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The Origins of the Caste System in India Vs. (and how it relates to) The Formation of Race in America

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Nothing has been more common in human history than discrimination against different groups, whether different by race, religion, caste or in innumerable other ways. Moreover, this discrimination has itself been unequal—more fierce against some groups than others and more pervasive at some periods of history than in others.

—Thomas Sowell, Race, Culture, and Equality

I. Introduction

Historically, one of the most complex systems of segregation, and what later became a system of discrimination, has been that of caste in India. Compared with this idea of caste separation is the concept of "race-making" in the United States. Given the similarities between the two phenomena, it is worth exploring the possible resemblance between the mind-sets that led to their creation. These two systems became expressed in all spheres of life: religious, social and political. Essentially, race and castes are cultural creations formulated to organize society. In any given society, those considered relatively "inferior" were considered "polluting" to the rest of society; the classifications were originally used to separate groups of people and to identify them as relatively inferior or superior. In this essay, I will attempt to find the similarities and differences of the two systems of classification and the historical reasons for their creations. Many preconceived and false beliefs exist, especially about the caste systems, and I will try to clarify those misconceptions as well.

II. An Overview of the Caste System in India

By Anu Thakrar

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The caste system of India, as a system that affects the division of labor and land control, may have developed in the early kingdoms of northern India (Kolenda 24). The word "caste" was invented by Portuguese seafarers who traded mainly on the west coast of India in the 16th and 17th centuries. It was taken from the Portuguese word "casta" meaning "species" or "breeds" of animals or plants and "tribes," "clans," or "lineages" among men (Marriot and Inden, qtd in Quigley 4). Therefore, the modern conception of caste is a European invention. The traditional caste system of India developed more than 3000 years ago when Aryan-speaking nomadic groups migrated from the north to India about 1500 BC. The Aryan priests, according to the ancient sacred literature of India, devised a system whereby they divided the society into hierarchical groupings. Sometime between 200 BC and AD 100, the Manu Smriti, or Law of Manu, was written. In it, the Aryan priest-lawmakers created the four great functional divisions of society placing their own priestly class at the head of this caste system with the title of earthly gods, or Brahmans. Although these divisions still survive today, the rules that determine membership have changed drastically over time, and now rest on more than just birthrights. Thus, created by the priests, the caste system was artificially made a part of Hindu religious law, rendered secure by the claim of "divine revelation" (Encarta).

The Sanskrit word for caste is jati; the term varna denotes a group of jati, or the system of caste. One cannot choose one's jati (caste); it is defined by birth. However, one can choose whether one's jati refers to a more or less inclusive group, depending on the context. In one context, one's jati is one's lineage; in another, it may be all lineages with which one can marry. The common understanding of caste is "a rigid social system in which a social hierarchy is maintained generation after generation and allows little mobility out of the position to which a person is born" (Encarta). In addition, around three thousand sub-castes exist in India, often with an administrative or corporate structure, illustrating the rigidity of this culturally structured system. Although the latter is true, caste, no doubt, keeps changing, and customs come and go; the pattern alters, but the principles that govern it are exceptionally constant for a human institution.

The Bhagavad-Gita says the following about the varnas ("colors"): the works of Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Shudras are different in harmony with the three powers of their born in Brahmans (associated with the color white) are purity, loving forgiveness, righteousness, wisdom. The Gita continues to note the works of a Ksatriya (color red): to have a heroic mind, inner fire, courage along with courage in battle, generosity and noble, the rearing of cattle are the works associated with the color yellow. Finally, the works of a Shudra (with the color black) are performing different aspects, this arrangement seems to be very socio-economical, not directly related to religion or religious values. The text was motivated by the Brahmans, as we will see, this arrangement seems to be very socio-economical, not directly related to religion or religious value. Furthermore, according to Padma Manian's article, the colors (or the skin of the people included in each varna) are "heraldic"...
The word "caste" was invented by traders mainly on the west coast of India in the modern conception of caste is a European term for caste system of India developed more than 1500 BC. The Aryans, according to the Aryan priests, devised a system whereby they divided social groupings. Sometime between 200 BC and 100 BC, or Law of Manu, was written. In it, the Aryans divided the four great functional divisions of society: the four varnas: "Brahman," "Ksatriya," "Vaisya," and "Shudra." Although these divisions still survive, they have changed drastically on more than just birthrights. Thus, created by the Aryan priests, as we will see below.

Furthermore, according to Padma Manian's article "Harappans and Aryans: old and new perspectives of ancient Indian history," the colors associated with the various castes are "heraldic" colors and not the colors of the skin of the people included in each respective caste (Manian 27). This is contrary to the popular belief that the highest castes were descended from light-skinned Aryans and the lowest castes were descended from dark-skinned people defeated by the Aryans. In actuality, the colors white, red, yellow and black were associated with spirituality and enlightenment, fiery and courageous temperament, wealth and gold, and finally "darkness" of ignorance respectively. There is no contextual evidence that the original caste system, before actually being "systematized" by the higher classes, was a division of society by skin color or race.

J.H. Hutton defines caste as "a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community" (Hutton 47). He goes on to add that the caste name is generally associated with a specific occupation and that a caste is almost invariably endogamous, but is further divided, as a rule, into a number of smaller circles each of which is endogamous (47). Therefore, a Brahman, for example, is not only restricted to marrying another Brahman, but to marrying a woman of the same subdivision of Brahman. In spite of this, it is still important to maintain that caste and social class are very different: Whereas the con-

harmony with the three powers of their born nature. The works of a Brahman (associated with the color white) are peace, self-harmony, austerity, purity, loving-forgiveness, righteousness, vision, wisdom, faith. The Gita continues to note the works of a Ksatriya (associated with the color red): to have a heroic mind, inner fire, constancy, resourcefulness, along with courage in battle, generosity and noble leadership. Trade, agriculture, and the rearing of cattle are the works of a Vaisya (associated with the color yellow). Finally, the works of the Shudra (associated with the color black) are performing different acts of service. As we see, this arrangement seems to be very socio-economically based, and is not directly related to religion or religious value—the emphasis on this aspect was motivated by the Brahman, as we will see below.

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ception of social class is fluid and may include caste, caste has "emerged into social consciousness to the point that custom and law attempt their rigid and permanent separation from another," and furthermore, consists of individuals (Cox 299). Caste, as it is known today, is an exclusively Indian phenomenon, with a multitude of complexities that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. The system was originally used to separate the "pure" castes from those that were "polluted."

For an "outsider" or a person foreign to traditional Indian culture (which may even include many Indians in India itself) it is difficult to understand the great need for and the advantages of the creation of the caste system in ancient India. There has been much outside study done on the perceived disadvantages, of which there are many today because of the industrialization of society and the distortion of meaning of Hindu culture, which was believed to be elitist or "racist" in some respects. It was very true several centuries ago, and is still somewhat true today in the smaller villages, that the work of a family would carry on through the sons and that it was very hard to change, or elevate one's caste. A male child basically grew up to be what his father was in life, and that is how society went on successfully, especially considering historical wars and the need for groups to continue to play their key roles so that all could survive. Birth determines a man's caste for life unless he is expelled for violation of its rules; otherwise transition from one caste to another is not possible and the whole system "turns on the prestige of the Brahman" (Hutton 49). However, in its earlier history, there seem to have been Brahmins by works as well as Brahmins by birth (Hutton 67). A "Godly" person for example, could have worked his way up the ladder through rigorous study and become titled as a Brahman. Furthermore, the meanings of the classifications were dependent upon one's locality.

Before I continue, it is important to understand that nowhere in the original Vedic text outlining the way of Hinduism does it attempt to segregate people according to their caste and or perceived societal "value" in they eyes of the Supreme - all are equal in that respect. Unlike most Western societies, the many regional groups in India are still trying to work together as one unit, so that all can survive to reach their spiritual goals in life peacefully. The caste system does provide for the various functions necessary to social life, ranging from education to scavenging, from government to domestic service. What one does professionally in life is a result of one's previous karmas, or actions taken.

[The caste system] makes this provision for "religious dogma," the belief that karmas are superficially inequitable distribution of the prosperity of the divine order of the world. It is an episode in the prolonged existence of the notion of being part of the divine order of the world. This idea is actually a vicious circle, and if one would presently follow dharma (the religious dogma) in one's work, then she could also enjoy the higher status in the next, or which may be suffering from some form of religious dogma, merely by reason of its transgressions in this life (Hutton 123-24).

Therefore, the caste system has been deceptive philosophy of the cycle of birth. People believe that enjoying the higher status is due to her karmas and if one would presently follow dharma (the religious dogma) in this life, then she could also enjoy the higher status in the next birth! This idea is actually a vicious circle, also called Brahmanism, and is still in practice today. It is an ancient part of the culture, when in fact it is part of the Brahmanism around the 9th century AD. This is politics has corrupted religion and society's way of thinking.

It is my opinion, and one many share, aged by the caste system were distorted as a result of the influence and colonization of India. Some have concluded that this idea of the caste system was an ancient part of what is called the Brahmanism back-projection of systems of racial segregation.
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[The caste system] makes this provision under the sanction of a
"religious dogma," the belief that karma, which renders the
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being part of the divine order of the universe and a transient
episode in the prolonged existence of the individual soul, which
by acquiring merit in one existence may rise in the scale in the
next, or which may be suffering from a degradation in caste
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Therefore, the caste system has been deceptively maintained by the phi-
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enjoying the higher status is due to her karma in her previous lifetime,
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also called Brahmanism, and is still in practice today. Many actually think
it is an ancient part of the culture, when in fact, it was devised by the
Brahmans around the 9th century AD. This is a blatant example of how
politics has corrupted religion and society's way of thinking. One might
even conclude that this idea of the caste system has become a sort of
hegemonic way of thinking.

It is my opinion, and one many share, that the values encour-
aged by the caste system were distorted as a direct result of European
influence and colonization of India. Some have pointed out that the
Europeans collaborated with the Brahmins to formulate a system of
slavery and economic welfare for the rich, a theory that is still being
vastly researched.

II. Comparison of the Caste System with Origins of Racial Categorization in the
United States

Some say that interpreting caste as race would be a "fantastic
back-projection of systems of racial segregation in the American South

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and in South Africa onto early Indian history" (Jim Shaffer and Diane Lichtenstein, qtd. in Manian 27). However, it is true that the racial segregation and classifications in the US took place based on racial "purity" while the term "purity" in India meant the physical purity of caste. The lower a man's caste the more polluting he is, and the higher he is, the more sensitive he is to pollution.

In *Caste, Class & Race*, Oliver Cox hypothesized that race was founded by the racial exploitation and race prejudice development among Europeans with the rise of capitalism and nationalism, and that because of the world-wide ramifications of capitalism, all racial antagonisms can be traced to the policies and attitudes of the leading capitalist people, the white people of Europe and North America. (322)

Categorization in the US began with the immigration and conquest of the Europeans. Several scholars argue that race began to have a social significance after the discovery of the New World and the sea routes to Asia. They attempted to rationalize the situation and to prove to themselves that their subjugation of other racial groups was natural and inevitable (Cox 104). Furthermore, the racial categorization, especially in the US, was mainly instilled for economic reasons. Unlike the caste system, certain occupations in the US were reserved specifically for a racially, or an economically inferior group, whereas in India, the divisions evolved naturally. For example, when the Irish immigrated into the US in the early nineteenth century, they were compared, sometimes unfavorably, to African Americans and were most certainly not treated as White (Brodkin 54). They were given low-paying, unskilled jobs (or deskill ed jobs in the Jews' and African Americans' case). Other examples of these "inferior" jobs in the US included work such as cleaning and disposing of the dead; these were sometimes even labeled as "immigrant" jobs.

Perhaps due to insecurity or possibly even fear, a crude sense of racism developed in the United States, especially in the job sector. Regarding pollution, Karen Brodkin quotes David Brody, who reflects on a white man's shock concerning another white man's choice to work on a blast furnace job:

> Negroes and Syrians...are filthy in the idea of working with them is repugnant to retain his self-respect. It is no place a man's heart to be. The Negroes and fi garet and brutal in their acts and conversion.

This attitude can be compared to that of a Brahman upper caste or class in ancient India, but attitudes which part of the country one was in. Part of US had to do with religion, especially concern due to the influx of Christians in the US, about Jews, and they were therefore consider edly and socially, upon their arrival from Europe, maintained slavery and "dirty jobs" for the slaves respectively. Since these and other occupations as "unclean," those that perform them in Indiaables (recently referred to more commonly as "caste") to preserve the whole caste and society man's job, similar to a Kshatriya, on the other hand, for office or professional work, and, ironically, in the upper caste or class in ancient India, but attitudes which part of the country one was in. Part of US had to do with religion, especially concern due to the influx of Christians in the US, about Jews, and they were therefore considered "white" or racially superior even among "race" if he held a higher paying, more acceptable job. Therefore, race and caste do, in fact, have some terms of attitudes, but they are placed within such that the complexities of caste systems go beyond and categorization for economic reasons.

**IV. Present day and future implications on development**

Race is becoming a more largely discussed and we are increasingly seeing the changes that have awareness and acceptance. Both these systems excuses for social discrimination, when origin, was not its intended purpose. The caste system from a Western point of view, but for many lives in India, it is still the normal way of perceiving somewhere Blacks and Whites were segregated beca thought to be polluting, the higher and lower c
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Negroes and Syrians...are filthy in their personal habits, and the idea of working with them is repugnant to any man who wants to retain his self-respect. It is no place for a man with a white man's heart to be. The Negroes and foreigners are coarse, vulgar and brutal in their acts and conversation. (57)

This attitude can be compared to that of a Brabman's or any person of upper caste or class in ancient India, but attitude also depended on which part of the country one was in. Part of the divide in race in the US had to do with religion, especially concerning the Jewish immigrants: due to the influx of Christians in the US, several stereotypes were held about Jewish people, and they were therefore oppressed, both economically and socially, upon their arrival from Europe. Earlier, the US also maintained slavery and "dirty jobs" for the slaves and immigrants respectively. Since these and other occupations were and still are viewed as "unclean," those that perform them in India became the "untouchables" (recently referred to more commonly as Dalits) and were "out-casted" to preserve the whole caste and society from pollution. A white man's job, similar to a Kshatriya, on the other hand, would entail more office or professional work, and, ironically, in the US one could be considered "white" or racially superior even among those of the same "race" if he held a higher paying, more acceptable job of this type. Therefore, race and caste do, in fact, have some common origins in terms of attitudes, but they are placed within such different contexts that the complexities of caste systems go beyond simple discrimination and categorization for economic reasons.

IV. Present day and future implications on development of society

Race is becoming a more largely discussed topic in the US and we are increasingly seeing the changes that have resulted from this awareness and acceptance. Both these systems have come to be used as excuses for social discrimination, when originally, at least in India, this was not its intended purpose. The caste system is definitely out of date from a Western point of view, but for many living in the villages of India, it is still the normal way of perceiving society. As in the US, where Blacks and Whites were segregated because the former group was thought to be polluting the higher castes in India were not?
allowed to eat or drink together because of the same notion of pollution.

In the last century, caste discrimination has been officially outlawed. The caste system is slowly beginning to dismantle itself. Today, people of all religions and all castes live and work side by side often oblivious and without regard for the other persons religious beliefs or caste. There are pockets of religious bigotry and intolerance but they are usually politically driven.

The complexities of the caste system, however, have historically constituted a serious obstacle to civil progress in India. The continuing trend today is toward the dissolution of the artificial barriers between the castes. Some say that modernization of these societies is impossible because of the "strength of their traditional social institutions and beliefs" (Kolenda 74). However, if the traditional system is eliminated or transformed into a modern system of nuclear families, social classes, free markets, rational-bureaucratic organizations with an achievement-oriented scientific worldview, according to many scholars, much is possible in terms of modernization (Kolenda 1). As long as the belief that there should be equal opportunity for education and social mobility (jobs, etc) there will be improvement, as we have seen in the United States after World War I and more so after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 70s. We have seen this throughout the history of the United States.

Considering all that needs to change, it is indeed unlikely that this could take place in the next several years, but a gradual change has taken place. I believe that this is especially due to the number of Non Resident Indians going back India to educate those still living under these "ancient" beliefs. In addition, several human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, have consistently been advocating caste equality in India, and many political activist groups within the country have been taking a stand as well. In larger cites, such as Bombay, caste is hardly an issue for most families and may only come up at the time of marriage of a son or daughter.

This necessary installation of education and activism is primarily what was used to practically abolish the system of segregation in the United States over the last three decades. However, the strong ties to tradition in the Southern part of India have been overwhelmingly detrimental to the society, largely because of the insurmountable obstacles to modern capitalism and industry (Kolenda 74). Pauline Kolenda, author of Caste in Contemporary India, has argued that modern capitalism and industry has led to a breakdown of the traditional social institutions and beliefs that underpin the caste system.

Many scholars have agreed with Max Weber that the caste system—supported by the Hindu beliefs and reward for meritorious and sinful behavior—has had a destabilizing effect on the development of modern capitalism and industry (Kolenda 74). Weber argued that the caste system was a major obstacle to the development of modern capitalism and industry in India. The caste system was characterized by a rigid social hierarchy based on birth and occupation, with each caste having its own set of rules and restrictions. This caste system was perpetuated by the Hindu beliefs of karma and reincarnation, which held that one's actions in this life determined their status in the afterlife.

In contrast, the modern capitalist system is characterized by individualism, competition, and the pursuit of wealth. These values are at odds with the caste system, which is based on tradition, conformity, and the maintenance of the status quo. Weber argued that the caste system was incompatible with the modern capitalist system, and that the two systems would eventually come into conflict. He believed that the modern capitalist system would eventually replace the caste system, as it was more efficient and adaptable to the demands of a rapidly changing world.

WORKS CITED


Together because of the same notion of pollution, caste discrimination has been officially outlawed, but it is slowly beginning to dismantle itself. Today, all castes live and work side by side often regarding for the other persons religious beliefs or of religious bigotry and intolerance but they are of the caste system, however, have historically been an obstacle to civil progress in India. The continuing dissolution of the artificial barriers between modernization of these societies is impossible if their traditional social institutions and however, if the traditional system is eliminated modern system of nuclear families, social classes, bureaucratic organizations with an achievement view, according to many scholars, much is possi-zation (Kolenda 1). As long as the belief that opportunity for education and social mobility improvement, as we have seen in the United and more so after the Civil Rights Movement, we have seen this throughout the history of the that needs to change, it is indeed unlikely that the next several years, but a gradual change has been especially due to the number of Non Back India to educate those still living under.

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A Psychological Perspective

By Elizabeth Marazas and Elizabeth Downes

The only sexual advice I ever got from my parents was that I can let a girl give you a hand job, you can do it, but never ever have sex with random people. It really was. I can't say I followed it, but I've definitely kept it in my head.

—Joe, 22 year old male

I believe that we are all sexual beings and that sex should be for the context of marriage, so I stick to that in [my] thoughts and actions.

—Mary, 22 year old female

[My first time], I felt that I loved the person I was committing to and that it was not forced upon me.

—Sarah, 20 year old female

By the time I knew what masturbation was, it was [made] more enjoyable, because I was raised [with the belief] that private body parts are your private body parts. They exist for reasons of course? Perhaps it is because other nondescribable parts are your private body parts. They exist for reasons other than pleasure.

—Rita, 20 year old female

All of these excerpts (which were taken from a survey of students whose names have been changed) indicate that sexual advice and experiences originate from specific experiences. On this point, it is impossible to always pinpoint the exact source of our sexual experiences. However, in the case of Joe, his father's advice was a guiding factor in his decision-making process.

—Kolenda, Pauline

Race in India: Beyond Organic Solidarity


