

# History of the Indian Caste, Religion and Ethnicity: A Historical Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The caste system divides Hindus into four main categories - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. India's caste system is the world's one of the longest existing perpendicular social hierarchies. Caste identity appears the basis of civilization, tradition and customs in Indian politics. The caste system is underpinned by values of ritual purity and impurity. The paper highlights a diverse and complex mixture of different religions, cultures, tradition, rituals, ethnic groups, and social classes. The caste system in India has deep historical roots, with its origins tracing back over 2,000 years. Indian society stressed on cultural and religious pursuits for their livelihood. The origin of religious conflicts in India is often ascribed to the advent of Muslims to this country.

**Keywords:** History, Caste, Society, System, Hindus, Varna, Kashtriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras

## INTRODUCTION

Its roots are ancient India, but the system was transformed by various ruling elites in medieval, early-modern, and modern India. It is a social hierarchy passed down through families, and it can dictate the professions a person can work in as well as aspects of their social lives, including whom they can marry. These four castes are the Brahmins (priests, teachers), Kshatriyas (rulers, warriors), Vaishyas (landowners, merchants) and Sudras (servants), and the 5th group is the group of the untouchables, called Dalits. One of the Hinduism's holy books, the Srimad Bhagavatam has a part. It includes a multifaceted order of social groups on the basis of descent.

To be a nation state, political sovereignty is not enough for a society, especially for a pluralist one. The plural societies of our times are multilingual, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-casteistic. A nation-state has to accept not only the diversities, it also has to promote and strengthen them, it has to be a 'unity in diversity'. India presents a society which is, indeed plural in almost every aspect of the term. The challenges of a pluralist society like those in our system are numerous. They are so real that they play significant role in our social and political life; they affect our society and our society and our politics. In turn, they are influenced by our politics and help raise certain movements of social nature.

Caste in Indian Politics: Caste, according to Risley, is "a collection of families bearing a common name, claiming a mon descent from a mythical ancestor, divine or human, and professing to follow the same hereditary calling and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community" (Sathaye, Adheesh 2015: 198) We may thus, describe caste as localized group having a traditional association, based on one's birth in a caste, though at times, associated with particular occupation.

The caste groups have their respective rules governing their behavior and attitudes. G.S Gharye sums up the features of the caste system as "segmental division of society, hierarchy, restrictions of feeding and social intercourse, civil and religious disparities and social discourse, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and restrictions on marriage" (Basham, Arthur 1997: 19) Caste groups divided the society hierarchically into numerous segments having their own respective rules which govern their behaviour, customs and rituals. Caste group are rigid in the sense that once born in a caste a person remains in the caste throughout his life, though women adopt the caste of their husbands. They divide the people socially; higher caste people enjoy higher status and have better entitlements than those born in lower caste. The Indian Society is a casteist society.

"The caste system in India is the paradigmatic ethnographic instance of social classification based on castes. It has its origins in ancient India, and was transformed by various ruling elites in medieval, early-modern, and modern India, especially the Mughal Empire and the British Raj" (Bayly, Susan 2001: 67) It is today the basis of affirmative action programmes in India as enforced through its constitution. The caste system consists of two different concepts, varna and

jati, which may be regarded as different levels of analysis of this system. “The caste system as it exists today is thought to be the result of developments during the collapse of the Mughal era and the rise of the British colonial government in India. The British Raj furthered this development, making rigid caste organisation a central mechanism of administration” (Gupta, Dipankar 2000: 59)

The caste system in India presents a stratified social hierarchy which alone distinguishes us from any other society. Its history goes back to the times as far as 1200 BC. The term caste is derived from the Portuguese caste meaning breed, race or kind. We, in India, relate caste to varna, jati, jat, birdri, and samaj. The Indian caste system has its origin in the Varna System. The four basic Varna, usually described are 1) the varna of Brahmas, the priestly and the learned class; 2) the varna of Kashatriyas, the ruling and the worrier; 3) the varna of Vaish, the commercial and the trading class; and 4) the varna of shudra, the class of servile labours.

Each varna is described as having been created by god and with specific function. Brahmans or priest, for example, were created from the mouth of the God and were to provide for the intellectual and spiritual needs of the community. The Kashatriyas, i.e, the rulers and worriers, were created from the arms, and their job was to rule and protect others. The Vaishs, i.e., the traders and landowners, sprang from the high and they were to take care of trade and agriculture. The Shudras, i.e., the savants and the labourers, came from the feet and their task was to perform manual labour.

The varnas are further classified into castes and sub-caste, rigidity and socially arranged in such a way that each group is a world of its own. The Indian society is a caste society, a multi-casteist society. Though, the caste system is primarily associated with Hinduism, it exist, the jains, the others religious groups as well as. Among the Muslim, the Christians, the Buddhist, the Jains , the Sikhs, caste like group exist clearly. Caste considerations are acknowledged and maintained from birth to death; hierarchical distinctions both horizontally and vertically, prevail in the Indian Society. Politically democratic India has a socially diversified base.

The caste system works both ways: it divides when one caste works against the other; it mobilizes when it unites the people belonging to the same caste. The English, in the colonial period used divisive tendencies of the Indian society and kept the India Under their rule, they had explored the diversities to their imperialistic designs, caste disintegrations including. The traditionalists, during the era of the national liberation movement, such as Tilak, Vivekanand, and Gandhi, sought social reforms in the Indian casteist society, men like Jawaharlal Nehru, on the other hand, regarded the caste system in India as an evil – as the main source of Indian social and moral degeneration, while like Ramaswami Nicker and Dr Ambedkar, condemned the caste system as it prevailed in the society.

After independence, the caste, with introduction of the electoral politics, had a new role for itself. Moin Shakir is of the opinion that the caste has a dual role in post- independence era, positive in democratizing the system, and negative, in hampering the rise of evolutionary class organizations. Caste helps in the mobilization of the people. Rudolph and Rudolph refers to three types of mobilization 1) vertical in marshalling the political support of traditional notables in local societies which are organized and ranked; 2) horizontal in marshalling the political support by class or community leaders and their specialized organizations; differential in marshalling the direct or indirect political support by political parties through appeal to ideology, sentiments and interest. In both rural and urban India, the caste has been the instrument of mobilization, a channel of communication, representation and leadership which links the electorate to the democratic process.

Caste, in the Indian electoral context, has become important, especially the lower caste votes gaining significance during elections. Leaders of all the political parties agree that the crucial Dalit votes make and unmake their fortune because of their number. The formation of Dalit Political Parties, from Republic Party of India (1956) to that of the Bahujan Samaj Party (1982), shows the emerging strength of the dalit vote. This is true about other castes as well. Exercising franchise on the basis of caste is a normal process of voting in India. Caste has become a source of mobilizing votes. Vote banks are created through religious, linguistic, regional and above all caste appeals, polarizing people into one caste group or the other. Example of such polarization are , for instances Brahmins versus non- Brahmin in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, Rajput versus Jat in Rajasthan, Baniya- Brahmins versus Patidars in Gujarat, Kayasthas vrsus Rajput in Bihar, Kammas versus Reddi in Andra Pradesh, and Nairs versus Ezhavas in Kerla , Lingayat Versus Vakkaliga in Karnataka . Such polarization keeps emerging with different combinations from time to time in one region or other.

Kothari states that it is not politics that gets caste ridden; it is caste that gets politicized. Caste is not a factor in political mobilization of the voters; it has become a factor in political leadership, both at the party and government levels. Referring to caste as getting politicized, Kothari writes “This is so because the operation of competitive politics has drown caste out of it’s a political context, and given it a new status and identity such that the caste system; as hitherto known, has begun to

disintegrate. Such things as respective numerical strengths of different castes, choice of candidates, factions within castes and economic ties between the castes are calculated as variables in the situation .....another variable in politics along and with many other variables” (Ketkar, Shridhar Venkatesh 1999: 39) caste, despite all efforts at legal and constitutional equality, remains and would always remain an important arbiter in contemporary India Politics. The Post- Mandal era clearly indicates that other backward classes (OBCs), in addition to the Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes, have a definite role to play in India.

## **CONCLUSION**

The caste system in India is a system of social stratification, social constraint and a basis for assenting action in India. While the caste system originally was for Hindus, nearly all Indians today identify with a caste, regardless of their religion. While caste determines social status and occupation based on birth, religion revolves around personal beliefs, practices, and spirituality. Understanding these differences helps us appreciate the complexities of social systems and individual identities. The caste system, as it actually works in India is called jati. The term jati appears in almost all Indian languages and is related to the idea of lineage or kinship group.

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