



2001

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

Anu Thakrar '01  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Thakrar '01, Anu (2001) "The Origins of the Caste System in India Vs. (and how it relates to) The Formation of Race in America," *Undergraduate Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 4. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol13/iss1/4>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

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

By Anu Thakrar

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*

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," "races," "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*, *Ksatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, and *Shudras* are different, in  
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol13/iss174> 2

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 *Vaishya* (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 *Brahmans*, 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 *Brahmans*. In spite of this, it is still important to maintain that caste and social class are very different: Whereas the con-

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 *Brahmans* by works as well as *Brahmans* 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 of the most menial kind. What one does professionally in life is thought to be a direct result of one's previous *karmas*, or actions taken during previous births.

[The caste system] makes this provision under the sanction of a "religious dogma," the belief that *karma*, which renders the superficially inequitable distribution of functions acceptable as 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 merely by reason of its transgressions in a previous life.  
(Hutton 123-24)

Therefore, the caste system has been deceptively maintained by the philosophy of the cycle of birth. People believe and accept that the one enjoying the higher status is due to her *karma* in her previous lifetime, and if one would presently follow *dharma* (the righteous law of the caste system) in this birth, then she could also enjoy the higher status in her next birth! This idea is actually a vicious scheme of the caste system, 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 encouraged 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 *Brahmans* 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  
Published by Digital Commons @ IWU, 2001

## 16 The Undergraduate Review

---

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 *deskilled* 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 Brodtkin 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 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 *Brahman'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 and lower castes in India were not 7



## 18 The Undergraduate Review

---

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 cities, 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 detri-

mental to the society, largely because of the influence of the caste system. Certain castes, curiously only in South India, are regarded as castes of the Right Hand and the others as castes of the Left Hand (with eighteen castes in each 'Hand') (Hutton 67). Between these two divisions there is a very strong sentiment of rivalry, leading to frequent violence, often with riots, sometimes associated with some real or supposed infringement by castes of the Left Hand on privileges claimed as belonging exclusively to the Right. (However, not all castes are concerned with this opposition and its rivalries and hostilities. An example Hutton cites is that of a South Indian *Brahman's* group: This group is spoken of as *Mahajanam* ('of great birth') and is often regarded as belonging to neither division.)

Many scholars have agreed with Max Weber's argument that the caste system—supported by the Hindu beliefs in rebirth, retribution, and reward for meritorious and sinful behavior—would function as obstacles to modern capitalism and industry (Kolenda 4). According to Pauline Kolenda, author of *Caste in Contemporary India*, "Caste cannot be abolished in India, and to attempt it would be one of the most hazardous operations that is ever performed in a political body" (1). Just as the notion of race has increasingly become an issue of concern in the US in recent years, so has caste in India; the former misconceptions and distortions of Hinduism must be clarified in order to make any progress. Mindsets must be improved and education and equal opportunity for all must be advocated in order to make any sort of social progress in the coming years.

## WORKS CITED

Brodkin, Karen. *How Jews Became White Folks (& What That Says about Race in America)*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1998.

"Caste." *Encarta Encyclopedia 1996*. CD-ROM. Redmond, WA: Microsoft, 1995.

Cox, Oliver Cromwell. *Caste, Class & Race*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959.

## 20 The Undergraduate Review

---

- Daniel, Aharon. "The Caste System." *Information on India*. 2000.  
<http://members.tripod.com/adaniel/castes.htm> (8 April 2001).
- Ezekiel, Raphael S. *The Racist Mind*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.
- Gosset, Thomas F. *Race: The History of an Idea in America*. New York: Shocken Books, 1973.
- Gregory, Steven and Roger Sanjek, eds. *Race*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1994.
- Hutton, J. H. *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function, and Origins*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1963.
- Kolenda, Pauline. *Caste in Contemporary India: Beyond Organic Solidarity*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1978.
- Manian, Padma. "Harappans and Aryans: old and new perspectives of ancient Indian History." *The History Teacher* 32.1 (1998): 17-32.
- Marriot, M. and Inden, R.B. "Toward an Ethnology of South Asian Caste Systems." In *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia*. Ed. K. David. The Hague: Mouton, 1977.
- Quigley, Declan. *The Interpretation of Caste*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Sowell, Thomas. *Race, Culture, and Equality*. Hoover Essay. 1998.  
<http://www-hoover.stanford.edu/publications/he/23/23c.html>  
(8 April 2001).