

# The Historical Background of Indian Caste System in Ancient India: A Review

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**Abstract – This speculative paper argues that the caste system of India could be seen as a present-day remnant of 'tribal apartheid' which came into being when Indo-European warlike nomadic pastoralists overran and dominated an earlier urban Dravidian peoples. This form of discrimination based on identity is akin to racism. The enduring salience of caste and colour consciousness among Indians forms one of the great modern paradoxes that have resisted Indian governmental attempts to bring about social change.**

**This lesson teaches about the Caste System of Ancient India by grouping students so that they act out roles of the Caste as they complete an assignment. Students experience first-hand the lack of equality and fairness that exists in India. At the conclusion of the lesson students compare the caste system with the American class structure. This lesson will stir a lively discussion and lead to student thinking about the inequalities that exist among most societies, including our own.**

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## INTRODUCTION

About 3,600 years ago, a group of cattle herders from Central Asia settled into India. This group of people, called the Aryans, brought with them their beliefs, customs, and writing system (Sanskrit). They introduced a rigid caste structure that divided people into four classes.

Under this setup, Brahmins or priests made up the highest caste. They held a tremendous amount of power over everybody else. They were the only ones who could both study and teach the holy texts, known as the Vedas. They were also the only ones who could perform sacrifices and other religious rites. Because of their authority, people of other castes often gave them generous donations. By giving Brahmins (also spelled as Brahmins) valuable goods, people of other castes believed that they would be rewarded in their next life. Next to the Brahmin class was the Kshatriya (pronounced "shuh-TREE-uh") class. It consisted of warriors and rulers.

Kshatriyas' main duties were to govern and defend the country. Though they could learn the Vedas as Brahmins did, they could not teach the holy texts. As Kshatriyas were responsible for the national defense, they underwent extensive military training. They were the experts in archery, swordsmanship, and hand-to-hand combat.

The Aryans categorized farmers and merchants as their society's third caste, called the Vaishya (pronounced "VYSH-yuh"). Vaishyas were expected to

tend cattle, to farm, or to trade. Like Kshatriyas, they could only learn, but not teach, the Vedas. Beneath the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, and the Vaishya castes was the Shudra (also spelled as Sudra) caste. It represented the majority of the populace. People in this caste did menial, labor-intensive work. They took on the duties of servants, craftsmen, or laborers.

Shudras received little informal education. They were not allowed to learn the Vedas, so they could not participate in the initiation ceremony that boys of the three upper castes were entitled to when they began learning the holy texts. The ancient Indians believed that a person who had the initiation ceremony was "twice-born." The first was, of course, the person's physical birth. The second was his spiritual birth. As Shudras could not learn the Vedas, they would never experience a spiritual birth. Thus, they had only one birth.

Though Shudras were the lowest of the four classes, they were still better off than the so-called outcastes. The outcastes, as the name suggests, were people who did not belong to any of the four castes. They did work that nobody else wanted to do. They swept the streets. They collected garbage. They cleaned up toilets. And they disposed of dead animals or humans. The outcastes could not live in cities or villages. They led a lonely, humiliated life. When they ate, they could only take meals from broken dishes. When they traveled, they needed to move off the path if someone from a higher caste was approaching. When they entered a marketplace, they had to strike a piece of wood to announce their presence, so that other people

could avoid them. The outcastes were not allowed to drink from a public well. They were not allowed to enter a temple. And they were not allowed to study. Given that they stirred fear and were despised everywhere they went, nobody in the ancient Indian society wanted to see, hear, or touch them. This group of people in India suffered the worst fate. They simply became known as the untouchables!

The Aryans' caste system came from local legends. When Brahma, the god of creation, made humans, his mouth became the Brahmins, his arms the Kshatriyas, his legs the Vaishyas, and his feet the Shudras. Tales aside, the caste system was a very important element in ancient India. It followed a specific set of guidelines (called the Laws of Manu) that dictated every person's behavior.

The guidelines set rules from the type of jobs a person could hold to the type of foods a person could eat. According to the Laws of Manu, each caste was represented by a color. White was for the Brahmins, red for the Kshatriyas, yellow for the Vaishyas, and blue for the Shudras. Marrying someone within a person's own caste was norm. Marrying someone outside of a person's caste was rare, but possible. Children born from an inter-caste marriage needed to follow a different set of rules to determine what caste they belonged to.

The ancient Indians believed that each person had an eternal soul that could be reborn in a new body after death. While that person could never move from one caste to another in this life, he or she could be reborn to a different caste in the next life. If the person did a lot of good deeds (such as giving Brahmins generous donations) in this life, he or she would have the chance of being reborn to a higher caste in the next life. If the person did a lot of horrible things (such as committing a crime) in this life, he or she would risk being reborn to a lower caste in the next life.

The caste system had been prevalent in India's society for thousands of years. It was deeply embedded in the country's dominant religion, Hinduism. Though discriminations on the basis of a person's caste had already been outlawed in the 1900s, they still exist today. Because of this, the caste system has continued to be a sensitive issue in modern India. It is a topic better approached with extreme caution.

In ancient India, society was organized so that each specialized job was performed by a specific group, or caste. The interdependence of all of the various castes was recognized, and each one was considered necessary to the society as a whole. In the earliest known mention of caste, perhaps dating from about 1000 B.C.E., the metaphor (symbol) of the human body was used to describe Indian society. This metaphor stresses the idea of hierarchy as well as that of interdependence. The brahman, or priestly, caste represents society's head; the kshatriya, or warrior,

caste are its arms; the vaishya caste—traders and landowners—are the legs; and the sudra caste—the servants of the other three—are the feet. These four castes—brahman, kshatriya, vaishya, and sudra—are the classical four divisions of Hindu society. In practice, however, there have always been many subdivisions (J'atis) of these castes.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

There are different theories about the establishment of the caste system. There are religious-mystical theories. There are biological theories. And there are socio-historical theories.

The religious theories explain how the four Varnas were founded, but they do not explain how the Jats in each Varna or the untouchables were founded. According to the Rig Veda, the ancient Hindu book, the primal man - Purush - destroyed himself to create a human society. The different Varnas were created from different parts of his body. The Brahmins were created from his head; the Kshatriyas from his hands; the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Sudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created. Other religious theory claims that the Varnas were created from the body organs of Brahma, who is the creator of the world.

The biological theory claims that all existing things, animated and inanimated, inherent three qualities in different apportionment. Sattva qualities include wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness and other positive qualities. Rajas include qualities like passion, pride, valour and other passionate qualities. Tamas qualities include dullness, stupidity, lack of creativity and other negative qualities. People with different doses of these inherent qualities adopted different types of occupation.

According to this theory the Brahmins inherent Sattva qualities. Kshatriyas and Vaishyas inherent Rajas qualities. And the Sudras inherent Tamas qualities.

Like human beings, food also inherents different dosage of these qualities and it affects its eater's intelligence. The Brahmins and the Vaishyas have Sattvic diet which includes fruits, milk, honey, roots and vegetables. Most of the meats are considered to have Tamasic qualities. Many Sudra communities eat different kinds of meat (but not beef) and other Tamasic food. But the Kshatriyas who had Rajasic diet eat some kinds of meat like deer meat which is considered to have Rajasic qualities. Many Marathas who claim to be Kshatriyas eat mutton. The drawback of this theory is that in different parts of India the same food was sometimes qualified to have different dosage of inherent qualities. For example there were Brahmins who eat meat which is considered Tamasic food.

The social historical theory explains the creation of the Varnas, Jats and of the untouchables. According to this theory, the caste system began with the arrival of the Aryans in India. The Aryans arrived in India around 1500 BC. The fair skinned Aryans arrived in India from south Europe and north Asia. Before the Aryans there were other communities in India of other origins. Among them Negrito, Mongoloid, Austroloid and Dravidian. The Negrito have physical features similar to people of Africa. The Mongoloid have Chinese features. The Austroloids have features similar the aboriginals of Australia. The Dravidians originate from the Mediterranean and they were the largest community in India. When the Aryans arrived in India their main contact was with the Dravidians and the Austroloids. The Aryans disregarded the local cultures. They began conquering and taking control over regions in north India and at the same time pushed the local people southwards or towards the jungles and mountains in north India.

The Aryans organized among themselves in three groups. The first group was of the warriors and they were called Rajayana, later they changed their name Rajayana to Kshatria. The second group was of the priests and they were called Brahmins. These two groups struggled politically for leadership among the Aryans. In this struggle the Brahmins got to be the leaders of the Aryan society. The third group was of the farmers and craftsmen and they were called Vaisia. The Aryans who conquered and took control over parts of north India subdued the locals and made them their servants. In this process the Vaisias who were the farmers and the craftsmen became the landlords and the businessmen of the society and the locals became the peasants and the craftsmen of the society.

In order to secure their status the Aryans resolved some social and religious rules which, allowed only them to be the priests, warriors and the businessmen of the society. For example take Maharashtra. Maharashtra is in west India. This region is known by this name for hundreds of years. Many think that the meaning of the name Maharashtra is in its name, Great Land. But there are some who claim that the name, Maharashtra, is derived from the Jat called Mahar who are considered to be the original people of this region. In the caste hierarchy the dark skinned Mahars were outcasts. The skin color was an important factor in the caste system. The meaning of the word "Varna" is not class or status but skin color.

Between the outcasts and the three Aryan Varnas there is the Sudra Varna who are the simple workers of the society. The Sudras consisted of two communities. One community was of the locals who were subdued by the Aryans and the other were the descendants of Aryans with locals. In Hindu religious stories there are many wars between the good Aryans

and the dark skinned demons and devils. The different Gods also have dark skinned slaves. There are stories of demon women trying to seduce good Aryan men in deceptive ways. There were also marriages between Aryan heroes and demon women. Many believe that these incidences really occurred in which, the gods and the positive heroes were people of Aryan origin. And the demons, the devils and the dark skinned slaves were in fact the original residence of India whom the Aryans coined as monsters, devil, demons and slaves.

As in most of the societies of the world, so in India, the son inherited his father's profession. And so in India there developed families, who professed the same family profession for generation in which, the son continued his father's profession. Later on as these families became larger, they were seen as communities or as they are called in Indian languages, Jat. Different families who professed the same profession developed social relations between them and organized as a common community, meaning Jat.

Later on the Aryans who created the caste system, added to their system non-Aryans. Different Jats who professed different professions were integrated in different Varnas according to their profession. Other foreign invaders of ancient India - Greeks, Huns, Scythians and others - who conquered parts of India and created kingdoms were integrated in the Kshatria Varna (warrior castes). But probably the Aryan policy was not to integrate original Indian communities within them and therefore many aristocratic and warrior communities that were in India before the Aryans did not get the Kshatria status.

Most of the communities that were in India before the arrival of the Aryans were integrated in the Sudra Varna or were made outcast depending on the professions of these communities. Communities who professed non-polluting jobs were integrated in Sudra Varna. And communities who professed polluting professions were made outcasts. The Brahmins are very strict about cleanliness. In the past people believed that diseases can also spread also through air and not only through physical touch. Perhaps because of this reason the untouchables were not only disallowed to touch the high caste communities but they also had to stand at a certain distance from the high castes.

## THE RELIGIOUS FORM OF CASTE SYSTEM

In Hinduism there exists four castes arranged in a hierarchy. Anyone who does not belong to one of these castes is an outcast. The religious word for caste is 'Varna'. Each Varna has certain duties and rights. Each Varna members have to work in certain occupation which only that Varna members are allowed. Each Varna has certain type of diet. The highest Varna is of the Brahman. Members of this class are priests and the

educated people of the society. The Varna after them in hierarchy is Kshatria. The members of this class are the rulers and aristocrats of the society. After them are the Vaisia. Members of this class are the landlords and businessmen of the society. After them in hierarchy are the Sudra. Members of this class are the peasants and working class of the society who work in non-polluting jobs. The caste hierarchy ends here. Below these castes are the outcasts who are untouchable to the four castes. These untouchables worked in degrading jobs like cleaning, sewage etc.

The first three castes had social and economical rights which the Sudra and the untouchables did not have. The first three castes are also seen as 'twice born'. The intention in these two births is to the natural birth and to the ceremonial entrance to the society at a much later age.

Each Varna and also the untouchables are divided into many communities. These communities are called Jat or Jati (The caste is also used instead of Jat). For example the Brahmins have Jats called Gaur, Konkanash, Sarasvat, Iyer and others. The outcasts have Jats like Mahar, Dhed, Mala, Madiga and others. The Sudra is the largest Varna and it has the largest number of communities. Each Jat is limited to professions worthy of their Varna. Each Jat is limited to the Varna diet. Each Jat members are allowed to marry only with their Jat members. People are born into their Jat and it cannot be changed.

This is the how the caste system is supposed to be in its religious form. But in reality it is much more complicated and different from its religious form.

## THE FOUR VARNA

The word caste comes from the Portuguese word *castas*, meaning "pure." This Portuguese word expresses one of the most central values of Indian society: the idea of ritual purity. In India, however, the word *varna*, or "color," denotes the fourfold division of Indian society. The word *varna* may have been used because each of the four castes was assigned a specific color as its emblem. In Hindu religious texts, the *dharma*—the law, or duty—of each *varna* is described. It was thought that this *dharma* was an inherited, or inborn, quality. Consequently, people thought that if intermarriages took place, there would be much confusion as to the *dharma* of the next generation of children. As a result of such concerns, marriage between different castes was strictly prohibited. The practice of marrying only a person of "one's own kind" is called endogamy and is still a central role in many Hindu communities.

The Brahmins. The brahman caste is assigned the highest status of the four *varnas* but also must live by the strictest rules. In their very name, brahmins are identified with the supreme being, and so are expected to uphold this high honor by their conduct. In addition,

they must observe many detailed rules concerning ritual purity in their personal lives. They must avoid contact with dirt, for instance, and may not eat foods such as meat that are considered to be polluted. Because of the strict rules that the brahmins observe, they cannot perform many of the tasks necessary to everyday life. They cannot obtain their own food, for instance, or use violence to defend themselves. Thus, they must depend on other castes to perform these essential services. This is one way in which the interdependence of the castes is evident. Without the other castes, there could be no brahmins. In terms of occupation, the first duty of a brahmin is to study the Vedas, the ancient scriptures of India. A young brahmin boy begins this period of study after going through a special ceremony marking his spiritual rebirth. Kshatriya and vaishya boys also go through this ceremony of "rebirth" at age 10 or 11. After the ceremony, each boy is given a sacred thread to wear around his neck as a symbol of membership in the "twice-born" castes. After ten or more years of study, a brahmin may become a priest of a temple, or he may instruct boys of the twice-born castes in Sanskrit and the Vedas. If there is no employment available as a priest or teacher, a brahmin may enter certain other occupations. He must be careful, however, to observe all of the rules and rituals of his caste.

The Kshatriyas. The kshatriya caste includes soldiers, generals, and kings. Their traditional role is to defend the society from invaders and robbers, and they are expected to be both brave and high-minded. The kshatriyas must study the ancient Hindu scriptures under the guidance of a Brahmin teacher and are expected to follow many of the same rules of ritual purity that the brahmin caste observes.

The Vaishyas. The job specialties of the vaishya caste are agriculture and cattle raising. The vaishyas also carry on trading activities; for example, they bring farm products to market and lend money to keep various enterprises going. Like the brahmins and the kshatriyas, the vaishyas are a twice-born caste.

The Sudras. In ancient law, the sudras were given only one occupation: to serve the members of the twice-born castes. As servants to the other three castes, the sudras performed many of the tasks that involve "pollution," such as agricultural labor, leather working, disposing of garbage, and laundering. In time, however, many sudras became wealthy farmers or artisans in their own right. When a sudrajati, or subcaste, improved its status in this way, it was also able to adopt many of the rituals and habits of the twice-born castes. Menial tasks then became the *dharma* of the "out-casts" of society—the untouchables, or harijans.

The Untouchables, or Harijans. Inevitably, there were certain people who failed to live up to their caste *dharma* or who violated the rules concerning marriage between castes. Such people and their children were



considered outcasts from Hindu society. They had to live apart from other castes and were given the jobs that no one else wanted to perform. Because of their contact with things considered unclean or polluted, the outcasts were believed to be deeply tainted. They came to be thought of as "untouchable" because people believed that their touch—or even the sight of them—would compromise a brahman's purity. The untouchables were not admitted into Hindu temples and instead formed religious sects of their own. Over the centuries, they also organized into sub-castes much like those of orthodox Hindu society. In the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi made it one of his life's goals to bring the untouchables back into Hindu society. He renamed them the harijans, or "children of God," and tried to convince orthodox Hindus to admit them into their temples and their everyday lives. However, other leaders doubted that upper-caste Hindus would ever treat the harijans as equals. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a distinguished scholar who had been born an "untouchable," was a leading spokesman for this view. He used the term scheduled castes when referring to this group, for he believed that the term harijans was demeaning. The scheduled castes, he said, should withdraw from Hinduism altogether and join another religion, such as Buddhism, which does not recognize caste distinctions. After India became an independent nation in 1947, its new constitution outlawed the practice of "untouchability." The constitution also established affirmative action programs to ensure that the scheduled castes would have access to higher education and better jobs. In contrast to similar legislation in the United States, these clauses actually guarantee that a certain percentage of university and job openings will be assigned to disadvantaged groups. Because of these programs, there has been a marked improvement in the status of the scheduled castes. Yet discrimination continues, and the condition of the former "untouchables" is still a major social issue today.

## THE HIERARCHY OF JATIS, OR SUB-CASTES

While the term varna refers to the classic, or ideal, division of society, people use the word Jati when speaking of the thousands of sub-castes that exist in practice. The jatis perform the many specialized jobs that are considered essential to society—farming, metalworking, pottery making, carpentry, weaving, laundering, marketing, and many others. Relations among these various castes are governed by elaborate rules. Each one is very much aware of its status and duties in regard to the others. The members of each jati are believed to inherit the caste dharma necessary to carry out their role in society. In practice, however, each person becomes aware of all the complicated rules regarding dharma during childhood—usually by observing the behavior of family members. These rules concern not only the caste specialty but also the many other services and

courtesies that are owed to other castes. The quality of ritual purity is the most important factor in determining the rank of a jati in society. If a jati is to maintain or improve its status, its members must accept food and water only from people of their own caste or a higher caste. (For this reason, brahman priests are often employed as cooks during religious festivals.) A jati must also avoid contact with castes who are considered to be pollution-prone.

**Mobility of Castes.** In practice, there have always been more possibilities for upward (or downward) movement within the caste system than the classic rules of varna would suggest. To achieve a higher place in the social hierarchy, the members of a jati often take the following steps: enter an occupation that involves less contact with pollution; follow stricter rules of purity in daily life; and learn Sanskrit, the classic language of the holy scriptures.

## THE CONTINUITY OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

Countless reformers have attempted to abolish or reform the caste system. However, these reform movements have had little effect. Today, the caste system continues to be the main form of government in villages throughout India. In large part, its continuity depends on two central concepts: caste dharma and karma. In Hindu society, caste dharma is considered to be a divine law. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, caste dharma is "the duty one has to perform" and "the law of one's being." Many Hindus believe that this obligation tends to enhance the spiritual development of the individual. Because of it, each person learns from an early age to overcome selfish desires and instead focus on group goals and ideals. The concept of karma helps to explain differences in status that might otherwise be considered unfair. Because one's caste membership is thought to be a result of actions in a previous life, a person tends to accept this status rather than complain about it. By the same token, a successful performance of caste duty will improve one's karma and perhaps lead to improved status in the next life. The caste system also returns certain practical benefits to the individual. Being a member of a jati gives each person a sense of identity and of belonging to a well-defined group within society. The members of a jati have much in common. They share a job specialty and abide by the same rules concerning diet and religion. Because of the rules of endogamy, each jati is also an extended family, for most members are related by blood.

**Caste in India's Cities.** In the modern cities of India, people daily come in contact with hundreds of strangers in public transportation and in the workplace. In this context, the traditional caste rules of the villages cannot be observed. But many city dwellers nevertheless retain a strong sense of caste identity. Thus, one phenomenon of modern India is the device known as "compartmentalization." During the day, a person may

learn to be unconcerned with caste rules. But at home, and in the company of other cast members, the ancient ceremonies and rules continue to be respected.

## THE NON-HINDUS IN CASTE SYSTEM

Religiously anyone who does not belong to the four Varnas is an outcast and untouchable. It means, all foreigners and non-Hindus are all supposed to be untouchables. But in reality neither all foreigners nor non-Hindus were treated as untouchables. Foreigners and non-Hindus were treated differently in different parts of India. Some of the foreigners adopted Hinduism and integrated in the upper level of the Hindu hierarchy.

The Rajputs of Rajasthan belong to the Kshatria Varna (warrior castes). The Rajputs, more than any other Indian Jat, represent the warrior castes of India. Almost any Indian community which claims to be a warrior community, claims a Rajput ancestry. But it is believed that many foreign invaders of ancient India (see- India in the past), like Scythians; Huns; Greeks and others, who adopted Hinduism, integrated in the Rajput community and acquired a Kshatria status (see also Sati - burning of the widow).

The Konkanash Brahmins of west India are also believed to have non- Indian descent. According to a Hindu legend, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, Parsuram, found on the Konkan beach some dead bodies which were washed to the shore. In order to cremate them Parsuram gathered them on a pyre. These dead bodies woke up on pyre, probably because they were not dead in the first place but were only unconscious. Parsuram converted these people to Hinduism and made them Brahmins. There are other theories about the origins of these Konkanash Brahmins. Many of these Brahmins have gray-green eyes. Some claim them to be Vikings or of other European origin. In the Konkan coast there is Jewish community called Bene Israel. Some claim that these Jews are from the 'Lost Tribes'. These Jews who arrived in India after their ship-wrecked near the Konkan coast claim that they and the Konkanash Brahmins are descendants of the survivors from the same ship. And in their version, it was not an incarnation of Lord Vishnu who converted the Konkanash Brahmins but a local Brahmin. Anyway these Jews do not have gray-green eyes like the Konkanash Brahmins.

Different religion followers got different status in different parts of India. The Jews of west India (called Bene Israel) had a different status from Jews of south India (Cochini Jews). In general the Bene Israel had low status. The Bene Israel professed oil pressing and they had a status equal to a Hindu Jat called Somvar Teli, which also professed oil pressing and were part of Sudra Varna. Some orthodox Hindus treated anyone who was a non-Hindu or doing any

type as polluting job as untouchable and therefore treated the Jews as untouchables. But even though the Jews in west India had low status there were among them some who were landlords, businessmen and high rank officers in local armies.

Comparing to the Bene Israel, the Jews in south India had higher status. The Jews in Kerala were the business community of Kerala. They even ruled a small kingdom. They had aristocratic rights, such as use of elephants and sedans. They even had servants whose job was to announce their coming to the streets so that the low castes could move away from their way.

The relations between the Jewish communities of India are sometimes explained as affected by the Indian caste system but these relations can also be explained according to Jewish religious laws. There were three main Jewish communities in India. The Baghdadi, the Bene Israel and Cochini. The Baghdadi Jews were much strict about religious laws than the Bene Israel Jews. The Baghdadi did not mingle with Bene Israel Jews. The Baghdadi did not allow marriages between their children and the children of Bene Israel. They did not eat food prepared by Bene Israel and they refused to count the Bene Israel as part of the Minyan (the ten necessary to start a Jewish prayer). Many explain these relations as an influence of the Indian caste system on the Jewish communities. According to this explanation, the Baghdadi Jews referred to themselves as higher caste than the Bene Israel Jews and therefore did not mingle with them. But these relations between the Jewish communities can also be explained according to the Jewish Halacha laws. The Baghdadi Jews who were much strict about Jewish laws and diet did not mingle with the Bene Israel because the Bene Israel were secular Jews and they perceived in Bene Israel Jews as impure Jews.

The Muslims who arrived in India were strong and powerful to be treated as untouchables. Not only were they strong in the military sense, they also tried to enforce their religion on the Indians. The Indians who converted to Islam in most of the cases remained in the same social status as they had before their conversion to Islam. Hindus from the higher Varnas remained at the higher levels of Indian society. Hindus from the lower levels of the hierarchy thought that by converting to Islam they would come out from the Hindu hierarchy system, but in most of the cases they remained in the same hierarchy level after they converted. Among the Muslims of India there has developed a two-tier hierarchy. The upper class, called Sharif Jat, includes Muslims who belonged to the higher levels in caste hierarchy and also Muslims who arrived to India from foreign countries. The lower class, called Ajlaf Jat, includes Muslim converts from lower castes. As in the world, the upper classes do not have close social relations with lower classes, the

same way the Sharif Jat do not normally have close social relations with Ajlaf Jat.

The different Christian communities of India were treated in different ways in different parts of India. The Syrian Christians of Kerala had a high status. Along with the Jews, they were the business communities of Kerala and they too had aristocratic rights. The Indians who were baptized from the 16th century by Christian missionaries remained mostly in the same status they had before. As in the Muslim community of India, the Christians also have a two-tier social hierarchy. Many untouchables who converted to Christianity are still treated as untouchables, sometimes by other Christians.

The European Christians are also supposed to be untouchables to Hindus. Some Europeans in the 17th and 18th century even claimed that they were treated as untouchables. But later on with British rule over India it were the upper level Hindu castes, specially the Brahmans, who adopted the European democratic philosophy according to which all are equal and they introduced it to other Indians.

Other religions which were established in India - Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism - also have some marks of caste system, even though they oppose caste system. Sikhism rejects caste system. But different Jats who adopted Sikhism act according to traditional Jat lines. The different Jats normally marry within caste lines. The Jats which were the elite of the Punjab and converted to Sikhism do not give equal respect to Sikhs who belong to the lower levels of Indian hierarchy. The Jains also have separate communities who marry within the community lines. The Buddhist in India have a two-tier hierarchy and just like in the cases of Christians and Muslims it is also related to the status of the community to whom the person belongs. On the other hand the Mahar community of west India, who were untouchables and converted mostly to Buddhism, prefer, because of different political reasons to recognize themselves as Mahars and not always as Buddhists.

Not all residents of India were part of the caste system. About 7% of India's population are referred to as tribes and not as castes or Jats. These tribes are scattered all around India and they are descendants of communities who were not interested in the Varna hierarchy. They preferred to live away from the main societies deep in the jungles, forests and mountains of India. They survived mostly on fishing, hunting or simple agriculture, and also from stealing, robbing and plundering. These tribes had different religious beliefs and different gods. Some of them had simple beliefs, but others use to sacrifice human beings in their ceremonies. One such tribe, called Gond, had a strong kingdom in central India. Most of the tribes adopted

Hinduism, others adopted Islam or Christianity. Some tribes in East India claim to Jewish origin.

## CONCLUSION

Untouchability was born out of caste system which is a blot on the Hindu society. Individual Caste solidarity was there but the national solidarity was retarded due to the caste system. Dirks suggested that, it was under the British that "caste" became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all "systematizing" India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization.

The Indian caste system has played a significant role in shaping the occupations and roles as well as values of Indian society. Religion has been the constant push towards this stratification system for centuries, beginning with the Aryans and continuing down a long road of unfortunate discrimination, segregation, violence, and inequality. Hinduism was the backbone of the purity pollution complex, and it was the religion that influenced the daily lives and beliefs of the Indian people. Even after sixty-eight years of independence, Indians continue to be in the grip of caste consciousness.

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