HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

INDIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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SOCIAL CLASSES/CASTE

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 *varna*s (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.

Indus Valley Civilisation

Egalitarian The extreme uniformity of the IVC suggests that its society was more egalitarian than hierarchical. All the examples of uniformity— standardised bricks, houses, urban grid pattern, seals and measures—reflect a relatively classless society. In addition, artefacts are distributed throughout various occupational levels and are not concentrated in high-status residences or monuments. Important goods (semi-precious stones, copper and bronze ornaments, inscribed seals) are found in small hamlets as well as urban centres. The relative weakness of any ruling elite is further indicated by the nature of grave goods, in particular the absence of hoards.

Groups Despite the lack of a powerful elite, such as a hereditary monarchy or clan, differentiation based on wealth and power clearly existed. Indeed, the complex commercial and political organisation of the regional centres required a social structure of groups with different status and skills. From material remains, it has been suggested that the IVC consisted of eight distinct classes: artisans, labourers, land-owners, merchants, administrators (and their assistants), farmers, ritual leaders and political elites. These eight groups might be represented by the eight types of animals inscribed on the seals. Each of these groups had sub-groups, such as masons, potters, carpenters and jewellers among the artisans.

Indo-Aryan Civilisation

Varna The Vedic literature of the Indo-Aryans provides the template for the Indian caste system by listing its four main categories (*varna*, or 'colour'):

1. Brahmin: priests and scholars
2. Ksatriya: rulers and warriors, including property owners
3. Vaisya: merchants and skilled artisans
4. Sudra: labourers and servants

Twice –born A critical distinction between these four categories is that the first three were considered 'twice-born' because they underwent an initiation ritual that formalised their role in society. This reinforced the low status of the fourth category, the *sudra*s. It is significant, however, that the concept of 'twice-born' is not found in early Vedic texts and appeared only about 800-600 BCE.

Untouchables Untouchables were also not part of the original four-fold scheme. However, Vedic literature did mention groups inferior in rank to the *sudra*s because of their supposed impurity. These included the *dasas* ('slaves'), who are described as having dark skin, broad, flat noses, speaking a strange language and practicing magic. Elsewhere in the literature, the stigma of impurity/untouchability is associated with people who come in contact with death, such as human corpses, dead animals and animal skins. Over time, these low status groups came to be called *a-varna* ('out-castes'). Western writers in the early 20th century coined the term 'Untouchable', Gandhi called them 'Harijan' ('children of God') and now they call themselves 'Dalit' ('broken').

Jati When Indians (or anyone else) speaks of 'caste', they usually refer to the dozens of sub-divisions within each of the five overarching categories (the four *varna*s + untouchables). These sub-groups are known as *jati* ('birth'). They are the group into which one is born and is expected to marry. There is great regional variation in the *jati* system. For instance, a specific *sudra* caste in one region, or even one village, may not exist in the adjoining region or village. On the other hand, there might be six or eight different *vaisya* castes (*jati*s) in the same village. The *jati* system has also allowed newcomers to be slotted into the overall social system by allotting them a new name.

Classical Period

Consolidation Over the course of this long period, social interactions were increasingly constrained by caste rules. In part, this is explained by the influx of newcomers, from the northwest and from Central Asia, as well as by trade and by conquest. In order to maintain social cohesion, each new group had to be slotted into place in the complex social structure of the caste system. If they floated free, the entire system might drift into dangerous flexibility. As a result, marriage between castes became rare, and the number of permissible partners within one's caste narrowed, too. Hindu texts distinguish eight different types of marriage, according to the rules of endogamy and exogamy, or marriage inside caste but outside certain kin groups.

Kings An important exception to the hardening of caste rules was the acknowledgement that kings could be made from any social strata. Early texts insisted that kings must be *ksatriya* (warrior) by birth, but later texts accepted the reality that many Shaka, Kushana and Shunga rulers were not from the warrior caste. In effect, men could become kings by conquest rather than by ancestry.

Merchants Another group whose social status shifted in the classical period were merchants (vaisya). Benefitting from urbanism, trade and guilds, merchants grew steadily wealthier and began to exercise power in the political sphere. In the normative texts, however, these are low castes, just one rung above slaves and labourers (*sudra*). Indeed, many texts claim that merchants are *sudra* because of mixed ancestry. The important point here is that merchants did not change caste—they remained *vaisya*—but they gained new social standing. Class, not caste, was decisive.

Buddhism Buddhism created an alternative society with the establishment of a monastic order (*sangha*, 'association'). This community of monks and nuns and lay followers was governed by a formal set of rules announced in the earliest Buddhist texts. Although at first monks and nuns lived an itinerant life, by the 3rd century BCE, they were resident in large monasteries, which also served as centres of learning. Fortnightly meetings were convened in the monasteries, democratic rules for discussion were adopted and a treasury was set up to handle financial transactions, especially donations made by wealthy lay followers.

Postclassical Period

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 (*jati*s) 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 (*sudra*s) who propelled themselves up the ladder into *ksatriya* status.

Early Modern Period

The nascent capitalism, fiscal reorganisation, influx of foreigners and military campaigns opened up space for new social groups. A class of local gentry, including officials, warrior-chiefs and rich landowners, emerged in these volatile conditions. The primary beneficiaries were the Muslim officers (*mansabdar*s) and landowners (*jagirdar*s), and here again it was Akbar's reforms that stimulated change. He recruited men of various backgrounds into his elite administrative/military cadre, not just Afghans and Persians, but also Rajputs and Indian-born Muslims. The dramatic rise in the textile trade also raised the status of Hindu weaving castes. Most of the traders, merchants and money-lenders who participated in the thriving commercial sphere were also Hindu. Outside the Mughal Empire, the Mahratta kingdom in western India was built by peasant groups who rose to warrior status.

19th Century

During the19th century, some of the old rural elites, both Hindu and Muslim, were side-lined by a modern and foreign cadre of administrators. At the same time, a growing professional class of English-educated Indian doctors, engineers, lawyers, bankers, industrialists and scientists claimed more social authority in towns and cities. Among this new elite, caste barriers eased and mobility increased. A similar phenomenon occurred at the bottom of the social hierarchy, among Untouchables and others who converted to Christianity in large numbers, especially in South India. This, in turn, prompted some Hindus to form associations in order to promote their religion.

Early 20th Century

Change The political upheaval of the period created opportunities that were seized by some sections of Indian society. First, the increased participation by Indians in central and provincial government led to the emergence of a political elite, mainly comprised of high-caste Hindus and high-status Muslims. In South India, Brahmins filled the new administrative jobs from top to bottom. At the same time, the establishment of separate Hindu and Muslim constituencies contributed to the already widening gap between the two groups. Economic opportunities during the two wars produced a class of capitalist captains of industry, again among high-status groups in both Hindu and Muslim communities.

Stasis Despite mass movements on their behalf, the rural poor, urban labourers and Untouchables drifted further from the prosperity at the top. The mass movements that shook the country galvanised caste identities at all levels, as politics mobilised people on the basis of perceived shared interests. All in all, the reformist agenda of enlightened colonialism, with its aim of producing 'brown Englishmen,' floundered on the hard reality of casteism.

Vaikom temple A telling illustration of this reality is provided by what is known as the Vaikom temple controversy. In a small town of that name on the west coast (modern-day Kerala), a temple continued the old practice of barring Untouchables not only from entering the temple but also from walking on nearby streets. In 1924, the temple became a target for social reformers, including Gandhi and Ramaswami Naicker. After months of fasting, public protests and speeches, the ban was lifted on the streets but not for entering the temple. It was a compromise that compromised Gandhi's commitment to caste equality.

Late 20th Century

Changes in the political, economic and technological spheres appear only to have strengthened traditional social relations and consolidated caste identities. Although the link between caste and occupation is not as ironclad as it once was, the fragmentation into language-states and the rise of powerful regional parties has contributed to the deepening of caste identities. In a rapidly globalising nation, the localised community of a caste appears to offer security and stability. At the same time, caste is a vehicle for mobilising political support and economic cooperation. In the 1950s and 1960s, regionally dominate lower caste groupings succeeded in lobbying the government to grant them entitlements similar to those given to the Untouchables/Dalits. The 'backward classes', as they are known (and are one-third of the population), now enjoy positive discrimination in education and employment. Even among urban, westernised Indians, endogamous, arranged marriages remain the norm, and education and careers are still influenced by caste. In addition to these blood-based loyalties of caste and kin, traditional patron-client relationships also play a major role in social transactions. These reciprocal relations—between landowner and cultivator, householder and washerman, housewife and fruit-seller,

businessman and driver, shopkeeper and servant—are the threads that knit together the billion-plus people of India.

Questions/discussion

1. The presence of writing in the Indus valley presupposes a class of literate scribes, who in later periods of Indian history would perform the functional roles of copying manuscripts for patrons, writing oral texts down on manuscripts and (much later) writing letters (for illiterate people) to be put in the letter box. Imagine the life of an Indus scribe and write a short sketch of his ordinary day.

2. Although the caste is often considered unique to India, scholars have found very similar social systems (at various historical periods) in South Africa, Japan and the southern United States. These comparative studies are somewhat flawed in that they do not agree a common definition of 'caste.' What is a good definition of 'caste'?

3. The process of social climbing is known to academics as 'Sanskritisation' because the aspiring classes/castes consciously borrowed specific customs, such as wearing the sacred thread, that were associated with normative Sanskrit texts and Brahmins. Detailed examples are described in the landmark book by M.N. Srinivas in his 1962 book *Caste in India*.

4. Identify the factors that explain the spread of Muslim rule across north India and the Deccan. What relationship do you find between military success and social assimilation? How can you explain that fact that, in many cases, local Hindu populations under a Muslim ruler did not change their traditional culture?

5. British colonial rule, its military conquests as much as its education and rule of law, engendered many more changes to traditional Indian society. Which caste-groups in modern India can trace their origins back to the colonial era?

6. Arguably the most significant shift in Indian society has been the rise, since the 18th century, of certain low-status groups. Untouchables became Gandhi's Harijans and now call themselves Dalits ('broken'). They have a percentage of reserved seats in education and government jobs. What difference has this positive discrimination made to these people, who make up 17% of India's population?

Reading

M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in India* (Oxford, 1962)
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Noboru Karashima, *A Concise History of South India* (Oxford, 2014)
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