

## An Analysis on Caste Discrimination in India

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### Introduction

Caste is a form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a lifestyle which often includes an occupation, status in a hierarchy, customary social interaction, and exclusion. It is an extreme evolution of a system of legally-entrenched social classes, also endogamous and hereditary, such as that of feudal Europe. Although caste systems exist in various regions, its paradigmatic ethnographic example is the division of Indian society into rigid social groups, with roots in India's ancient history and persisting until today; it is sometimes used as an analogical basis for the study of caste-like social divisions existing outside India. In biology, the term is applied to role stratification in social animals like ants and termites, though the analogy is imperfect as these also involve extremely stratified reproduction.

### Definition of caste

- A system of dividing society into classes.
- A class of physically distinct individuals with a particular function in the society.

### Features of caste

Generally speaking, castes are mutually exclusive, often localized groups into which individuals are born. These represent minutely graded levels of social distance and a way of life influenced by a tradition of customs and taboos.

Castes have been evolving over the years. Legal changes, education, new employment opportunities, urbanization etc. have transformed many features of cast system. Some features are:

- **Hierarchy:**

The caste system represents and hierarchic pyramid with Brahmans at the top, various so called lower castes at the bottom and thousands of other cases in the middle.

- **Hereditary Status:**

Caste is determined by birth and there is very little room for change.

- **Traditional Occupation:**

In the traditional ancient system, almost every caste followed a certain occupation which was handed down from its one generation to another. Temple Priests, Carpenters, barbers, came from traditional castes.

- **Endogamy:**

Individuals marry within their own castes. And does not marry girls from other caste people.

- **Commisural Restrictions:**

Lower castes were denied many opportunities, they were not allowed to wear jewellery, enter temples or attend schools. According to Blunt, there were seven restrictions in this context.

(a) Cooking taboo, which lay rules that may cute food.

(b) Eating Taboo

(c) Commensally taboo

(d) Food taboo (Rules regarding food kacha, pucca, etc.)

(e) Smoking taboo (Rules regarding smoking Hukka)

(f) Vessels taboo (Types of vessels to be used).

- **Castes are Localized Groups:**

There are no uniform standards that evaluate castes all over the country. A particular caste may be considered 'untouchable' in our region but not so in another region.

### **Caste in Indian society**

The Indian society is divided into various sects and classes. This is because of the caste system which is prevalent in the country. The roots of the caste system go back to the ancient Vedas dividing people on the basis of varna or occupation. It has brought many evils in the

society. The Government is constantly striving to overcome the harms of the system and bring about true equality among the people.

The caste system is the bane for the Indian society. It divides the Indian society into sectarian groups and classes. Even today, it plays a predominant role in our society despite the growth of culture and civilization.

- The terms ‘Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes’ (SC/ST) are the official terms used in government documents to identify former untouchables and tribes. However, in 2008 the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, noticing that the word ‘Dalit’ was used interchangeably with the official term ‘Scheduled Castes’, asked the State Governments to end the use of the word ‘Dalit’ in official documents by calling the term ‘unconstitutional’ and to replace it with the term ‘Scheduled Caste’ instead.
- The roots of the caste system are traced back to the ancient ages. While one view discriminates between the castes as upper and lower castes on the basis of their origin, another view traces the origin of the castes to varnas which classifies the caste system on the basis of their functions. Since then, it was found that undue advantage was taken by the section of people having an upper hand and a say in the community, leading to discrimination and exploitation of the weaker sections of community.
- The people from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, referred to as ‘untouchables’ form one-sixth of India’s population or 160 million; they endure discrimination and segregation.

### **Evil faces of this system**

#### **Untouchability**

Many villages are separated by caste and they may not cross the line dividing them from the higher castes. They also may not use the same wells or drink in the same tea stalls as higher castes.

#### **Discrimination**

They often do not have the facility to electricity, sanitation facilities or water pumps in lower caste neighborhoods. Access to better education, housing and medical facilities than that of the higher castes is denied.

**Division of Labour**

They are restricted to certain occupations like sanitation work, plantation work, leather works, cleaning streets, etc.

**Slavery**

They are subjected to exploitation in the name of debt, tradition, etc., to work as labourers or perform menial tasks for generations together.

**Problems of caste****Social Problems:**

These problems pertained to the concept of purity and pollution. The untouchables were given a very low position in the society. The high-caste Hindus maintained a social distance from them. They were denied many basic amenities of life which were accorded to the high-caste Hindus. They were dependent on the tradition of Hindus for items of food and drink.

**Religious Problems:**

These pertained to the denial of the right of entering temples which were exclusively served by the high-caste Brahmins. The untouchables were neither allowed to enter the temples nor served by the Brahmins. They had no right to worship the Gods and Goddesses in the temple.

**Economic Problem:**

They suffered from many economic problems. They had to face many economic hardships and they were not given proper reward for their service. Traditionally, untouchables were deprived of landed property of their own. They were not allowed to carry on any business. They were not permitted to engage themselves in the professions which were being carried out by the people of other castes.

The untouchables were not free to choose any occupation according to their own ability they had to clean the streets, remove dead cattle and to undertake heavy agricultural work.

Mostly they were landless labourers. They worked in the fields of high- caste Hindus as labourers.

### **Public Disabilities:**

Harijans had to face many public indignities because they were denied the right to use the services of public utilities like wells, public transport as well as educational institutions.

### **Educational Problems:**

Traditionally the untouchables were deprived of getting education. They were not allowed to use public educational institutions. Even today most of the illiterates are untouchables. Describing the conditions of Harijans, K.M. Pannikar has remarked, their position, when the system functioned in its pristine glory, was in many ways worse than that of slavery. The slave at least was a chattel of the master and therefore, he stood in an individual relation to his owner. Considerations of economic self -interest and even human feeling modified the barbarism of personal slavery. But these mitigating factors did not apply to the system of untouchability, which was mostly perceived as a system of communal slave holding. Instead of an individual owning slave, each village held the untouchable families attached to it in a kind of slavery. No individual of the higher castes was supposed to have any personal relations with an untouchable.

## **Caste related Incidences**

### **Mirchpur, Hissar**

On 21 April 2010, 18 Dalit homes were torched and two Dalits—17-year old Suman and her 60-year old father Tara Chand—were burnt alive. The incident happened after a dog barked at Rajinder Pali, son of a Jat while he passing buy Balmiki colony at night on his bike. Rajinder hurled a brick at the dog, only to be objected by Yogesh, a young Dalit. Soon the argument turned violent and two exchanged salvos. Pali threatened all Balmikis with dire consequences. Although Balmiki elders went to Jats of the village to douse the issue but they too were beaten badly.

**Gohana, Sonapat**

On 27 August 2005 one Dalit named Shivpal, a resident of Balmiki Basti had a fight with Baljit, a Jat. The scuffle soon turned into a brawl and since Shivpal was joined by some other Dalits from his colony, Baljit died due to head injuries. Soon the tension engulfed the whole town and Dalits fearing a massive backlash by Jats started to flee their homes. Although Police arrested four Dalits responsible for the killing of Baljit, but JatMahapanchayat wasn't satisfied with action of police. In 31 August, a strong mob of around 1000 men armed with lathes, axes, kerosene barged into Balmiki colony and torched more than 60 households.

**Bathani Tola Massacre, Bihar**

On 11 July, 1996, 21 Dalits were slaughtered by RanvirSena militiamen in Bathani Tola, Bhojpur, Bihar. Among the dead were 1 man, 11 women, six children and three infants, who were deliberately singled out by the attackers. More than 60 members of RanvirSena, a private militia of Bhumihars in Bihar descended on the village and set 12 houses on fire. The attack was reportedly in retaliation for the earlier killing of nine Bhumihars in Nandhi village, by the CPI(M-L). The conflict began when CPI(ML) began organizing the agricultural laborers and demand increase in daily wages.

**Bant Singh, Punjab**

On January 5, 2006, Bant Singh, Mazhabi, Dalit Sikh, was attacked by unknown assailants and beaten so severely that his injuries necessitated medical amputation. Later Bant alleged that this was in retaliation for actively working to secure justice for his daughter, who was gang raped by upper caste members of his village in Punjab five years earlier.

**Khairlanji massacre Maharashtra**

On September 29, 2006, four members of the Bhotmange family belonging to the Mahar community were killed by a mob of 40 people belonging to the Maratha Kunbi caste in Kherlanji, a small village in Bhandara district of Maharashtra.

**Dangawas, Rajasthan**

On May 16, 2015 in Nagaur district in Rajasthan, three dalits were crushed under tractor by Jats over a decade old land dispute.

**Tsundur massacre, Andhra Pradesh**

In 1991, a young dalit graduate was beaten up after his feet unintentionally touched a Reddy man in a Cinema hall. The dalits of Chundur village in Guntur district supported their youth. Irked by this, the dominant Reddys of the village massacred 13 dalits.

**Kilvenmani massacre, Tamil Nadu**

On 25 December 1968, the powerful landlords of village Kilvenmani killed 44 people including five men, 16 women and 23 children. The victims were dalits working on the fields of these landlords. In 1968, influence by CPI (M), these workers demanded for higher wages and therefore formed a union seeking better working conditions and higher wages. To mark their union the workers hoisted red flags in their villages, irking their landlords. Soon things turned violent and on 25th December 1968, at around 10 pm, the landlords and their henchmen came surrounded the hutments, cutting off all routes of escape. According to eye-witnessing, some were shot dead whereas many were burnt alive.

**Sunped, Faridabad**

On 20 October 2015, two children Vaibhav and Divya(nine months old) were charred to death when Rajput strongmen torched their household around 10 pm. The Rajputs were reportedly had a confrontation with Jitender, a dalit and father of the dead children in October 2014 in which one Rajput youth had died. In order to avenge the killing, a group of Rajputs set ablaze Jitender's house at night.

**Family stripped naked, Dankaur**

On October 9, A dalit family was stripped naked on road including a woman by none other than police in Greater Noida near the Capital. Gautam and his brothers were robbed on gun

point on Tuesday evening while they were watering their farmland. Their motorbike besides some cash, was also taken by the robber about which Gautam went to police to get a FIR registered on Wednesday morning. Gautam demand speedy action against the robbers and his demands irked police official at Dankaur police station who allegedly stripped member of family and threw them out on road.

### **Caste-based discrimination and violence**

Official statistics released in November stated that more than 40,000 crimes against Scheduled Castes were reported in 2016. Several incidents were reported of members of dominant castes attacking Dalits for accessing public and social spaces or for perceived caste transgressions.

In May, two Dalit men were killed, several injured, and dozens of Dalit homes burned by dominant caste men in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, following a clash between members of the communities. In September, S. Anitha, a 17-year-old Dalit girl who had campaigned against the introduction of a uniform national exam for admission to medical colleges, committed suicide, sparking protests in Tamil Nadu. Protesters said the exam would disadvantage students from marginalized backgrounds.

Activists said that at least 90 Dalits employed as manual scavengers died during the year while cleaning sewers, despite the practice being prohibited. Many of those killed were illegally employed by government agencies. In August, the Delhi state government said that people who employed manual scavengers would be prosecuted for manslaughter. In November, the UN Special Rapporteur on safe drinking water and sanitation expressed concern that the government's emphasis on building new toilets as part of its Clean India Mission could prolong manual scavenging.

### **Conclusion**

**Habiba Sultana and Db Subedi (June 2015)** projects that due to untouchability, Hindu sweepers in Bangladesh have been historically subjected to discrimination and marginalization, and are deprived of choices such as free selection of occupation, access to housing, education

and other benefits. Hinduism maintains social order by caste and division of labour, these shows to caste discrimination and untouchability. **Vani Kant Borooah (June 2017)** says that millions of people in India are born with scars that will last a lifetime. These are scars of social rather than physical blemish and they reduce the capacity of such persons to function in life, free of prejudice and untainted by stigma. The sources of these wounds are ‘untouchability’ meaning that any physical contact with them is avoided because they are considered unclean.

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