

[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

V. G. JULIE RAJAN, PHILADELPHIA

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

[org/report](#)
[s/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

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Hinduis

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some

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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

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correct

these
issues.
" The
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Gurude

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"We
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us the
deterio
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of the

system

which

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been

abused
beyond
the
point

of
recogni
tion.

Membe

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the
brahmi
n caste

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g their

children

and

abusing

their

wives.

Membe

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are

confused,
living
in

anger
and in
jealous
y. No

wonder

their

familie

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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

because

they

live in

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These

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human

s are

struggl
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throug
h the

lower
chakra
s,
trying

to get
out of
the
dark

worlds
of the
mind.
Let us

not be

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about

what

the

sapta

rishis

[the
"seven
sages"
] had

in
mind
when
they

casted

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soul's
spiritu

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We

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Hindu caste system as

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