

[Caste in Transition](#)

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SOCIETY

## Caste in Transition

Education, economics and protest drive changes and reform to India's ancient societal divisions

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Caste is not a pleasant topic for Hindus, and in the international arena today, it has elicited a shame upon the Hindu religion. I have written this article to initiate dialogue within our community. The negative issues associated with caste will not go away, but will only tear at the credibility of the religion. I am not suggesting the abolishment of Hinduism or of Hindu texts or the defamation of those in the upper castes. Rather, I write out of reverence for Hinduism itself, to initiate change, to affirm the positive aspects of Hinduism and to bring a spiritual sense of unity to Hindu believers worldwide.

Origins: The standard explanations of India's caste system are based on the now discredited "Aryan Invasion" theory of ancient India. We await new speculations from the historians and anthropologists. Suffice it to say that many ancient societies had hereditary classes of people, eventually lost in social upheaval. The modern term caste is derived from the Portuguese *casta*, alluding to family, tribe or race, and was introduced into Indian society in the late 16th century.

The Hindu religious texts describe *varna ashrama dharma*, the religious/social law delineating duties of four castes. Gurudeva, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, founder of Hinduism Today, wrote,

"The original caste system had these four divisions. The divisions were all based on the ability of the individual to manage his body, his mind and his emotions properly. If he stopped fulfilling the dharma of his caste, society would recognize that he had moved from one caste and was now in another. The original caste system was based on self-discipline through education and through personal sadhana. The original caste system was based on the unfoldment of the consciousness within each individual through the chakras. People everywhere naturally divide themselves up

into castes. We have the workers. You go to work, you work under somebody else—that happens all over the world—that's the shudra caste. We have the merchants, who are self-motivated. That's the vaishya caste. We have the politicians and the lawmakers and the law-enforcement people. That's the kshatriya caste. And then you have the priests, the ministers, the missionaries. That's the brahmin caste. Every society has these four castes working within it in one way or another."

Jati and its advantages:  
Today, most Hindus do not abide by the chaturvarna (four caste) system but classify themselves according to the more specific colloquial form of caste known as the jati system. Jati are horizontal divisions within the four castes, and there are thousands of them, segregated according to occupational, sectarian, regional and linguistic distinctions. "The operative

unit even today for social and marriage purposes is not caste but jati. You talk of brahmins as a caste, which is pan-Indian, but the fact is that a Tamilian brahmin would rarely have a marriage alliance with a Punjabi brahmin," stated Madhu Kishwar, editor of Manushi magazine and one of India's foremost women's rights advocates. "They are as far apart from each other culturally as could possibly

be. It's really not the operative and, yet, we have the whole notion of brahmin domination, brahmins as a caste, whereas the regional differences matter much more."

Kishwar points out the advantages of the jati system: "It allows even the most disadvantaged

and impoverished groups to identify themselves and a political assertion based on their numerical strength. It has kept democracy not just alive, but has given it very deep roots. I think all these modernists attacking caste can't understand the survival strategy of the



subcontinent. For example, it has provided social security for a rural migrant when he or she comes to the city as an impoverished economic refugee."

Kishwar's points are valid. There are certain advantages to

the caste system with regard to communal pride and access to political power. But what about those at the bottom, the untouchable Dalits? On November 4, 2001, the conversion of several thousand Dalits to Buddhism gained worldwide

attention. "I am walking out of Hinduism because the 3,000-year-old caste system will never allow me any respect or dignity," stated the organizer of the event, Ram Raj, who dropped his first name upon conversion.

Caste and class  
discrimination: As a  
Hindu, you might  
wonder: Is this really  
a fair portrayal of  
Hinduism? Is the  
caste system so  
unique to Hindu  
society? And is it  
really that bad? It  
cannot be denied

that all countries have experienced, or are experiencing, some form of caste. For example, modern-day Britain supports strong class divisions on the basis of economics. Recently Laura Spence, a

student of the lower social economic class, was not admitted into upper-crust Oxford, despite her extraordinary academic qualifications. Harvard University gladly admitted her,

on a full scholarship.

Hierarchical  
divisions on the  
basis of race and  
economics are part  
and parcel of the  
American  
experience as well.

"In America, we have caste. There are black people and white people, rich people and poor people, superior people and inferior people," states Swami



# Brahmavidyananda of the Institute of Holistic Yoga of North America.

According to  
Smita Narula,  
Director of the

Asia Division of  
Human Rights  
Watch, the  
difference  
between class  
and caste is "that  
being born into a  
particular caste  
invites a certain

amount of  
restrictions on  
your basic  
freedoms, your  
basic rights. So it  
is the  
combination of  
work and  
descent-based

discrimination  
that makes caste  
different from  
the class system.  
There's very little  
mobility."

Class divisions  
are mostly  
culturally and  
economically  
based and,  
therefore, have  
the capacity to  
change as

culture changes  
[though  
slowly—see  
sidebar, page  
33]. The  
inequalities  
associated with  
the Hindu caste

system are  
more complex,  
mainly with  
regard to its  
undeniable  
roots in  
scripture and to  
the shameful

existence of the  
untouchables.  
Other religions  
receive bad  
press due to  
patriarchal  
constraints of  
women, for



example, but  
Hinduism is the  
only religion to  
be bombarded  
with issues of  
race, intolerable  
human rights  
violations

among its own  
believers and  
inequality on  
such a grand  
scale.

The

untouchables:  
Although  
untouchability  
was abolished  
under Article  
17 of the  
Indian  
Constitution in

1950, it is still  
widely  
practiced all  
over India  
today. The  
untouchables  
or "scheduled  
castes and

scheduled  
tribes" (as they  
are listed by  
name on  
government  
schedules) are  
not associated  
with any caste

mentioned in  
the original  
chatur varna  
Hindu system.  
Rather,  
untouchables  
are outcastes  
placed below

the sudra  
caste. The  
untouchable  
sect of  
Hinduism is  
relegated to  
labor that no  
other caste will

perform, such  
as the cleaning  
of latrines,  
scavenging  
dead animals  
and funeral  
duties.



In the 1970s  
with the  
revolutionary  
activities of  
the Dalit  
Panthers in  
Maharashtra,

untouchables  
assumed the  
name Dalit, or  
"broken  
people," to  
represent  
themselves as

politically  
empowered  
and mobilized  
nationwide.

"The word  
itself implies  
the need to

revolt, the  
need to  
identify one's  
oppressions,  
and then the  
need to act  
against it,"

said Narula.  
Today, Dalits  
represent  
over 16  
percent of  
India's  
population of

over 160  
million.

After being  
approached

over several  
years to  
monitor the  
issue, Human  
Rights Watch  
embarked on  
a deep

# investigation of the systemic human rights abuses against the Dalit



community  
across six  
different  
states of  
India. "We  
realized that  
we needed to

look not only  
at the  
outward  
manifestations of  
violence but  
also at the

roots of why  
things were  
happening,  
and the roots  
were both  
large-scale  
segregation

and  
economic  
exploitation,"  
Narula said.

Social  
stratification  
has forced  
the physical  
separation  
of  
untouchable

s from the  
rest of Hindu  
society in  
much the  
same way  
Blacks were  
forceably

kept apart in  
America 40  
years ago or  
in South  
Africa ten  
years back.  
They are not

allowed to  
live within  
the  
boundary  
lines of  
casted  
Hindu



society and,  
instead,  
subsist on  
separate  
lands,  
drinking  
from

separate  
wells. "We  
found that in  
cases, for  
example,  
when Dalits  
demanded

land rights  
or the return  
of land that  
had been  
taken from  
them,  
punishment

would be  
meted out  
against their  
entire  
community,"  
Narula said.  
"Or if

somebody  
drew water  
from an  
upper-caste  
well, that  
they were

not  
supposed  
to touch  
even  
though it  
was a

public well,  
their entire  
village  
would be  
burned  
down."

Protective  
legislation  
has been  
enacted,  
but is slow  
to be



enforced.

For

example,

the 1989

Scheduled

Castes and

# Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act),

offered  
protection  
for  
untouchabl  
es and  
allowed for

remunerati  
on in cases  
of violent  
acts  
against  
them. But

police  
corruption,  
lack of  
strong law  
enforceme  
nt and

political  
unwillingne  
ss have  
rendered  
the law  
almost

useless.

The Dalit  
human

rights  
movement  
s have  
been  
subjected  
to a



variety of  
violent  
acts, as  
stated in  
Broken  
People,

the  
published  
culmination  
of  
Human  
Rights

Watch's  
investigati  
ons  
(available  
at

[www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)

[org/reports/1999/ind](#)

[ia/](#)). It is  
the most  
comprehe  
nsive NGO

# documentation of human rights violations against

Dalits. In  
addition to  
several  
massacres  
of Dalits in  
the 1990s,

upper  
caste men  
are  
accused of  
ongoing  
cases of

rape  
against  
dalit  
women.  
Out of  
hundreds



of  
document  
ed cases,  
for  
example,  
the rape of

a  
12-year-old  
Dalit girl  
by a man  
of the  
Thevar

caste in  
Tamil  
Nadu was  
covered  
up by the  
Thevar

communit  
y via  
blackmail  
and  
kickbacks.

# Origin of untoucha bility: In a religion that

preaches  
the  
all-pervasi  
veness of  
God, how

did

untoucha

bility even

come to

be?

Mahatma  
Gandhi  
called it a  
product of  
"sheer



ignorance

and

cruelty."

"The

scheduled

tribes and  
scheduled  
castes in  
India. This  
is the

biggest  
problem  
that we  
have,"  
said

Swami  
Brahmavi  
dyananda.  
"This is  
man's

creation."

Explanatio

ns also

include

the

"unclean"  
occupatio  
ns of the  
untoucha  
bles and

# the eating of meat.

# Swami Tathagat ananda of the Vedanta



Center of  
New York  
believes  
that the  
developm

# ent of untoucha bility through Hindu

history is  
a result of  
some  
basic  
human

tendency,  
and has  
nothing  
to do with  
Hinduism

itself.

"America

is a

democrati

c country,

but  
democrac  
y is not  
practiced  
all of the

time," he  
points  
out.  
"Good  
Hindus,

like  
Mahatma  
Gandhi,  
Swami  
Vivekana



nda and  
others,  
did not  
believe in  
untoucha

bility, but  
regardles  
s of their  
beliefs or  
convictio

ns or  
vocations  
against it,  
they were  
not able

to

remove

it.

Suppose

the

American  
government  
wants  
to abolish  
drugs.

Just  
because  
we make  
a law,  
you

cannot  
abolish  
drugs.  
There are  
many

laws, but  
who is  
obeying  
the laws?  
The



division  
of all  
society is  
always  
based on

color, on  
gender  
and on  
money or  
education

||

■

# Gurudev

a noted  
boldly,  
"Caste~  
or at  
least

discrimin  
ation on  
the basis  
of  
caste

as been  
thrown  
out of the  
laws of  
India, but

people  
still hang  
on to it  
as an ego  
structure.

The high  
caste  
people  
love to  
hurt the



low caste  
people,  
so to  
speak, by  
ignoring

them,  
treating  
them  
roughly.  
That's

not the  
way it  
should  
be. If you  
find the

high  
caste  
people in  
your  
society

ignoring  
and not  
wanting  
to speak  
with and

associate  
with the  
lower  
castes,  
those are

nasty  
people,  
and  
those are  
people

you  
should  
avoid.  
Spiritual  
people,



even  
ordinary  
kindly  
people,  
would

never  
think of  
behaving  
that  
way."

Swami  
Tathagat  
ananda  
concur,  
"What

you are  
seeing  
today is  
the  
hardene

d system  
which  
has  
misinter  
preted

the main  
points of  
division  
of labor.  
This

hereditary  
y  
business  
was not  
there

originally

. Hindu

people

have

perpetua



ted this  
system  
in order  
to enjoy  
the

benefit  
of the  
status."

Swami

Brahmav

idyanand  
a said,  
"The  
caste  
system

is in one  
way  
good,  
but in  
another

way

harmful.

When

the ego

bonds

with  
ignorance,  
then it  
brings  
harm to

society."

Other

religions  
and  
regions:  
Caste is



by no  
means  
only a  
Hindu

issue.  
Today,  
caste, or  
the jati

system,  
more  
specifically,  
is

pervasive,  
cutting  
across

# religions , cultures and

national  
identities  
both in  
South

# Asia and its diaspora ,

according  
g to  
Kishwar.  
All of the



religions  
practice  
d within  
the

# South Asian subconti nent

reflect  
this very  
same  
caste

system,  
especially  
y with  
regard

to  
untouch  
ability.  
Those

who  
convert  
from  
Hinduis

m into  
Christian  
ity,  
Buddhis

m and  
Islam  
still face  
discrimi



nation  
on the  
basis of  
caste.

There  
are  
separate  
churches

in South  
India for  
brahmin  
converts

# and Dalit converts . The Dalits

are also  
rendered  
more  
vulnerable

le to  
violence  
from the  
upper

castes,  
as they  
lose  
their

right to  
protectio  
n under  
the 1989



# Schedul ed Castes and

# Schedul ed Tribes Act

when  
they  
change  
religion.

Caste  
proves  
to be a  
troublin

g factor  
for the  
younger  
generati

# on of Hindus in the diaspora

. An  
anonym  
ous  
contribu

tor from  
the US  
notes: "I  
am not



a

brahmin

but

have

brahmin  
friends  
who do,  
from

time to  
time,  
bring up  
their

spiritual  
and  
intellect  
ual

superior  
ity to  
me, in  
very

subtle  
ways.  
This  
really

undercu  
ts our  
friendshi  
ps and

is pretty  
ridiculous,  
since I  
have



demonst

rated

equally,

if not

more,  
spiritual  
and  
intellect

ual  
superior  
ity than  
they

have."

# Toward a solution : Swami

Brahma  
vidyana  
nda  
sugggest

s, "We  
have to  
reinterp  
ret

problem  
atic  
texts  
and set



a good  
exampl  
e in our  
society.

We  
should  
not  
disrespe

ct our  
culture,  
but we  
should

condem  
n those  
who are  
not

properly  
versed  
in the  
philosoph

Why that  
God  
belongs  
to

everyon  
e, God  
does  
not feel

color or  
sex, or  
whether  
you are



white or  
black."

Most  
activist  
s  
fighting

for  
Dalits  
are not  
fighting

to

dismant

le

Hinduis

mãñtho

ugh

some

areãñb

ut to  
demand  
account  
ability

from  
the  
Indian  
govern

ment to  
uphold  
existing  
laws,



such as  
the  
constitu  
tional

abolish  
ment of  
untouch  
ability

# and the Prevention of Atrociti

es Act  
(1989).

Narula  
states:

"The  
Dalit  
movement  
is

also  
asking  
for the  
internat

ional  
commu  
nity to  
work

hand in  
hand  
with the  
Indian



govern  
ment  
and  
with

NGOs in  
India to  
insure  
enforce

ment of  
the  
laws  
that are

already  
in place  
to take  
care of

issues  
such as  
violence,  
rape,

scaven  
ging,  
bonded  
labor

and  
other  
issues."

Higher

govern

ment

represe

ntation



for

Dalits is

needed

to bring

visibilit  
y to  
their  
issues.

# Dr. Kiran Bedi, India's

highest  
ranking  
female  
police

officer,  
said,  
"The  
largest

deterre

nts are

the

local

politicians  
who  
use and  
abuse

the  
situatio  
ns for  
narrow



political  
gain."  
Bedi  
points

out

that

Dalit

leaders

themse

Ives

need to

unite in

their  
views.

Swami

Brahm

avidya

nanda

said,  
"India  
today  
is not

the  
India of  
50  
years

ago.

People

want to

change



. In  
order  
to  
protect

our  
religion  
, our  
system

, we  
should  
reorga  
nize

properly

and

slowly.

We

should

pass

out

right

inform

ation

and

correct

these  
issues.  
" The  
rise in

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issues

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caste,  
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Gurude

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rized:

"We  
can  
see  
around

us the  
deterio  
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of the



system

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has

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abused  
beyond  
the  
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tion.

Membe

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the  
brahmi  
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children

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abusing

their

wives.

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are

confused,  
living  
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anger  
and in  
jealous  
y. No

wonder

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familie

s break

apart  
and  
their  
busine



sses

fail. In

the

eyes of

the  
Gods,  
most  
of

those  
who  
adhere  
to the

caste  
system  
that  
exists

today  
are low  
caste.  
This is

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[the  
"seven  
sages"  
] had

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# Hindu caste system as

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Caste

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Fact of

# Life in India

Econo  
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**MALIK**



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# The lower stratu

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