

the caste system

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 (**Jatis**) of these castes.

1. 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 rule 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, brahmans 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 *brahmans* 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 *brahmans*.

In terms of occupation, the first duty of a *brahman* is to study the **Vedas**, the ancient scriptures of India. A young *brahman* 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 brahman 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 *brahman* 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 *Brahman* teacher and are expected to follow many of the same rules of ritual purity that the *brahman* 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 *brahmans* 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.

2. 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.

3. 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 caste members, the ancient ceremonies and rules continue to be respected.

Source: *India: Its Culture and People*. Anne Ferguson Jensen. New York: Longman Publishing Group, 1991, pp. 31-36.



Brahman

A late hymn from the *Rig-Veda*, a classical Hindu poem:

When the gods made a sacrifice with the
Man as their victim
When they divided the Man, into how
many parts did they divide him?
What was his mouth, what were his
arms, what were his thighs and his
feet called?
The *brahman* was his mouth, of his arms
were made the warrior.
His thighs became the *vaishya*, of his
feet the *sudra* was born.
With Sacrifice the gods sacrificed the
Sacrifice, these were the first of the
sacred laws.
These mighty beings reached the sky,
where are the eternal spirits, the gods.