

An analysis of the hindu caste system



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The caste system is one of the oldest forms of social stratification and even though it may be prohibited by the law, the political divisions continue to exist in the minds of the people leaving many oppressed. Before the caste system, India had four groups or divisions already established: the Negrito, Mongoloid, Austroloid and Dravidian. It was during the Aryan invasion around 1500 BCE when the caste system was created. The word caste derives from the Portuguese word *casta*, meaning breed, race, or kind. In this system, the citizens are divided into categories or castes. *Varna*, the Sanskrit word for color, refers to large divisions that include various castes; the other terms include castes and subdivisions of castes sometimes called subcastes.

Among the Indian terms that are sometimes translated as caste are *jati*, *jat*, *biradri*, and *samaj*. There are thousands of castes and subcastes in India. It follows a basic precept: All men are created unequal. Each category or *jat* has a special role to play in the society as well as a unique function: this structure is a means of creating and organizing an effective society.

The caste system in India is primarily associated with Hinduism but also exists among other Indian religious groups. Castes are ranked and named. Membership is achieved by birth. Castes are also endogamous groups. Marriages and relationships between members of different castes, while not actually prohibited, face strong social disapproval and the threat of ostracism or even violence. To illustrate, in a notorious case in August 2001, a Brahmin boy and a lower-caste girl were publicly hanged by members of their families in Uttar Pradesh, India for refusing to end their inter-caste relationship.

The first of the four basic Vedic books, which are considered the source of Indian wisdom, is the Rig Veda- a collection of over 1, 000 hymns containing the basic mythology of the Aryan gods. The Rig Veda contains one of the most famous sections in ancient Indian literature in which the first man created, Purusa, is sacrificed in order to give rise to the four varnas.

The varna of Brahmans emerged from the mouth. They are the priests and teachers, and look after the intellectual and spiritual needs of the community. They preside over knowledge and education. The varna of Kshatriyas emerged from the arms. Their responsibility is to rule and to protect members of the community. They are associated with rulers and warriors including property owners. The varna of Vaishyas emerged from the thighs. They are the merchants and traders and those who look after commerce and agriculture. The varna of Sudras emerged from the feet. They are the laborers.

Castes or subcastes besides the four mentioned include such groups as the Bhumihar or landowners and the Kayastha or scribes. Some castes arose from very specific occupations, such as the Garudi - snake charmers - or the Sonjhari, who collected gold from river beds.

Each caste is believed by devout Hindus to have its own dharma, or divinely ordained code of proper conduct. Brahmans are usually expected to be nonviolent and spiritual, according to their traditional roles as vegetarian teetotaler priests. Kshatriyas are supposed to be strong, as fighters and rulers should be, with a taste for aggression, eating meat, and drinking alcohol. Vaishyas are stereotyped as adept businessmen, in accord with their

traditional activities in commerce. Shudras are often described by others as tolerably pleasant.

The existence of rigid ranking is supernaturally validated through the idea of rebirth according to a person's karma, the sum of an individual's deeds in this life and in past lives. After death, a person's life is judged by divine forces, and rebirth is assigned in a high or a low place, depending upon what is deserved. This supernatural sanction can never be neglected, because it brings a person to his or her position in the caste hierarchy, relevant to every transaction involving food or drink, speaking, or touching.

The Rig Veda mentions how the four varnas were created but it does not mention the concept of untouchability. "The idea of an Untouchable caste ... is not in the Vedas or the law books, which list only four varnas." It is a part of the system that has been created by society itself.

Untouchables are the fifth group. They are considered unworthy that they fall outside of the caste system. In 1950, the term Untouchable was eradicated under India's constitution, and untouchables are now formally referred to as the Scheduled Castes. Gandhi referred to untouchables as Harijan, which means "people of God". Politically active untouchables feel that this term Harijan might evoke pity rather than respect, and prefer the term Dalits, which means, "oppressed".

Dalits are descendants of the ancient Dravidians of India who lost their language and were subjugated due to the linguistic and socio-cultural oppression by the perpetrators of the caste system. While Dalits in Tamil Nadu speak Tamil, their brethren in other parts of India speak different

Dravidian or tribal dialects or languages that arose due to mixtures of Tamil, Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic, such as Hindustani (Hindi).

As an Indian is born into the caste system, they are supposed to stay with that caste until death. What a person in each of these varnas can and can't do, is prescribed in detail in the laws of Manu, written by Brahman priests at least 2, 000 years ago. The laws of Manu are inscribed in Indian culture.

Umashankar Tripathy, a Brahman priest, says, " Manu is engraved in every Hindu"

Untouchables or Dalits obviously live also by a certain set of rules. The occupations of people in caste systems are hereditary and dalits perform jobs that cause them to be considered impure and thus " untouchable" and for little or no pay at all. They are restricted to occupations such as landless farm workers and peasants, and forced into washing clothes, beating drums, cutting hair, cleaning latrines and sewers, working as a leatherworker (they work with animal skin which makes them unclean), street cleaners, and manual scavengers. Manual scavenging refers to disposal of human waste by hand, using only the most basic tools, typically a brush, a tin plate and a wicker basket. Scavengers also dispose of dead animals. Millions of Dalits work even as slaves. They mostly have no opportunities for better employment.

Dalits live in the most congested and cramped slums in villages, towns and urban areas consisting of huts or ghettos which are damp and cramped. They live in the most insanitary conditions with no access to public health and sanitation amongst open sewers and open air toilets. There are no state

sponsored public housing rights or public health rights in India. Most Dalits are forced to live in isolated areas. Even after death, grave sites are segregated. The best housing is reserved for the upper castes; the government provides separate amenities for each neighborhood, which are segregated on caste lines. Dalits are usually left with the worse of the amenities or none at all. Over 85% of Indian Dalits own no land and are dependent on landlords for work or land to rent; those that do own land may find it difficult or impossible to enforce their rights; workers rarely receive the statutory minimum wage.

Furthermore, in past decades, Dalits in certain areas (especially in parts of the south) had to display extreme deference to high-status people, physically keeping their distance—lest their touch or even their shadow pollute others—wearing neither shoes nor any upper body covering (even for women) in the presence of the upper castes. In northern India for example, untouchables had to use drums to let others know of their arrival. Even their shadows were considered polluted. In the south, some Brahmins ordered Untouchables to keep at least 65 feet away from them.

Untouchables are shunned, insulted, banned from temples and higher caste homes, made to eat and drink from separate utensils in public places. The higher-caste people do not accept food or water from the untouchable because it would transmit the pollution permanent and inherent in the person of the untouchable. Thus, untouchables are not allowed to drink from the same wells, wear shoes in the presence of an upper caste, or drink from the same cups in tea stalls. They are not allowed to touch people from the four varnas or caste groups. They are not allowed to enter houses of the

<https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-the-hindu-caste-system/>

higher varnas especially in which the chula (the small earthen stove) is located. In public occasions, they were compelled to sit at a distance from the four varnas. They are also denied education, freedom of expression, and many other rights the higher classes have.

Dalit children do not have access to education due to the lack of mandatory and universal primary and secondary education in India. Even in rural areas where there may be schools, Dalit children are ostracized, oppressed and stigmatized from attending school. Thus, few Dalit children progress beyond primary education and they are often made to sit at the back of the class. Nearly 90 percent of all the poor Indians and 95 percent of all the illiterate Indians are Dalits, according to the International Dalit Conference. Dalit Children are also subjected to atrocities such as sexual abuse in rural areas, physical abuse and murder just as adult Dalits are. They have a high level of malnutrition and ill health. Some are ordained into temple prostitution as a part of religious rituals for exploitation by non-Dalit men of the village or town.

Dalit women do all the back breaking work society expects Dalits to do, such as manual scavenging, farm labour, stone breaking, etc., and in addition they have to bear domestic responsibilities as mothers and wives. Dalit women suffer double discrimination as Dalits and as women. They are exposed to sexual abuse at the hands of the so called " caste" Hindu men and also men who work or state authorities such as the police. They are frequently raped, gang-raped, beaten and tortured or forced to walk through the streets naked as punishment as an act of reprisal against male relatives who have committed some act worthy of upper-caste vengeance. Atrocities

such as rape of Dalit women in police custody, bonded labour and physical abuse are common in India.

The chastity of women is strongly related to caste status. Generally, the higher ranking the caste, the more sexual control its women are expected to exhibit. Brahman brides should be virginal, faithful to one husband and celibate in widowhood. By contrast, a sweeper bride may or may not be a virgin, extramarital affair may be tolerated, and, if widowed or divorced, the woman is encouraged to remarry. For the higher castes, such control of female sexuality helps ensure purity of lineage—of crucial importance to maintenance of high status. Among Muslims, too, high status is strongly correlated with female chastity.

Many thousands of Dalit girls are forced into “ marriage” to temples or local deities in south India, often before puberty, sometimes in payment of a debt. They are “ married” to temples under the guise of the religious practice Devadasis, meaning “ female servant of god.” They are then unable to marry and become unwilling prostitutes for upper-caste men, many eventually being sold into brothels. The Badi Jat is regarded as a prostitution subcaste. Women and girls are routinely trafficked into brothels. Perversely, and hypocritically, untouchability does not seem to apply to prostitution and customers are mainly men from the upper castes.

If, because of any reason, there was a contact between an untouchable and a member of the Varnas, the Varna member became defiled and had to immerse or wash himself with water to be purified. In strict societies, especially among the ‘ Twice Born’ (the three top Varnas) the touched ‘

Twice Born' also had to pass through some religious ceremonies to purify himself from the pollution. If the untouchable entered a house and touched things of a Varna member, the Varna members used to wash or clean the places where the untouchable touched and stepped. A twice born Hindu is a male member of one of the three upper castes who has completed the thread ceremony. The thread ceremony is a Hindu initiation ceremony, similar to a Christian confirmation or a Jewish Bar Mitzvah. A thread is given to the boy and it is thereafter worn over the left shoulder or around the waist. The thread has three strands, representing the three gunas (qualities): satya (truth); rajas (action); and tamas(inertia). Sudras and Dalits are excluded from the thread ceremony and cannot become twice-born.

Horrific and unbearable are just a few words that come to mind when thinking of the abuse towards Dalits. More than 160 million people in India are considered achuta or untouchable. Human rights violation against these people known as Dalits is extremely prevalent although obviously illegal. Laws have been passed to prevent the abuse of the Dalits and NGO groups have been established to protect these people. However, that doesn't limit the crimes. The enforcement of laws on both local and nationwide scale designed to protect the Dalits is lax if not nonexistent in many regions in India. Often times, especially in rural areas, where the practice of untouchability is the strongest, police officers even join in the abuse of the Dalits.

Nearly 50 years later, another event gave rise to a mass of conversions by the untouchables. A man from their " class" became educated, and then dared to try and watch a festival that the upper class men took part in. The

untouchable was soon discovered and called a “ dirty untouchable” and then killed. When the dead man’s family tried to report the murder to the police, the police turned them away because they were untouchables. Eventually the police gave in and investigated the murder, later convicting a young man, but that did not satisfy the people. They were tired of being treated so poorly, and soon decided to abandon the Hindu religion and chose a new one.

Other headlines about crimes victimizing the Dalits are as follows: “ Dalit boy beaten to death for plucking flowers”; “ Dalit tortured by cops for three days”; Dalit ‘ witch’ paraded naked in Bihar”; “ Dalit killed in lock-up at Kurnool”; “ 7 Dalits burnt alive in caste clash”; “ 5 Dalits lynched in Haryana”; “ Dalit woman gang-raped, paraded naked”; “ Police egged on mob to lynch Dalits.”

Fear of public humiliation, beatings, and rape keep India’s Untouchables in their place. Statistics from India’s National Crime Records Bureau indicate that in 2000 25, 455 crimes were committed against Dalits. Every hour two Dalits were assaulted; every day three Dalit women raped, two Dalits murdered, and two Dalit homes torched. Majority of crimes go unregistered, because the police, village councils, and government officials often support the caste system, which is based on the teachings of Hinduism. Many crimes go unreported due to fear of reprisal, intimidation by police, inability to pay bribes, or simply because people know that the police will do nothing. There will be no punishment for the criminals; no justice for the victimized.

Amnesty estimated that only about 5 percent of attacks are registered

Hundreds of thousands of Dalits have already renounced Hinduism, generally by conversion to Buddhism or Christianity, sometimes in mass ceremonies. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit leader, lawyer, and politician, famously led several hundred thousand Dalits in converting to Buddhism, saying “ I was born a Hindu, but I will not die one”. Conversion is not a panacea, however, and converts to other religions, especially Christianity and Islam, have suffered continued discrimination. Some converts have lost “ reserved” occupations on the grounds that they are no longer members of scheduled castes and converts are not counted as Dalits in the Indian census.

Amidst the oppression and hardships, Dalits still have social life which is expressed through dance and music. Their dance and music are full of fiery spirit, spontaneity and humour without the inhibitions and rigid classical structure that characterizes Hindu music and arts. Dalit songs celebrate life but lament their life conditions, while frankly exposing the realities of life, in a style full of humour and sensual zest, by using simple instruments and vocals. In modern times, Dalit poetry and writing by social and political activists have taken centre-stage amongst the educated activist community.

Despite the harsh treatment that the untouchables are receiving, there have been certain attempts to help them. The elimination of untouchability became one of the main planks of the platform of all social reform movements of India. Reform movements and humanitarian acts such as those started by Buddha, Ramanuja, Ramanand, Chaitanya, Kabir, Nanak, Tukaram and others were established but they hardly had any effect on the people’s treatment of the untouchables. The Hindu state also enacted laws

to punish those who rebelled against their intolerable conditions. The social oppression of the untouchables had religious sanctions.

The British listed the poorest (principally Dalit) subcastes in 1935, creating detailed lists of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The 1948 Indian constitution, thanks to its architect Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, reinforced this classification, for a system of affirmative action called reservation. The concept was that these measures would help the poorest to escape poverty and oppression.

Reservation is an attempt by the Indian national government to redress past discrimination. The constitution reserves 22.5% of national government jobs, state legislature seats, seats in the lower house of the national parliament and higher education places for members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Unfortunately, this policy has not been implemented in full. Less than half the national government quota had been filled in total in 1998 and less than 15% of "reserved" public sector jobs. An unspoken policy discriminates in favor of upper castes, particularly Brahmins. Dalit representation in university teaching posts is less than 1%.

New economic forces, education and nationalist movements had different impacts on the treatment of the people on untouchables. Because of new economic forces, railways and buses were introduced, thus, bringing touchables and untouchables together. Modern industries established in India recruited their labor supply and labor market from both touchables and untouchables, who further worked at the machines in physical proximity to one another. The workers also fought together during labor strikes. Because

of education, whether liberal or technical, their economic conditions somewhat improved and different sections following different occupations began to merge, on class basis, with groups of other castes following similar occupations. The new bonds were based not on caste but on common occupation and class. This very slowly began to dissolve the mass of the untouchables into groups such as factory workers, teachers, clerks, merchants, mechanics, or manufacturers. New economic bonds between the touchables and untouchables following the same economic activity started weakening the prejudice of untouchability. Finally, nationalist movements also contributed to the benefits received by the untouchables. For example, the Swaraj struggle demanded the democratic alliance of all castes and communities in India whose vital interests lay in the political independence of the country. The nationalist movement contributed towards the dissolution of old distinctions. The social reformers were moved by humanitarian and national considerations when they crusaded against purely social evils.

The Untouchables is a topic that touches on many sensitive issues relevant to every society; not only to the Indian society. One prevalent issue that the Untouchables have driven out is that of being an outcast. Perhaps many of us, if not all, can relate to the feeling of being unable to belong and just longing to fit in. Perhaps in high school, we tried out many roles and sought the group we most felt at home in. For the Dalits, life is high school taken to the worse extremes. From birth, they are ostracized. They are placed outside of society; and seen as less than human. They are given roles that they must play, and follow a certain set of rules for the rest of their lives, or suffer the consequences. In our society, to be treated as an outcast in this manner is

simply unimaginable. It would seem as though one would go through life apart from society; apart from people. It would be as though one isn't a person at all; that one would be less than a person; less than even an animal.

This sense of inequality was seen many times over history, in many different societies, and many are still relevant in today's society. Divisions were brought about by differences in gender, creed, and race, to name a few. Wars have been waged; rallies have been set into motion; and lives have been lost, with regard to all these issues. With all that has happened in our world's history, India's society learned nothing to deter from inequalities problems. The Dalits are maltreated and discriminated against. The maltreatment for Dalit women are even harder hit. Their people experience the never-ending cycle of poverty.

The caste system was built and based on the idea that each caste or jat has a special role to play in the society but shouldn't an individual have the right to choose what role he/she will play in the society? Is the caste system the best way to achieve an organized and effective society? It is understandable that breaking away from the caste system would be difficult or something very hard to get used to. India has lived through all these years with the mentality that all men are unequal and there will always be untouchables or Dalits. It has become a part of their lives and is embedded in them.

There is very little pressure for change, especially within India: it is said that the majority has an interest in perpetuating caste discrimination. Protests by Dalits themselves are rare: for many Dalits, day-to-day survival may be a

higher priority. To quote Human Rights Watch: “ The solution lies in concerted international attention to assist national governments in this important and long overdue work.”

If you take a look at our society, even without the caste system, you will see that this never-ending cycle of poverty is also a major problem in the Philippines, and one question still stands, that is, “ How can one break free from poverty?” Poverty is a problem, because those experiencing it, the poor, are marginalized. They can barely afford or sometimes cannot afford basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. Yes, in India, as well as the Philippines, there have been programs, laws to aid and support these people. However, it is in the implementation of these laws that fail to solve the problem.

For most Western people, the single action that has the best chance of making a difference would be to raise awareness of the problem, repeatedly bringing it to the attention of individuals, politicians, media, diplomats and above all the Indian government. The lack of will to change and unity among people (in India, as well as the Philippines) is one important problem in breaking away from poverty and making a change. Therefore, the caste system or these political divisions continue to live in the minds of many, leaving millions of untouchables or Dalits trapped in a world of oppression and poverty.

Change is something much called for in the Indian society, in our society, and in many others around our world today. We can study the oppressive Dalit cases time and time again. We can feel disgusted, depressed, and

down reading about them, and we can wonder, “ can their lives ever change?” It isn’t enough to read and wonder, in order for change, action is a must. In retrospect, there isn’t much radical action one can take for the Dalits when still in second year college in the Philippines. However, we believe there is much we can do in the future, for our society, as well as others. In the words of Mahatma Ghandi, “ be the change you want to see in the world”.