The system refers to an elaborately stratified social order or hierarchy dating back to 1200 BCE (Sharma, 843). According to historians, the Caste System came into being about 5, 000 years ago when a white race, the Aryans came into India from the North West and conquered the dark colored race that inhabited India at that time (Sharma, 844). The Caste System is also called Varna Vyavastha with the word Varna being a Sanskrit word that means “ color of the skin” (Sharma, 844). As such, it is safe to state that that the Caste System was founded based on skin color and, therefore, on race. Fair skin color is usually preferred over darker skin and so it was even in those days. The Aryans founded the caste system on race, but it soon developed a different basis according to the needs of the feudal Indian society (Rao, 21). It developed into the feudal, occupational division of labor in society. Theoretically, there were only four castes, Brahmas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras (Sinha, 12). However, in reality there were several hundreds, if not thousands of castes. Founders of the Caste System targeted at coming up with a sustainable way of ensuring social order and stability. Although the

Caste System has lately come under intense criticism and faded away, it helped match the Indian society to the feudal occupational division of labor, which created a stable society.

Adherents of the Caste System adhered to a complicated social order.

According to ancient texts called Rigveda, Brahma, the fourhanded deity had a divine manifestation of four groups. The texts states that teachers and priests were cast from his mouth, warriors and rulers from his arms, traders and merchants from his thighs, peasants and workers from his feet (Sharma, 845). Each of these classifications based on work or occupation fell into the four classes, Brahmas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. The Brahmins were the priest and teacher classes. They could study the Vedas (Holy Scriptures), perform rites and rituals for others and themselves and observe the sacraments. They could also invoke the gods on behalf of the people.

The Manu or lawmaker indicates that the Brahmins were a reincarnation of Dharma (cosmic law and order) (Gould, 18). Their work was to show good behavior they were the excellent in the society. They were also entitled to all things on earth because other castes considered them the best. The

Kshatriyas were the warrior class. They protected the people, gave gifts to Brahmins, offered sacrifices to the ancestors and gods, dispensed justice, and studied the Vedas. According to the Manusmriti or the “ laws of Manu”- Hindu law, written in 200 C. E, the Kshatriyas were to abstain from sensual pleasures (Gould, 20). The next class was the Vaishyas. These were the merchant and peasants. The responsibilities of the Vaishyas were to tend to cattle, trade, study the Vedas, cultivate the land, and lend money. The next class was the Shudras of the labor class. Their duty was to serve the other

three castes. The order never required the Shudras to observe the Samskaras or the Vedic rituals (Gould, 21). They could also not study the Vedas or listen to sacred chants. They could also not eat in the company of other castes neither could they marry people from other castes. The lowest of the classes was the Shandalas or the impure ones. They were the “untouchables” who loved magical rites, had gory religious practices, and loved penchant for sacrifices (Kutsenkov, 8). Other castes sidelined this caste so much that the Shandalas could not walk on the same street with the others. Authorities had also banned them from entering the city during daytime, their shadows were considered impure, and seeing them was a bad omen! (Kutsenkov, 8) They lived near graveyards and cremation grounds as butchers, hunters and were the professional cleaners of animal and human waste!

The four classes formed the foundation of the Caste System where one’s ancestors predestined that person and his generations to belong to a certain social class for eternity. Many Indian languages use the term “jati” for the system of hereditary social stratification common in South Asia (Goldman, 41). The term “caste” came from the Portuguese who first visited India in the 16th Century. They encountered what looked to them as race-based social stratification and used the term “Casta” to describe it. “Casta” means race. The local people later changed the name to “caste” (Goldman, 43). The caste system existed until the early 19th century and when civilization came about the system started to fade as people deemed it unfair to predestine someone to a life of poverty and hardship. The world also criticized the system and as Indians began to intermingle with other

nationalities, the influence of castes lessened. Today the system existed very remotely and “untouchability” is a serious crime according to the Indian constitution.

The caste system created order and stability in the society. Religious and political authority enforced the caste rules strictly. Each caste performed its duties in a religious manner. Although the people in the higher castes enjoyed several privileges, the society expected them to be good role models. In order for one to continue as a Brahmin, he had to read the Vedas, lead a pure life and practice the rituals. Failure to do so caused the person to lose respect in the eyes of fellow caste members who would consider him to befit lowly castes such as Shudras or Shandalas (Hinduwebsite. com). The system also required women to assist their husbands to perform the duties of their caste. Failure to observe the caste rules led to purification ceremonies, punishments, and fines. As such, the caste system helped to maintain a disciplined and orderly society that observed rules and regulations very strictly. Although the system has faded, it continues to influence the Indian society by making the people affiliated to each class independent of their castes. The system also ensured that its adherents observe spiritual purity. It governs the various aspects of life such what they wear, what they eat, how they earn a living, who they marry (people must marry people of their caste). The “Shandalas” or the “untouchables” live apart from the other people in restricted, harsh, conditions. Lohia observes that the Shandalas were satisfied that way and did not demand any great recognition (34). People born into a given caste had their fate in life planned out and they just have to fit into the social stratification of their ancestors.

People who followed the caste system respected each other because they knew that they had to be interdependent in order to live harmoniously and happily. The Brahmas (priests and teachers) knew that they would need the traders and merchants (Kshatriyas) for their survival through the purchase of goods that the traders provided. The trader who also owned land needed people to attend to it and as such, the peasants (Shudras) would always come in handy to work for that landowner and others of his class. The people lowly people took it that the gods intended that they serve them in that lowly capacity. The system taught people to respect their class and jobs. They were satisfied with their divine postings and never blamed anyone for what people in the modern world term as misfortune, laziness, or lack of ambition (Lohia, 45). The people were satisfied with their own money, clothes, food, and lifestyle thereby stabilizing their society. The nature of the caste system influenced Indians to avoid social evils such as theft, corruption, murders, trickery, and other related issues. Sharma notes that the people did not bother to try crooked means of acquiring wealth since they would be violating divinity and the rules of the gods if they did so (850). The respect for people's property as well as the contentment that people in all classes had, ensured that none wronged the other deliberately. The avoidance of social evils encouraged the people in all classes to work harder. For instance, the traders and the merchants did business more vigorously while the teacher and the priests taught better and this made sure that people in the lower classes also benefited from more work. This helped to create a unified, stable, and sustainable society.

The social and occupational order created by the caste system helped in the

division of labor. The caste system ensured that the authorities did not struggle to obtain people to do the tough, the dirty, or the difficult jobs. For instance, the “ Shandalas” could do the very dirty and filthy jobs such as handling dead animals, cleaning streets and residential areas as well as other filthy jobs (Sinha, 24). They also ate from broken plates! Though demeaning, the jobs done by the Shandalas ensured that the environment remained clean (Rao, 22). Each caste specialized in its category of jobs and this helped families to perfect their vocational skills from one generation to another. The traits of intelligence abilities, experiences, trade, values, and skills were passed on through generations in a natural way (Goldman, 46). People learnt the secrets of their occupation and solutions to their problems informally. For instance, if one family belonged to the class of the Sundras and they were blacksmiths, their skills in tool making improved tremendously as generations piled on each other. The improvement of skills and competencies in each caste ensured that the society had better labor; work could be done easily and perfectly for the betterment and the stability of the society. The system led to the development of caste-based guilds in the urban areas and labor unions. The people united under a common purpose and provided some sort of social insurance against unfair competition and the unjust exploitation of labor. The unions ensured that their members obtained fair wages for their members, loaned them money and helped the unemployed to find work (Goldman, 46). In addition, they also promoted work ethics and urged their members to deliver high standards of performance at work and in social life. The people in the rural areas who belonged to the same caste also united and developed strong

bonds of friendship, fraternity, and solidarity. They would strengthen the bonds through marriages. As such, the caste system developed strong and stable societies through bonds of brother hood by members of the same caste.

The caste system also ensured the stability of the society through the retention or the continuity of traditions. The Indian society and traditions are some of the oldest and richest in the world thanks to the Caste system. According to Kutsenkov, Indian traditions have survived amidst many competing traditions, foreign invasions, and religions because the caste system remained a central unifying pillar of the people (20). The caste system discouraged people from experimenting with other beliefs and faiths. The teachings of the Vedas that the upper castes read adhered to and propagated kept people within certain boundaries because the people regarded the scriptures as holy and unquestionable instructions from the gods. The majority of people in the ancient Indian society were illiterate they therefore never questioned the laws of Karma or the implications of violating the caste rules (Kutsenkov, 23). They, therefore, followed and maintained their commitment to their traditions. These events created strong and sustainable traditions that people in one generation passed on to the oncoming generations. Although there was great differences between castes the original intention of establishing the caste system was the creation of social order. The system emphasized that all people are products of divinity through a great cosmic sacrifice that arose from the various parts of a human being. The system also regulated the affairs of people to prevent them from acting in manners likely to harm nature, divinity and other people



(Sharma, 860). The preservation of the sacred law also unified people. It made it possible because people were under certain strict guidelines of conduct. All castes regarded God as the protector of the caste system and the social order it brought. Moreover, the caste system ensured that all people were responsible for the avoidance of chaos and unrest, which was imminent due to the intermixture, and the confusion of the castes.

## **Conclusion**

The caste system which is most synonymous with ancient Indians was a hereditary, stratified social order composed of four distinct classes; Brahmas (teachers and priest), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders, merchants and land owners) and the Shudras (peasants and workers). At the very bottom were the outcasts, or the untouchables. The Aryans (a white race) founded the system about 5, 000 years ago in order to maintain social order and stability. Although the system has vanished almost entirely, it used to be a source of great stability for the society. The religious and political authority that backed the caste System ensured that people obeyed, and acted in accordance with the requirements and expectations of their caste. The system also ensured that it detailed small issues such as what people in different castes ate, wore and how they earned their living. The people respected each other because the castes had to be interdependent through occupations. The system also created harmony and contentment, which guided people to keep off social evils such as theft, murders, and corruption. In addition, the system helped in the division and the specialization of labor as families perfected their occupations. All jobs had

people to do them perfectly and even the filthy jobs such as handling dead bodies and cleaning the streets had people to do them. Unity of occupations and class helped to bond people in each class. They developed unions through which they helped each other. In all the system also ensures the retention of traditions and although the people were divided by the social stratification, there was unity of purpose because they all believed that the gods desired them to live the way they did. Though largely discriminatory and unfair, the caste system served to create a stable society in ancient Asia.

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