

CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIAN SUBCONTINENT AND CHANGES

Dr. Subhash Chand Sharma*

ABSTRACT

India's caste system is perhaps the world's longest surviving social hierarchy. Differences in status are traditionally justified by the religious doctrine of karma, a belief that one's place in life is determined by one's deeds in previous lifetimes. Traditional scholarship has described this more than 2,000-year-old system within the context of the four principal varnas, or large caste categories. In order of precedence these are the Brahmins (priests and teachers), the Kshatriyas (rulers and soldiers), the Vaisyas (merchants and traders), and the Shudras (laborers and artisans). Almost identical structures are also visible in Nepal.

Keywords: *Caste System, Traditional Scholarship, Social Hierarchy, Doctrine of Karma, Untouchability.*

Introduction

They may not use the same wells, visit the same temples, or drink from the same cups in tea stalls. Dalit children are frequently made to sit at the back of classrooms. In what has been called India's "hidden apartheid," entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste.

"Untouchability" is reinforced by state allocation of resources and facilities; separate facilities are provided for separate caste-based neighborhoods. As revealed by the case study below on the earthquake in Gujarat, these same practices hold true even in times of great natural disaster.

On January 26, 2001, a devastating earthquake rocked the northwest Indian state of Gujarat. Within days of the country's worst natural disaster in recent history at least 30,000 were declared dead and over one million were left homeless. caste and communal discrimination in the distribution of relief and rehabilitation, corruption in the handling of aid, and political squabbling that has done little to help the earthquake's neediest victims.

While the government has allocated equal amounts of monetary compensation and food supplies to members of all communities, Dalit and Muslim populations did not have the same access to adequate shelter, electricity, running water, and other supplies available to others.

As of this writing, it remained to be seen whether the government would construct integrated housing and give effect to its 1950 constitutional abolition of "untouchability."

India's caste system naturally finds corollaries in other parts of the sub-continent, including *Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh*. Within the Dalit community of *Nepal*, there are eight major caste groups and twenty-five identified sub-castes. Some NGOs estimate the Dalit population at 4.5 million, or 21 percent of Nepal's population. Despite their significant numbers, they continue to be victimized by reason of their caste.

In a high-profile case in 2000, dubbed the "Gaidakot Milk Scandal," the upper castes of the Gaidakot Multipurpose Milk Production Co-operative Institution Limited refused to sell milk from an animal raised by a Dalit.

* Assistant Professor, Smt. Kamladevi Gauridutt Mittal Mahila PG Mahavidhlaya, Sardarshahr, Churu, Rajasthan, India.

Nepal's Ninth Five-Year Plan also adopted several specific policies and programs for Dalit socio-economic development in the areas of education, health, sanitation, training and skills enhancement, and employment. On August 16, 2001, the prime minister of Nepal announced that the government would outlaw discrimination against lower-caste Hindus and pledged to pass new legislation to criminalize untouchability practices and enforce the pre-existing constitutional ban on caste discrimination. At this writing, specific legislation had yet to be proposed.

Unlike *India*, which persistently argues that "the policies of the Indian Government relating to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes do not come under the purview of Article 1 of the Convention [on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination]," *Nepal* has provided detailed accounts of the country's problems with caste discrimination in several of its reports to CERD.

At the Asian Regional Preparatory Meeting for the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Tehran in February 2001, the Nepali government also declared that the problem of caste discrimination should be addressed at WCAR.

Within *Sri Lanka's* majority Sinhala community, the *Rodiya* were historically excluded from villages and communities, forcing them into street begging, scavenging, and roving. Moreover, *Rodiya* could only wear caste-specific attire; were restricted from schools and public facilities; segregated at gravesites; and made to drink out of disposable coconut shells from local teashops so as not to contaminate the glasses of others. A history of exclusion has carried forward into present-day practices—*Rodiya* continue to reside in segregated communities with little to no interaction with upper-castes.

The exception is the caste of *Rodiyas* or *Rodi* (meaning "filth") from very early times. Many legends surround their origin, all agreeing that they were banished for a heinous crime and condemned to a life of begging or, more accurately, soliciting for alms. They were denied land and work and subjected to many disadvantages and degrading treatment.

Caste differentiation occurs in both of *Sri Lanka's* main Tamil communities (those descended from plantation workers of Indian origin brought to *Sri Lanka* by the British colonial government, as well as those with ancestors in *Sri Lanka*). Marriage bars persist, as do other social bans. Caste-based discrimination is sometimes applied to non-Hindus—including Tamil Christian and Muslim converts, and members of other minority groups.

Caste-based divisions of labor are central to several ethnic groups in many West African countries, including the *Fulani*, *Mandinka*, and *Wolof* communities. Various U.N. human rights treaty monitoring bodies have made at least passing reference to caste-based distinctions in *Burkina Faso*, *Mali*, *Cameroon*, and *Mauritania*. Outside of West Africa, caste in *Burundi* and *Mauritius* has also been noted. While this report limits its discussion in West Africa to *Mauritania*, *Senegal*, and *Nigeria*, in addition to the countries mentioned above, caste systems can also be found in *Guinea*, *Guinea Bissau*, the *Ivory Coast*, *Gambia*, *Sierra Leone*, and *Liberia*.

He went on to add that castes can be defined as hereditary, endogamous groups that are assigned specific occupations and governed by strict hierarchical relationships. All such characteristics can be found among the *Wolof* who are principally divided between the *geer* and the *neeno*.

The Senegalese constitution proclaims the right of all citizens to equal protection of the law regardless of race, religion, sex, or origin, a reference to one's caste background (article 1), and prohibits all acts of racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination (article 5). Despite these constitutional protections, the extent to which *neeno* castes approach the courts for legal redress on discrimination claims is negligible. Within the *Igbo* communities of southeastern *Nigeria*, the marginalization of those that have been categorized as *Osu* reportedly remains largely unchecked. The term "*Osu*" historically applied to individuals who were held to be "owned" by deities. Like caste distinctions in other societies, the distinction of *Osu* is automatically passed on by inheritance and descent and cannot generally be overcome. *Osus* cannot be distinguished from others on the basis of their physical appearance or their speech.

Though *Osu* share the same legal status as other *Nigerians*—the *Osu* system was outlawed with the passage of the *Osu System Law* and the *Laws of Eastern Nigeria* in 1956 and 1963—members of the *Osu* community are still shunned as pariahs and denied social equality. Mostly landless, *Osu* can traditionally only marry within their caste, and are buried in separate cemeteries. Discrimination against *Buraku*, sometimes known as *eta* (variously defined as "pollution abundant" or "unclean") persists in *Japan*. Scholarly consensus today holds that the estimated three million *Buraku* who live in *Japan* today can trace their ancestry to those who became involved in occupations thought to be unclean during

Japan's feudal Tokugawa era in the seventeenth century. These occupations included leather-making, a task shunned by Shintoists and Buddhists who felt that anything which involved the taking of life was unclean. The then-government codified such discrimination against Buraku when it explicitly deemed certain groups distinguished by their occupations to be eta and *hinin* ("nonperson"). These newly formed lower castes were then further forced into specific occupations.

The Buraku system was officially abolished by the Emancipation Edict of 1871, though discrimination against Buraku persists to this day. Following the edict, peasants rioted in protest at being ranked as equals to Buraku, setting fire to Buraku villages in western Japan and demanding that the edict be revoked. In modern day Japan, many Buraku still live in segregated communities in cities around the country, including major cities such as Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe. Burakumin continue to be characterized as "dirty" and "inappropriate" to associate with. They are even said to be of a different descent than the majority of Japanese people even though they are racially indistinguishable from the rest of the population.

Today, the Buraku people are the targets of verbal abuse and incitement to violence, often in the form of graffiti or messages posted on the Internet with slogans like "Kill Buraku People" or "Exterminate Buraku People." Offensive emails are frequently sent to NGOs active on Buraku issues, such as the Buraku Liberation Movement.

Segregation also continues to be a way of life for the Buraku people in rural areas in Japan, though in urban centers many have successfully integrated with non-Buraku communities.

Caste and Marriage

Often, rigid social norms of purity and pollution are socially enforced through strict prohibitions on marriage or other social interaction between castes. While economic and social indicators other than caste have gained in significance, allowing intermarriage among upper castes, in many countries strong social barriers remain in place against marriage between lower and higher castes.

In *India* the condemnation can be quite severe, ranging from social ostracism to punitive violence. On August 6, 2001, in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, an upper-caste Brahmin boy and a lower-caste Jat girl were dragged to the roof of a house and publicly hanged by members of their own families as hundreds of spectators looked on. The public lynching was punishment for refusing to end an inter-caste relationship. Inter-caste marriages can also lead to large-scale attacks on lower-caste communities. In May 2000 in Hardoi district in Uttar Pradesh, a police constable enraged by his daughter's marriage to a Dalit was joined by other relatives in shooting and killing four members of his son-in-law's family. Dalits who marry high-caste persons in *Nepal* in some cases reportedly have been imprisoned by local authorities because of false cases filed against them by members of the upper-caste families. Dalits are often forbidden from performing marriage or funeral rites in public areas or, in some areas, from speaking to members of upper castes.

In both the Tamil and Sinhala communities of *Sri Lanka*, intermarriage between upper-caste and lower-caste persons is still socially discouraged. Matrimonial ads in Sri Lankan newspapers placed by Tamils and Sinhalese both routinely specify the caste background of the match that the family is seeking.

In *Japan* marriage remains a primary source of discrimination for Buraku people today. Suspicions that a person is of Buraku descent often lead to private investigations into his or her family background. These background checks are easy to conduct because family registries are easily obtainable, and Buraku names are distinct and recognizable.

In parts of southeastern *Nigeria*, marriage to an Osu by a non-Osu is highly discouraged and even condemned by society, while children of such a union are likely to be ostracized and mistreated.

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