

INDIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE – Postclassical Period

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Overview India's caste system is rightly seen as a distinctive feature of its society and culture. It can be defined as the hierarchical segmentation of society into groups whose membership is 1) determined by birth; 2) is permanent; 3) determines occupation; and 4) requires endogamy (marrying inside). The system of four overarching categories or *varnas* (Brahmin/priest, ksatriya/warrior, vaisya/merchant and sudra/servant) is both very ancient (described in the Vedas c. 1200 BCE) and extremely powerful even today. A fifth category of Untouchable/Harijan/Dalit emerged after the ancient period, probably toward the end of the first millennium BCE. The crucial group, however, is not one's *varna* but one's *jati*, or 'birth-group', which is what people refer to when they speak of a caste. Despite the rigidity of this system, it has built in flexibility, which has enabled Indian society to absorb new groups.

Stratification Throughout this period, the ancient four-fold Vedic caste system held firm and in some cases became more rigid. Social space and movement, for instance, became more restricted. In south Indian towns and villages, caste-specific quarters appeared, such as the Brahmin quarter (*agraharam*) mentioned above. A detailed study of inscriptions found seven further different quarters: for landowners, cultivators, people who control the canal irrigation system, artisans, temple servants, toddy tappers and untouchables. Some people who had no caste designation were brought into the system when their forest or hilly territory was cleared and cultivated. These relatively egalitarian tribal and forest populations were then designated as a new sub-caste of untouchables.

Transformation At the same time, the social system was not entirely rigid and transformations did occur. Within the *sudra* category, for example, landowning sub-castes (*jatis*) gained in status, while some cultivator sub-castes became landless labourers. In South India, the groups who seemed to have risen in status were traders in ghee, seafaring merchants and weavers. By the end of the period, silk weavers began to invest in and own land.

Sanskritisation In both north and south India, social change occurred through a process known as 'Sanskritisation.' Low castes, mainly *sudra* landowners who had grown wealthy, assumed the trappings of royalty, took on royal titles, commissioned scribes to invent genealogies with ancient pedigrees and hired Brahmins to conduct rituals in their temples. In the north, low castes followed this route to become recognised as 'Rajputs' ('Son of a Raja), the warrior or *ksatriya* caste. In the south, it was arriviste peasant groups (*sudras*) who propelled themselves up the ladder into *ksatriya* status.

Reading

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Noboru Karashima, *A Concise History of South India* (Oxford, 2014)

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