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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

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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

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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 Brahman. 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 Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra are different, in harmony with the three powers of their born color. Brahman (associated with the color white) are purity, purity, loving forgiveness, righteousness, wisdom. The Gita continues to note the works of a Kshatriya (color red): to have a heroic mind, inner fire, courage along with courage in battle, generosity and noble agriculture, and 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 acts and see, this arrangement seems to be very socio-economic, not directly related to religion or religious values or the colored of the skin of the people included in each race (27). This is contrary to the popular belief that descended from light-skinned Aryans and the less descended from dark-skinned people defeated equality, the colors white, red, yellow and black were equality and enlightenment, fiery and courageous tradition, gold, and finally "darkness" of ignorance respect to textual evidence that the original caste system, being "systematized" by the higher classes, was a divine color or race.

J.H. Hutton defines caste as "a collection of families bearing a common name; claiming a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing a hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are in opinion as forming a single homogenous community; goes on to add that the caste name is generally occupation and that a caste is almost invariably ther divided, as a rule, into a number of smaller endogamous (47). Therefore, a Brahman, for example, restricted to marrying another Brahman, but to same subdivision of Brahman. In spite of this, maintain that caste and social class are very dif
The Origins of the Caste System in India

The word "caste" was invented by traders mainly on the west coast of India in the modern conception of caste is a European caste system of India developed more than 2000 BC. The Aryan priests, according to the Law of Manu, was written. In it, the Aryans divided the four great functional divisions of society into four categories: those who work in the fields, the warriors, the priests, and the servants. Although these divisions still survive, they are no longer an automatic membership. One can choose whether one's jati (hereditary name) is one's lineage; in another, it may be all lineages in one's community. The common understanding of caste is that a social hierarchy is maintained generally and allows little mobility out of the position to which one was born (Encarta). In addition, around three thousand years ago, often with an administrative or corporate structure, a caste named the "caste" is defined 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-

Gita says the following about the varnas ("colors"): Brahman, Ksatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra are different, in 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 Brahman, 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-

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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 his 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 separate 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 result of one's previous karmas, or actions taken in life.

[The caste system] makes this provision for a "religious dogma," the belief that karma and if one would presently follow dharma (the system) in this birth, then she could also enjoy her karmas next, or which may be suffering from merely by reason of its transgressions (Hutton 123-24).

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

It is my opinion, and one many share, aged by the caste system were distorted as a result influence and colonization of India. Some have Europeans collaborated with the Brahmins to slavery and economic welfare for the rich, a vasty researched.

II. Comparison of the Caste System with Origins of United States

Some say that interpreting caste as racial back-projection of systems of racial segregation
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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 encour-
gaged 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

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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 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 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 this idea of working with them is repugnant to retain his self-respect. It is no place man's heart to be. The Negroes and fin gar and brutal in their acts and convers.

This attitude can be compared to that of a Brahman in India, which part of the country one was in. Part of US had to do with religion, especially concerning the influx of Christians in the US, severe about Jewish people, and they were therefore clerically and socially, upon their arrival from Europe, maintained slavery and "dirty jobs" for the slave respectively. Since these and other occupations as "unclean," those that perform them in India...ables" (recently referred to more commonly as "casted") to preserve the whole caste and society.

Therefore, race and caste do, in fact, have some terms of attitudes, but they are placed within so 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 we are increasingly seeing the changes that have awareness and acceptance. Both these systems excuses for social discrimination, when origi...not its intended purpose. The caste system from a Western point of view, but for many in India, it is still the normal way of perceiving where Blacks and Whites were segregated because thought to be polluting, the higher and lower c...
The Origins of the Caste System in India Vs. (and how it relates)

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...
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 detri-

mental to the society, largely because of the in-

ternal. Certain castes, curiously only in South India of the Right Hand and the others as castes of eighteen castes in each 'Hand') (Hutton 67). In some regions there is a very strong sentiment of rivalry, often with riots, sometimes associated with infringement by castes of the Left Hand on property belonging exclusively to the Right. (However, Hutton cites that of a South Indian "Brahmanam" spoken of as Mahajanam ('of great birth') and belonging to neither division.)

Many scholars have agreed with Max Weber's caste system—supported by the Hindu beliefs and reward for meritorious and sinful behavior—obstacles to modern capitalism and industry (Kolenda). Pauline Kolenda, author of Caste in Contemporary India, abolished in India, and to attempt it would be a hazardous operations that is ever performed in a place as the notion of race has increasingly become US in recent years, so has caste in India; the former distortions of Hinduism must be clarified in order to progress. Mindsets must be improved and equal opportunity for all must be advocated in order to make progress in the coming years.

WORKS CITED


Together because of the same notion of pollution, caste discrimination has been officially outlawed and is slowly beginning to dismantle itself. Today, all castes live and work side by side often disregarding for the other persons religious beliefs or of religious bigotry and intolerance but they are.

On the other hand, the restrictions of the caste system, however, have historically been an obstacle to civil progress in India. The continuing dissolution of the artificial barriers between castes has led to modernization of these societies is impossible to their traditional social institutions and however, if the traditional system is eliminated, modernization of nuclear families, social classes, bureaucratic organizations with an achievement orientation, according to many scholars, much is possible (Kolenda 1). As long as the belief that opportunity for education and social mobility improvement, as we have seen in the United States more so after the Civil Rights Movement, has been largely due to the number of Non-Indian castes, the former misconception 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.

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A Psychological Perspective

By Elizabeth Marazas and Elizabeth Downes

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

—Joe, 22 year old male

I believe that we are all sexual beings, and sex for the context of marriage, so I think I'm in [my] thoughts and actions.

—Mary, 22 year old female

[My first time], I felt that I loved the process of being 18, I felt that I was in a committed relationship. I felt that the decisions and that it was not forced upon me.

—Sarah, 20 year old female

By the time I knew what masturbation was [and I was more], because I was raised [with the idea] that your private body parts. They don't touch them unless you're gonna have sex.

—Rita, 20 year old female

All of these excerpts (which were taken from students whose names have been changed) indicate that sexual advice and the interaction of these experiences, wants, and sometimes contradictory perspective on sex originate from specific experiences. On the other hand, the advice I've received has Joe not always heeded his father’s advice course? Perhaps it is because other nondescribable...