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Overview of the Caste System in India

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Abstract – The caste system in India is the paradigmatic ethnographic example of caste. Originates in ancient India, and was transformed by various ruling elites in medieval, early-modern, and modern India, especially the Mughal Empire and the British Raj. The caste system consists of two different concepts, varna and jati, which may be regarded as different levels of analysis of this system.

The caste system that exist today, is the result of developments during the collapse of the Mughal era and the rise of the British colonial regime in India. The collapse of the Mughal era saw the rise of powerful men who involved themselves with kings, priests and ascetics, affirming the regal and martial form of the caste ideal, and it also reshaped many apparently casteless social groups into differentiated caste communities.

Key Words: Communities, Caste, Dalits, Untouchables, Occupation, Hierarchy

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1. INTRODUCTION:

India's caste system is probably the longest living and most stringently applied social class structure in the world. Based on ritual purity, the caste system follows a complex ordering of social classes. By fact, Caste is inherited and of descent. This is a characteristic determined by one's birth into a particular caste. Caste denotes a conventional system of hierarchical social stratification, identified by descent and occupation, into graded classes. Although the actual caste ranking differ between regions, the extremes of the continuum are set at the very bottom with Brahmins sitting atop the hierarchy and Dalits, or so-called untouchables.

The caste system is an intrinsic part of Hinduism, the dominant faith practiced by Indians. Individuals are born inherently unequal according to Hindu scripture into a graded caste-based system that determines their status and life opportunities. Sikhs, Christians, and Muslims against Dalits who have converted to these religions in an attempt to avoid their oppression are still actively practicing caste-based discrimination. Though the origins of the caste system have long been a subject of dispute, as has the question of whether it tracks racial groupings, the following theories are worthy of note Caste, as alluded to in scripture, is said to have its origin in the Hindu faith. Throughout the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna proclaims: "I created the four castes;" similarly, the Manu-Smriti sets out the main castes as each is created from a different part of the nature of God, and codifies the respective God-given duties of each caste. Alternative sociological hypotheses propose the caste system as a ceremonial response to the Vedic cultural problem to separate oneself from pollution. A common but disputed suggestion has been that this Vedic community arrived in India with the migration of the Indo-Aryans, from whom the Brahminian "upper castes" are supposedly descended. Still others have focused on the role of British colonial rule in cementing caste-based divisions.

Traditionally, discrepancies in status are explained by the religious doctrine of karma, a belief that one's position in life is decided by one's acts in previous lives. . In the context of the four, conventional scholarship has established these more than two thousand-year-old structures: the Brahmins (priests and teachers), the Ksyatriyas (rulers and soldiers), the Vaisyas (merchants and traders), and the Shudras (laborers and craftspeople). A fifth category is outside of the varna system and consists of those known as "untouchables" or dalits; duties often assigned to the traditional varna system are too ritually polluting to merit inclusion. While most closely identified with Hinduism, the custom of untouchability — the social imposition of specific disabilities on persons considered to be untouchable — permeates all major religions in India and the entire subcontinent. Among the four major castes, there are thousands of sub-castes, also known as jatis; endogamous communities that are further categorized into occupational, political, and ethnic classes; all of these are often generally referred to as "caste Hindus," those who fall under the caste system. The Dalits dropping out of the system are known as

varna-sankara. They are deemed to be so inferior to other castes that they are considered polluting and thus "untouchable." Even as outcasts, they are themselves divided into more sub- and practice untouchability towards those rated below; discrimination is fully internalized giving way to what Dr. Ambedkar called a" graded injustice "system. Whereas the first four varnas have over time enjoyed significant occupational mobility, a majority of Dalits in India continue to involuntarily inherit occupations assigned to the caste into which they are born— occupations deemed too filthy or polluting for others to carry out.

2. CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION AND INEQUALITY:

Especially in much of South Asia and India caste has become coterminous with race based on their descent in defining and excluding distinct population groups. Caste remains the deciding factor for the attainment of legal, political, educational, economic and cultural rights for over 167 million dalits or "untouchables" in India.

2.1 Untouchability

The tradition of "untouchability"— imposing social inequalities on individuals by way of their birth into" untouchable "castes— continues to plague the lives of today's millions of Indians relegated to life below the" pollution "border. The representation of such injustice has taken many forms, and continues to take. Age-old practices included prohibiting Dalits from walking on public streets so that their "polluting" shadow will fall on a Hindu "higher caste," and requiring Dalits to mark themselves with black bracelets; looping a broom around their waists to sweep the "touched" dust they walked on; or hanging an earthen pot around their necks .New India changed only by means of traditions of untouchability. Dalits are still barred from entering temples, are segregated into Dalit ghettoes, and in some areas they are still forced to get off their bike or take off their slippers as they walk past non-Dalit homes — movements that lead Dalits to continuously affirm their inferior status. In housing, marriage, education, and general social life, the caste disparities between Dalits and non-Dalits dominate — disparities compounded by the past and danger of social ostracism, economic boycotts, and physical violence. Dalits are denied access to land, forced to work in unequal conditions, and routinely oppressed by police and "higher-caste" communities who also enjoy State protection. Whole villages in several Indian states remain overwhelmingly caste-separated in what has been called India's "hidden apartheid." As Ambedkar pointed out, "India is simply a land of villages, and so long as the village structure offers a straightforward way to define and designate the untouchable, the untouchable does not escape untouchability." There is ghetto in the village, and the Dalits live in the ghetto. "Untouchability" relegates Dalits to lifetime of slavery, violence, and cruelty, including extreme forms of torture by the state and private actors. Irrespective of the castes into which they are born, Dalits are forced to work in 'polluting' and degrading occupations and are subject to exploitative labor practices such as bonded labour, migratory labour, and forced prostitution Children in these and other areas are vulnerable to slavery and the worst kinds of child labour. Private employers often discriminate against dalits when hiring and paying salaries. Migration and the anonymity of the urban environment have in some cases resulted in upward mobility of employment for Dalits, but the majority continue to play their traditional or "polluting" positions.

In housing, schools, and access to public and private sector facilities, separation between Dalits and non-Dalits is routinely practiced. Ninety-nine per cent of Dalit students are enrolled in state schools where basic amenities, classrooms, teachers and teaching assistance are missing. Government schools by and large teach in local languages as opposed to private schools — the students of which are mainly "upper caste" — teaching in English. Their inability to speak English further disadvantages Dalits in the private sector and the global market. Dalit children also face harassment by teachers and non-Dalit students as well as discrimination in the classroom as well as midday meal provisioning. Dalit schoolchildren and teachers also face discrimination from "upper caste" community members who see education for and by Dalits as both a waste and a risk. Their resentment towards Dalits 'education is linked to the assumption that Dalits are not meant to be trained, unable to be trained or would pose a threat to village hierarchies and power relations if taught.

2.2 Caste discrimination and Dalit women in Rajasthan:

Caste discrimination affects Dalit women who experience multiple types of discrimination in a peculiar and complex way. Dalit women are very much vulnerable to police and private actors becoming perpetrators of abuse. With the majority of landless workers, Dalit women have more interaction with landlords and compliance agencies than women from the "upper caste," rendering them more vulnerable to violence. Landlords use sexual harassment and other forms of violence and humiliation against Dalit women as instruments for inflicting "lessons" and suppressing resistance and labor movements within Dalit communities. Susceptibility to sexual violence often stems from the lower economic and social status of Dalit women, causing many to resort to survival prostitution. Dalit women have unparalleled access to facilities, job opportunities and justice systems relative to Dalit men. In terms

of work opportunities, Dalit women are given some of the most lower and arduous tasks and face greater discrimination in wage pay than Dalit men. Dalit women have less access to education and health facilities in relation to employment, meaning that their schooling, nutrition, and health levels fall well below those of Dalit men and non-Dalit men and women. The number of Dalit women in decision-making roles is also very small, and Dalit women are not represented at all in some of the central employment. Benefits from various Dalit development schemes, such as land distribution and other productive properties, have largely gone to Dalit males and they have failed to improve the status of Dalit females. Investment in Dalit female development projects is also much lower than that for males. Devadasi tradition, in which a girl is ceremoniously dedicated or married to a deity or temple, usually before she reaches the age of puberty, Continues in other Southern Indian states like Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Devadasis is traditionally a member of the Dalit caste, meaning literally "godly female laborer." The girl is reluctant to marry when married, is forced to become a prostitute for members of the "upper caste" class, and eventually auctioned into a brothel in the urban area. The age-old custom continues to legitimize the sexual harassment and sexism which have defined the intersection of caste and gender.

2.3 Dalits among Dalits:

Dalit women make up the majority of manual scavengers — a caste-based profession where Dalits collect excrement from public and private dry pit latrines and take it to dumping grounds and disposal sites. However, the "occupation" of manual scavenging is the only available economic opportunity for many Dalit women who come from scavenger sub-castes leading to more Dalit women and girls working as manual scavengers than Dalit men. Manual scavengers are situated at the very bottom of the graded hierarchy of caste system oppression and thus face discrimination from other non-scavenger caste Dalits who see them as 'untouchable,' creating an unquestioned 'untouchability' within the 'untouchable'. The graved discrimination towards manual scavengers makes it difficult to find alternative jobs and even more segregated.

3. CONCLUSIONS:

While "untouchability" has been legally abolished pursuant to Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, the custom remains determinant of those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy's social and economic outcomes. Although "untouchability" is generally seen as a religiously enforced means of separating the pure from the impure, it is, at its root, a mechanism for fostering and sanctioning an economic exploitative order. As a result, in India today, Dalits continue to rank amongst other social groups in all major social and economic indicators. While Dalits have made some gains across a variety of metrics in the six decades since independence, their socio-economic growth still lags significantly behind non-Dalits.

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