

## Indian Caste System: Then and Now

Unlike what is stated in the Declaration of Independence, “all men are created equal,” the caste system in India is based on the belief that not all men are created equal. A caste system in Hinduism is a social hierarchy that is determined at birth and cannot be changed or challenged. Each person is born into the caste that they will remain in for the rest of their life and their children will be in that caste as well, and so on. The caste system is one of the world’s longest surviving social structures, as it has been around for about 1,500 years, determining the fates and lives of all who practice Hinduism.

Once one has entered into the caste system, they are forced to remain there forever. They are only allowed to marry, eat, live with and work with people who are in their own level. In the past, this system was incredibly strict and there were no exceptions to the rules of the caste. Now, the system has evolved, but many of the rules and structures remain the same.

The way castes are determined is through the body parts of a primordial being named Brahama. From the Brahama come four different levels, or varnas. Within those four levels are hundreds of sublevels and sub-castes. Each of these levels is assigned a title along with many associated beliefs and practices. For example, certain castes are known to be vegetarians, while others are far stricter in the protection of animals and are named the protectors (O’Neill, Untouchables). However, recently, many of the people within the castes have abandoned their original crafts to take up new jobs and practices (Sankaran, New York Times). The four levels are the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras. There is a fifth level, Achuta, however they are so low the primordial being does not claim them (O’Neill, Untouchables).

The Brahmins are the highest caste and they are said to come from the mouth of the primordial being. People who are in this caste were historically priests and teachers (O’Neill, Untouchables). Most people in this caste are highly educated, as they are the highest caste. Even the women were allowed to get a good education. While women are allowed to have an education, they are still considered to be second to men, but higher than the women in other castes. Women in this caste most often do not work, but they play a large role in rituals. Only people who are in the Brahmin level are allowed to be priests. Since this caste is the highest, its members are most often the most educated, intelligent, prosperous and influential (PG India, People Groups India).

Brahmins only comprise about 5 to 9 percent of the Indian population, but they control 78 percent of India’s judicial posts, which is nearly half the parliament (Gospel for Asia).

More recently, Brahmins have strayed away from their traditional roles of teachers and priests. Now only about 1/5<sup>th</sup> of Brahmins are priests. They have mainly transitioned to roles of landowners or government officials. Other professions that they undertake include magistrates, clerks of public officials, doctors and engineers (Singh, 186).

The next grouping is called Kshatriyas. They come from the arms of the primordial being and are classified as rulers and soldiers (O’Neill, Untouchables). Similarly to the other groups, Kshatriyas do not marry outside of their caste. Most often, they have arranged marriages. As with many cultures, only the sons can inherit ancestral property. Women are left

to be in charge of the housework, but still play a large role in rituals (PG India, People Groups India).

The roles of the Kshatriyas have evolved similarly to the Brahmins. Rather than being rulers and soldiers, they are now more often businessmen and doctors (PG India, People Groups India). They have also been known as government officials, police, landowners and ruling chiefs. As they are the second highest class, they are still highly thought of in the hierarchical system (Singh, 186).

Vaiśyas are the next level and come from the thighs of the primordial being. The Vaiśyas are known as merchants and traders (O'Neill, Untouchables). This caste of people are known as commoners, but they are not servants. They believe that all people have a skill, a trade or a profession. They also believe that they have a duty to give food to all creatures, as they were said to have been given this duty at their creation. In the Bhagavad Gita, they were assigned the duty to take care of the cows; because of this they are often vegetarians (Hockings, Encyclopedia).

Modern Vaiśyas practice business and agriculture. To ensure they fulfill their roles as cow protectors, they practice environmentally sound agriculture to protect their environment (Hockings, Encyclopedia).

Sudras are the lowest caste claimed by the primordial being. They are said to come from the feet and are the laborers (O'Neill, Untouchables). Their role is to serve the three higher-ranking varnas. While they are normally allowed to enter all Hindu temples, they are not allowed to wear sacred thread (Hockings, Encyclopedia).

Now, Sudras are commonly self-employed farmers, but they also have jobs in most parts of the world. There are nearly several hundred million of them and they work throughout jobs in the country (Hockings, Encyclopedia).

The Achuta, also known as the Untouchables, are so low that the primordial being will not claim them. They are shunned by all the other castes and are considered outcasts. They cannot wear sacred thread and are banned from temples and the homes of other caste members. They are believed to be too impure to enter normal society. They are required to take part in horrible tasks dealing with pollution and diseases. Because of these duties, contact is prohibited between them and other castes (O'Neill, Untouchables).

Still today, Untouchables are required to perform jobs that are considered nasty and distasteful. Most often, they are in charge of cleaning up waste, whether in private homes or from large septic tanks. In extreme cases, the Dalits are required to clean the waste with their hands, which has become a large legal dispute. The way the Untouchables are being treated has been equated to slavery. Not only are they forced to work in unhygienic and revolting circumstances, but they are still forced to face threats of violence and eviction and overall discrimination. In order for any improvement to be made, the government needs to put strict laws in place so the discrimination will hopefully end. While some progress has been made so that the Untouchables are receiving better treatment, they are still, in many cases, being mistreated. A manual scavenger in the Untouchable class, Sona, vividly recounts the horrors she was forced to face in one of the jobs she worked at: "The first day when I was cleaning the latrines and drain, my foot slipped and my leg sank in the excrement up to my calf, I screamed and ran away. Then I came home and cried and cried. I knew there was only this work for me." This story brings to life with vivid details the horrible challenges that the people in the Untouchable class are forced to live with. It affects them personally and professionally. They

are forced to suffer these experiences and they know there is no way to escape them because they have been born into a class that they cannot escape (Campbell, Time).

More than 160 million people in India are considered to be Untouchables. At the International Dalit Conference that took place in 2003, statistics were uncovered that claim that around 90 percent of all poor Indians and 95 percent of illiterate Indians are Dalits. This shows that even though the caste system is theoretically a system of the past, there is still extreme discrimination against the lower castes (Mayell, National Geographic News). The average literacy rate of Dalits is only 37 percent, but in some areas it can be as low as 10 percent (Gospel for Asia).

A Dalit activist, B.R. Ambedkar, says, “Caste is a state of mind. It is a disease of mind. The teachings of the Hindu religion are the root cause of this disease. We practice casteism and we observe Untouchability because we are enjoined to do so by the Hindu religion. A bitter thing cannot be made sweet. The taste of anything can be changed. But poison cannot be changed into nectar” (Gospel for Asia). This goes to show that while the Indian government attempts to improve the lives of the Dalits, it is really an imposing task.

The segregation between the Untouchables and other castes is similar to how segregation used to be in the United States. Without doing anything other than being born into a lower social level, the Untouchables are shunned and treated harshly, which is similar to how African Americans used to be treated after slavery ended. Achuta are required to eat and drink in areas that are separated from the other castes. There have also been extreme cases where they would be raped, burned, lynched and gunned down, which are some of the horrific scenarios African Americans faced in the past (O’Neill, Untouchables).

The caste system has had a tremendous impact on India for thousands of years. Its importance was prominently emphasized in the Bhagavad Gita which is from around 200 BCE-200 CE. Knowing that the system was so important in the Bhagavad Gita helps scientists attempt to uncover how long it has been in place, as there is no definitive date that it began.

While there are theories as to how the caste system was started, there is no definite answer. One theory says that Aryans from central Asia invaded southern Asia where local populations already inhabited. It was said that the Aryans then created this hierarchical system in order to control the local populations. They defined key roles and dictated who would be assigned to each of these. Within this theory, there was no social mobility. However, 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship has completely disproved this theory and historians are not fully sure if there was an Aryan population at all. The only thing that scholars know for sure is that the caste system has been around for many eras and up until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it had not changed much (USHistory.org).

Swami Vivekananda, an Indian Hindu monk in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, knew that the caste system was an incredibly devastating social hierarchy. He knew that they needed to move away from the system, but it would be a complicated task. He did not want to try to solve the problem by taking away power from the higher castes, but to help progress the lower castes. He said, “Modern caste distinction is a barrier to India’s progress. It narrows, restricts, separates. It will crumble before the advance of ideas” (Swami Vivekananda quotes).

While the caste system is not fully extinct, there have been some changes made. Officially, the Indian government has completely outlawed the system, but that has not stopped it from remaining an important part of some culture.

There are people who are hoping to eliminate the caste system completely. In the early 1900's, Mohandas Gandhi, an Indian nationalist, helped loosen some of the structure to allow cross-caste contact.

One of the major changes that happened in 1949, as a result of Gandhi's efforts before his assassination, was releasing some of the stigma associated with being a member of the Untouchables caste. The government changed their name to Harijans, which means "people of God." Gandhi forced this change in hopes of stopping some of the shunning. People in this group strived to receive equality. At this time, the Indian constitution had the legal framework to emancipate all the Untouchables. More recently, the Untouchables renamed themselves as Dalits, which means "those who have been broken," and are a politically active group (USHistory.org).

Another big change that is happening in modern day India is job inheritance is less structured and forced as it was in the past. In the past, whatever occupation you were born into was undoubtedly the one you would do, but this is not as much the case anymore. This shows that, in a way, the caste system is depleting because you are not necessarily forced to remain in a low paying or poorly thought of job if you have the credentials to escape them (Vaid, Caste in Contemporary India).

While the term "caste" is used less often, it is still a relatively prevalent concept. The distinction is most commonly seen in marriage and politics (Sankaran, Caste is Not Past). In a recently conducted survey, 95% of the female respondents reported marrying within their own caste, which proves the caste system is still important in defining social structure (Desai & Dubey, 12).

Today, caste has become similar to the racism and segregation that once plagued America. Each caste is seen to have its own stereotype, for example, the Vaisyas caste is known for being good at finance, Brahmins are known for doing math and music and Kshatriyas fight the hardest (Sankaran, Caste is Not Past).

There are other groups that are hoping to make a difference in ending the horrors that the Untouchables have to face. Ashif Shaikh, founder of Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan, a grassroots campaign to end manual scavenging, is one of the people who strongly believes there needs to be an end to the injustice. He says, "The manual carrying of human feces is not a form of employment, but an injustice akin to slavery. It is one of the most prominent forms of discrimination against Dalits, and it is central to the violation of their human rights." This prejudice that the Untouchables are forced with violates them in so many ways. There needs to be an end to all this mistreatment.

In hopes of eliminating the caste system and the stigmas associated with being a member of the lower varnas, the government set job and education quotas for them, hoping to assure that they are included and not ostracized. While that seems like a positive change, there has been quite a bit of contradicting data. Some members of higher varnas believe this change is unfair because it reserves too many spots for the Dalits in colleges that the other classes are unable to enter, thus preventing them from receiving a higher education. Other people say that even though these quotas are in place, most of the high paying jobs still go to the top three castes, leaving the lower levels to be forced into underpaying jobs relegating them to remain in poverty (Sankaran, Caste is Not Past).

While the caste system is not as intense and structured as it was in the past, it is still prevalent, especially in social structures. Members are not fully freed from the judgment that comes with their particular caste. Members of the newly named Dalits are still forced to face

negative judgments as that is the system and stigma that was in place for so many years. This system has become far less structured, but it can still be a negative experience for the people in the lower castes, which is similar to segregation in America. It will be very interesting to see if it is obvious to tell what caste people are in or if it has become more of a subtle distinction.

## Inquiry in India

Caste is a social structure, thus, knowing a person's caste will be a difficult distinction. It is one thing to study the caste system countrywide, but I think it will be extremely interesting to be in specific areas and be able to see the impact of the social structure up close and in different socioeconomic contexts.

Given that castes are a social structure not a physical structure, it will be very interesting to see if there is any visible distinction between the levels while we are in India. I'm sure that if one were to go up and ask someone what varnas they are considered, they would be willing to answer, but I am not sure that there will be any way to tell without having to ask.

The one caste that may be easily distinguishable would be the Dalits. If they are truly still treated as they were in the past, there is a chance that in extreme cases you could notice they are a member of this group by the fact that they are not permitted in certain areas. Historically, the Untouchables were not allowed in the homes of people from other castes nor were they allowed in Hindu temples or sacred spaces. If the social constraints of caste have truly not changed significantly, members of the Dalits will still be treated poorly and not permitted to enter sacred spaces.

I think it would be incredibly interesting to have a conversation with a local about the caste system. While there has been much research about it, I think it would be a completely new experience to learn about the caste system and the implications of it from someone who has truly lived through it and hearing about it firsthand would be interesting. Not only could I learn about their personal experience, I would be able to ask them if they see any obvious examples of discrimination between the different varnas.

Before talking to a stranger, I think talking to our tour guide would be a good place to start. He would be able to hopefully discuss any vestiges of the social structure and give me some insights into how the structure has evolved and whether or not it has fully disappeared.

I will also be interested to see if the prevalence of the caste system varies by region. For example, are the distinctions more noticeable in the urban centers than in rural settings, and if so, why? In particular, it will be interesting to talk to the students we meet in Kerala to see how the caste system influences their worldview. They tend to be low on the socio-economic scale, yet are also higher educated. Do they see education as a way to break through the pre-determined caste levels, or is the caste system not a factor for them at all? I will also try to understand differences that are perceived by age and by gender.

I would also like to know if they have an experience in seeing if their parents have tried to break free from their destined caste level. Whether it be for themselves or if they are hoping to be able to improve their children's lives by getting ahead so they can get better jobs in the future. It would also be interesting to look into whether or not the students have any experience with people they know trying to move to different countries, perhaps America, to hopefully have a new and improved life.

If I do talk to people and they tell me that the caste system truly is no longer very prevalent and they do not see it in their everyday lives, I would investigate what they know about the system that their ancestors faced in the past. Even if the system is no longer in existence, I am sure some people would have heard stories from their family about how the system affected them and prevented them from marrying someone they loved or from getting a job they were interested in.

## Bibliography

"Dalits and the Caste System." *The Caste System*. Gospel for Asia, n.d. Web. 23 Dec. 2015.  
This source provides a lot of facts and statistics about the caste system, specifically numbers related to the Untouchables group. I want to use this to provide credibility and actual statistic to my paper to show the actual impact of the caste system and how many people have been affected by being born into the untouchable group.

"Swami Vivekananda Quotes." *Swami Vivekananda's Quotes On Caste And Casteism* ~. N.p., 28 Apr. 2014. Web. 23 Dec. 2015.

This website has quotes from Swami Vivekananda, who was a monk in Indian Hinduism. He was influential in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and believes in the deconstructive power of the social hierarchy. I want to use this site to get quotes from Vivekananda to help give my paper life and credibility.

Campell, Charlie. "India's 'Untouchables' Still Forced to Collect Human Waste." *Time*. Time, 25 Aug. 2014. Web. 23 Dec. 2015.

This website is an article that details the horrors that people in the untouchable level are still being forced to face. They are still in charge of the gross, polluted jobs and still face horrible discrimination. I want to use this site to help show that even though the caste system has technically been outlawed, it is still very prevalent and devastating.

Desai, Sonalde, and Amaresh Dubey. "Caste in 21st Century India: Competing Narratives." *Economic and Political Weekly*. U.S. National Library of Medicine, Mar. 2012. Web. 03 Nov. 2015.

This journal article focuses on the implications of caste in modern day India. It does research to hopefully discover whether or not the social status you are born into affects you for the rest of your life. With members of the lower class being able to participate in politics, the question arises whether or not the caste is still as viable as it was in the past. I want to use this article for the section of my paper where I will investigate how much, or if at all, the caste system is present in India today.

Hockings, Paul. "Sudra." *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*. 1996. *Encyclopedia.com*. 10 Nov. 2015

This source goes into more detail and context of what each group believes. It discusses each group's specific ideals and traditions and what they are required to do or not allowed to do. I want to use this site to help understand the roles of each group and how they are still in act today.

Mayell, Hillary. "India's 'Untouchables' Face Violence, Discrimination." *National Geographic*. National Geographic Society, 02 June 2003. Web. 23 Dec. 2015.

This is another website that discusses the horrors and struggles the untouchable class is forced to face. There are statistics and facts about the way they are treated. I want to use this source to show that the Untouchables are still treated badly.

O'Neill, Tom. "Untouchables." *Untouchable*. National Geographic, n.d. Web. 03 Nov. 2015.

This is a brief overview of an article from National Geographic. It gives a quick explanation of the caste system and the different levels that are in it. There are the Brahmins (priests and teachers), the Kshatriyas (rulers and soldiers), the Vaisyas (merchants and traders), the Sudras (laborers) and the Achuta (Untouchables). I will use this overview to start the descriptions of each layer and more specifically what it is like to be an untouchable.

PG India. "Brahmin - People Groups of India." *People Groups of India*. N.p., 2015. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

This site goes more into depth about each caste. It discusses what their jobs and roles were and some of what their customs were. I want to use this site to further my understanding of the caste levels and what each level's role is in society.

Sankaran, Lavanya. "Caste Is Not Past." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 15 June 2013. Web. 03 Nov. 2015.

This article is an article written by an Indian woman who has experienced the caste system for what it is in today's society. She goes into talking about the lack of clear information that is available about how prevalent the caste system remains today. I want to use this to further my knowledge of the caste system today and how it is not fully clear how prevalent it is.

Singh, Ekta. "Caste System in India: A Historical Perspective." (2003): n. pag. Bundelkhand University. Web. 3 Nov. 2015.

This journal article discusses the caste system in India and how it is one of the most defining and ridged social structures in the world. It also discusses the difference between caste and religions and the implications of the caste system of all the members. This journal goes a lot into what the caste system is and how it works. It also discusses the religious aspects of the caste, but this is different than saying that caste is religious. I want to use this journal to help me further my understanding of what the caste system is and how its implications have affected people throughout the years.

USHistory.org. "The Caste System." *Ushistory.org*. Independence Hall Association, n.d. Web. 03 Nov. 2015.

This website goes into the details about what the caste system is and how it affects the different levels of the group. It also discusses the history of the caste system and a theory that, while it was disproved, was thought to have started the caste system. It also talks about how the caste system is in place today. I want to use this source to get more information about the caste system in India in the more recent times. I will also use it to discuss a theory of how the system was put in place, even though it was proven to be untrue.

Vaid, Divya. "Caste in Contemporary India: Flexibility and Persistence." *Annual Review of Sociology* 40 (2014): n. pag. *Annual Reviews*. Web of Science, July 2014. Web. 3 Nov. 2015.

This journal focuses on the implications in the caste system today, but also how it has changed over time. One thing that this article highlights is how the occupational inheritance is not as prominent, which shows that India is moving away from the caste system in a sense. In the past, whatever occupation you were born into was undoubtedly the one you would do, but this is not



as much the case anymore. I will use this article to investigate the transition from the strict caste system of the past to then discover how present the caste system remains in India today.