

## A Study of the Caste System and Political Change in Indian Democracy

**\*Dr. Avni Sharma**

### **Abstract:**

The caste system in India has existed since ancient times and continues to be a major obstacle to the development of Mother India. In Indian culture, a caste is a social group whose membership is mostly determined by birth. With the rise of Hinduism and its doctrines of impurity and reincarnation, this caste system became established and inherited. The Laws of Manu (Manusmitri) maintain the supremacy and complete impunity of the higher castes while referring to the impurity and servitude of the outcasts. The functional divisions known as varnas, which have their roots in Aryan civilization, may be the source of the caste system. The Simon Commission first came up with the term "scheduled castes," which was used to describe certain castes in the Government of India Act of 1935.

The process by which the structure and operation of a certain social system change may be characterized as social change. Within a single culture, the character and rate of social development vary with age or era. Social change does not have an innate rule that dictates its specific manifestations. It is difficult to forecast the precise forms of societal change.

**Keywords:** Untouchable, Varnas, Democracy, Social Transformation, Caste System

### **Introduction**

Historically, one of the primary ways that Indians are socially separated by class, religion, geography, tribe, gender, and language is via the Indian Caste System. Even while all human cultures use this or other types of differentiation, it becomes problematic when one or more of these factors overlap and serve as the only foundation for uneven access to resources that are valued, such as money, income, power, and status. A person's social standing is determined by the caste they were born into under the Indian caste system, which is seen as a closed system of stratification. Interaction and conduct with individuals of a different social rank are restricted (Sekhon, 39). Its history is closely tied to Hinduism, one of the most popular faiths in India, and has seen several changes both during the Buddhist movement and under British administration. The many facets of the Indian caste system, including its hierarchy, history, and current impacts on India, will be examined in this essay.

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that their transgressions from a previous life are the reason for their position in the caste system. Crimes like becoming literate or disrespecting a member of a ruling caste are punishable by severe penalties including torture and death. The greatest authoritative work of Hinduism, the Manusmitri, establishes extreme inequity as the foundation of social interactions and validates social exclusion.

Even in the contemporary world, caste is still highly important to Indian individuals, yet it should be noted that various groups of people have varied motivations for upholding the caste system. In order to continue oppressing the lower castes and preserving their dominance, the higher castes want to keep the caste system intact. It's fascinating to observe that the lower caste groups, who are meant to despise the caste system, simultaneously seek to end the oppression that the upper castes have imposed on them and use their caste identity to their advantage in the political and power structures. The state of Indian society in contemporary India is an intriguing and ironic one.

In actuality, it was intended to demonstrate how the four classes related to the social structure in the same way as the various organs of the Primordial Man related to his body. They had to work together to keep the political system alive. However, the caste system has become so bad that it is impeding people's personal development in the name of caste, which affects people's basic right to life and development, which is the foundation of democracy. Two broad categories may be used to group the ways in which the caste system impacts democracy.

### **Democracy in Society and Democracy in Politics**

#### **Caste, Religion, and Culture**

One of the most basic aspects of India's social structure is the distinction of castes. Caste distinctions influence both the ideal system of values and real social interactions in Hindu culture.

It is assumed that people from various castes would act differently and have distinct beliefs and values (Béteille, 45). The Hindu faith approves of these distinctions. Classical Hindu religious writings, particularly as understood by Brahmins, have historically served as justification for India's caste system of stratification (Sekhon, 45). In ancient India, the caste system was rationalized for a number of reasons. The Vedic rationale was one of them. Without any mention of it in the Vedas, the caste system would not have been accepted by the Vedic community.

Oppressed groups in India, such as the Shudras and the "untouchables," joined anti-Brahmanical campaigns to protest the discriminatory practices they were subjected to. The caste system and the predicament of the downtrodden "untouchables" were nonetheless major factors in the 1950s conversion to Buddhism in India, which was spearheaded by B.R. Ambedkar (Sekhon, 45). People appeared to think that the only way to escape the evils of the caste system was to convert to Buddhism. This is the origin of the word "Dalit," which is used to indicate both pride in one's community and resistance to exploitation. Those who were referred to as "untouchables" called themselves the oppressed people (Sekhon, 45-6). Dalit activists opposed being labeled as Hindus and backed the fight against social and economic inequality; sometimes, the disadvantaged Shudra castes and tribal tribes also call themselves Dalit (Sekhon, 46).

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**Movements and Political Policies against Caste**

In order to combat and try to eradicate the injustices and inequities connected to the caste system, several movements and governmental initiatives occurred both before and after independence.

Gandhi started referring to the untouchables as "Harijans" (God's people) during the national movement in an effort to promote a change of perspective toward the lower castes. However, a lot of people from lower castes thought the word was condescending. In 1935, the British Government of India created a list of 400 groups deemed untouchable, along with numerous tribal groups, that would be granted special privileges to combat discrimination and deprivation. The British had begun the Census of India in the late 19th century. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are the names given to the groupings on this list.

However, many leaders of castes deemed untouchable began referring to themselves as Dalits in the 1970s (Sekhon, 48). Jyotirao Phule launched the anti-caste Dalit movement in the middle of the 19th century. He supported education and the advancement of women, Shudras, and Dalits, and the movement quickly expanded across India. Additionally, he sought to end the concept of "untouchability," which included removing barriers to temple access and establishing a position for Dalits in Hinduism (Sekhon, 2000). The B.R. Ambedkar-led Dalit movement, which got its start in the 1920s and 1930s, was another well-known movement. Both during and after British India's independence, he advocated for Dalits' increased rights.

Gandhi and Ambedkar both supported ending the caste system, but they had different ideas on how to do so. Gandhi thought that "goodwill and a change of heart among the upper-caste Hindus could abolish untouchability as a moral issue" (Sekhon, 48). Along with other social movements in India, the Dalit Panthers movement emerged among the younger Dalit population in the 1970s. They expressed their ire and frustration at the lack of implementation of policies aimed at ending upper-caste Hindu violence against Dalits in many urban and rural areas of India.

Based on their percentage of the local population, three major groups of individuals have been found to be eligible for preferred policies that reserve seats in legislatures, government employment, public sector businesses, and state-supervised educational institutions. The Scheduled Castes (SCs), who include groups deemed untouchables, make up the first group (Daniel). The Scheduled Tribes (STs) come in second. Communities that refused to embrace the caste system and favored living far from the majority in India's highlands, woods, and jungles fall under this group.

The SC and ST reservation system was established in the 1960s, but it was up to the individual states to decide who would be classified as OBCs. Economically disadvantaged castes were designated as OBCs in several southern states, although other Indian states have opposed the implementation of these laws. A panel led by B.P. Mandal was established by the Central Government to investigate the matter, and the Mandal panel report was finished by 1978. The three groupings were allotted a large number of seats in state institutions. In addition to 15% for SCs and 7% for STs, the Commission suggested that 27% of seats be set aside for OBCs. In 1990, the Janata Dal government "attempted partial implementation of recommendations leading to widespread unrest and opposition from

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middle- and upper-caste youths, intellectuals, and elites." Regretfully, the government did not implement these policies out of fear of widespread public opposition.

### **Democracy in Society vs. the Caste System**

Democracy's foundations are not found in parliamentary or other types of government. A democracy is not only a system of governance. It is essentially a way of living in association. The social relationships and linked lives of the individuals that make up a society are where democracy's roots may be found. Ambedkar, Dr. Of all the societal issues, caste is the most perplexing. Caste is a problem in Indian society. Caste is a constant that remains the same regardless of changes in religion, while religion is only a belief that may change at any moment in life. When one's employment or social standing changes, it remains unchanged. That is, caste doesn't change. It is comparable to an omega value in that it is a constant that remains constant under all circumstances.

The caste system prevents people from moving up the social ladder. In a caste-based society, an individual would have to stay within that limited level if their family is from the lower economic strata. The caste system has an impact on society by increasing people's exposure to discrimination, stereotyping, and other issues. Disputes throughout society are often brought up by these disparities in ranks. The caste system is rife with injustice and unfairness.

One caste's members dislike interacting with other castes. The unity and integrity of the Indian country are hampered by this split of society into several faiths, castes, and sub-castes. The caste system is the only cause of enslavement for women. It discourages remarriage and promotes child marriage. Women are seen as little more than sex machines. Women in many castes are not permitted to pursue education, work outside the home, or express their opinions. In some cultures, women's reduced status is due to the caste system. In India, no caste respects the rights and sentiments of women. For the simple reason that they are not members of their caste, an Indian is not allowed to eat or marry another Indian. Since he or she is a member of the caste, an Indian is simply not allowed to touch another Indian.

The caste system, which consistently suppresses a segment of the population, is the root cause of communal violence. People from lower castes are forced to carry firearms. Maoist and naxalite activities are just lower caste members' animosity at economic disparity. restricted employment options, which are enforced by other castes as well as inside a caste. Members of a caste may practice more than one traditional vocation, but they would still be limited to that range. limitations on social contacts and nutrition that specify who can accept from whom and what they can eat. Similar to marriage contracts, these limitations are applicable not just at the caste level but also at the sub-caste level. In several regions of the nation, there is physical segregation.

These come with restrictions on access and mobility, including to places of worship and education as well as to necessities like water supply.

People find it difficult to embrace the new ideals and scientific ideas since caste is an ancient system that is still in use today. The caste system breaches all human rights standards upon which UN agreements are based and discriminates against individuals. Many people have been treated

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inhumanely as a result of caste's application. Dalits now make up around 17% of India's population. The vast majority of Indians, over 85%, are minorities, including Muslims, Sikhs, and tribal peoples.

Atrocities against Dalits and other 'lower' castes continue to this day. The caste system's perpetuation of social degradation has relatively few historical precedents. Such care is still given now. Discrimination occurs in many spheres of life, including work, education, health, ownership of property, security, and every facet of women's rights. Democracy is impacted by the psychological impacts on "inferior" castes, which amount to egregious violations of human rights and ongoing brutality.

### **Caste System Vs Political Democracy**

Democracy is hampered by the caste system. The position of castes is not equal. They are positioned over each other.

### **Laws and Provisions in the Constitution for a Casteless Society**

Despite having one of the greatest constitutions, India seldom completely implements it. The Great Indians' earnest efforts have produced the stipulations listed below.

- ❖ Protection of Civil Rights Act-1976
- ❖ Prevention of atrocities against SC & ST's Act -1989

The first fundamental right is the right to equality.

- ❖ Article 14 – Equality before law and equal protection of laws.
- ❖ Article 15 – Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
- ❖ Article 16 – Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.
- ❖ Article 17 – Abolition of untouchability and prohibition of its practice. □ Article 18 – Abolition of titles except military and academic.

### **Fundamental Duty**

51A-(e), to encourage unity and the spirit of fraternity among all Indians, overcoming differences in religion, language, geography, or social class, and to abstain from actions that diminish women's worth.

### **State Policy Directive Principles**

- ❖ Article 38 – To promote the welfare of the people by securing a social order permeated by justice – social, economic and political – and to minimise inequalities in income, status, facilities and opportunities.
- ❖ Article 46 –To promote the educational and economic interests of SCs, STs and other weaker sections of the society and to protect them from social injustice and exploitation.
- ❖ Article 330 – Reservation of seats in Lok Sabha for SC and ST's.
- ❖ Article 332: SC and ST Seat Reservation in the State Assembly.

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### Conclusion

Indian society's values, duties, and jobs have all been significantly shaped by the caste system. For ages, starting with the Aryans and continuing along a long path of regrettable prejudice, segregation, bloodshed, and injustice, religion has been the driving force behind this system of stratification. The foundation of the purity-pollution complex was Hinduism, which also had an impact on Indians' everyday beliefs and way of life. Indians are still subject to caste awareness sixty-three years after gaining their freedom. For thousands of years, India has existed as a closed society with caste, creed, and linguistic divisions. However, there are now fewer barriers to social contact across castes, particularly in metropolitan areas, and the connection between caste and inherited jobs has diminished. Indian civilization is now transitioning from its closed institutions to a stage of transformation and advancement characterized by the affirmation of the human spirit, independent of castes and creeds.

In India, a number of groups opposing the caste system's inequalities have urged people to treat other caste members with greater civility. The partial abolition of the caste system has greatly benefited many lower castes, and India deserves praise for its persistent efforts to remove this stratification structure from its culture. In order to combat and try to eradicate the injustices and inequities connected to the caste system, several movements and governmental initiatives occurred both before and after independence. Gandhi started referring to the untouchables as "Harijans" (God's people) during the national movement in an effort to promote a change of perspective toward the lower castes. However, it is crucial to examine the ways in which caste status has impacted social mobility and quality of life in modern-day India.

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