

ENDURING STEREOTYPES ABOUT ASIA INDIA'S CASTE SYSTEM

By JOE ELDER

For decades most United States textbooks dealing with South Asia have contained sections on India's caste system, and most such sections have contrasted India's "immobile caste society" negatively with America's "open and mobile class society." People in India are seen (presumably) as locked forever in birth-determined positions, while people in the United States can (presumably) rise to whatever levels their abilities and good fortune permit. Caste in India is described as a fatalistically-accepted system of discrimination, an inducer of lethargy, and the generator of a mindset that continues to permit a tiny minority of high-caste brahman priests to exploit a large majority of lower-caste farmers and laborers. Implicit—and sometimes explicit—questions in these textbooks are: "When will Indians treat each other more fairly?" and "When will India get rid of its caste system?"¹

One difficulty in discussing caste in India is that the term itself is applied to several quite different Indian social phenomena. "Casta" was originally a Portuguese word, used in places such as Brazil to describe groups with different proportions of "racial purity" as the Portuguese inter-bred with local Indians and Blacks. The Portuguese applied the term "casta" (inappropriately) to the inter-marrying groups they found in India. The British changed the word to "caste" and incorporated it into their legal documents, where it continues to be used by the post-independence government of India.

TODAY IN INDIA THE WORD "CASTE" IS APPLIED TO AT LEAST THREE DIFFERENT SOCIAL PHENOMENA

1 FOUR MYTHICAL CATEGORIES OF HUMANS THAT EMERGED FROM FOUR DIFFERENT PARTS OF PURUṢA'S BODY AT THE DAWN OF CREATION.

According to the *Rig Veda* (X, 90)² four categories of humans emerged from four different parts of the body

of the primeval man, Puruṣa when he sacrificed himself on a cosmic funeral pyre at the dawn of creation. In Sanskrit texts, these categories are often referred to by the term *varṇa*. The dawn-of-creation story had been in circulation for centuries before priestly intellectuals generated different rules for each of the four mythical categories. Such rules were incorporated, for example, in the frequently cited *Laws of Manu*. Central to the *Laws of Manu* were requirements that men and women marry within their category (*varṇa*) and perform occupations assigned to their category (*varṇa*). Thus, members of the brahman *varṇa* (that emerged from Puruṣa's mouth) should be priests; members of the kṣatriya *varṇa* (that emerged from Puruṣa's arms) should be warriors and administrators; members of the vaiśya *varṇa* (that emerged from Puruṣa's thighs) should be producers of wealth; and members of the śūdra *varṇa* (that emerged from Puruṣa's feet) should serve the other three *varṇas*. The *Laws of Manu* describe a fifth "mixed" *varṇa*, the caṇḍālas. Caṇḍālas were, according to myth, the offspring of brahman women impregnated by śūdra men—in gross violation of rules prohibiting such inter-*varṇa* sexual relations. According to the *Laws of Manu*, caṇḍālas were to be dealt with as social pariahs, excluded from sacred places and events, and required to perform the least pleasant

tasks of society, including removing human feces and disposing of the carcasses of dead animals. The mythical caṇḍālas may have provided a basis for the more recent identification and segregation of India's "untouchables."

It is unlikely that the mythical four-*varṇa* society ever historically existed for any extended period of time. However, such a mythical society is described in epics and folk tales, and it serves even today as a point of reference for an idealized harmonious society.

2 HUNDREDS OF PUBLICLY IDENTIFIED KINSHI GROUPS LABELED AS "CASTES" IN CENSUS TRACTS AND OTHER OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS BY PEOPLE IN AUTHORITY.

According to the Government of India, for example, 15 percent of India's population belong to "scheduled castes," and another 7.5 percent belong to "scheduled tribes"—kinship groups, many of them previously considered to be "untouchables" who suffered historic deprivations at the hands of their neighbors—who were often regarded as ritually "polluting," were prevented from using certain temples and wells, and who are now entitled to special governmental benefits.

The government of India's 1960 publication entitled *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Arranged in Alphabetical Order*³ lists 405 scheduled castes and 255 scheduled tribes, for a total of 660 kinship groups (the boundaries distinguishing "castes" from "tribes" are unclear). Indian citizens who can establish their claim to belong to one of these publicly identified "castes" or "tribes" are today entitled to special benefits from the government (e.g., preferential access to government jobs, special representation on elected bodies, etc.). More recently, the government has published lists of

“Other Backward Classes”—52 percent of India’s population belonging to kinship groups that are also entitled to certain benefits because they are disadvantaged—but generally less disadvantaged than the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The government’s 1980 publication entitled *Report of the Backward Classes Commission* (also called the Mandal Commission Report) lists on a state-by-state basis a total of 3,743 castes belonging to “Other Backward Classes” above and beyond the “scheduled castes” and “scheduled tribes” included in the earlier government lists.

As one examines the official government lists of castes, it is clear that considerable arbitrariness went into identifying what comprised any given caste. For example, “scheduled caste no. 186” that is listed as

jolaha in the region of Jammu and Kashmir is listed as kabirpanthi, megh, meghwal, or keer in other regions of northern India. The government official who identified “scheduled caste no. 186” provided no evidence why he ultimately gave the same single label to kinship groups with different names in different regions of India.⁴

3 LINEAGES OF RELATED FAMILIES FROM AMONG WHICH PARENTS ARRANGE THEIR CHILDREN’S MARRIAGES.

Historically, a major responsibility of parents in India has been to arrange their children’s (especially their daughters’) marriages. Typically, the caste into which one is born provides the boundaries within which one’s parents’ marriage partners were selected, one’s own marriage partners are selected, and one will select the marriage partners for one’s own children. To marry outside of one’s caste is usually to invite serious social opprobrium—and possibly even expulsion from one’s caste.

The caste made up of one’s own intra-marrying lineages forms one’s ultimate base of social support. These are the people to whom one is related, whose food one can eat, whose hospitality one can provide (and benefit from), to whom one can go for financial and other assistance, and on whom one



Detail from an 18th-century painting. Women spraying colored ink and powders at each other during the spring festival of Holi. During this Hindu festival, restrictions on caste, sex, age and status are lifted.

Credit: Ancient Art and Architecture

will have to depend for aid in one’s old age and for proper disposal of one’s body after one’s death.

When defined as marriage-pool lineages, hundreds of thousands of such castes exist today in India. Strong we-they distinctions are often drawn between the members of one’s caste and the members of other castes. What from one perspective is standing by one’s relatives, from another perspective is favoritism and nepotism. Also higher and lower social distinctions between castes are often perpetuated—or challenged. Certain lineages fall out of favor, are cut off, and become separate castes. Similarly, mergers are possible between castes that see themselves as near social equals. Castes’ standings in relation to one another are

constantly being renegotiated on the basis of changing wealth, power, status, ritual behavior, sponsorship by important “others,” political mobilization, education, and geographical location. One can see parallels between castes as status determiners and marriage pools in India and racial, religious, and ethnic groups as status determiners and marriage pools in the United States.

TRUE OR FALSE?

As a consequence of the term “caste” referring to such different social phenomena in India, misconceptions about caste have frequently arisen. Taking “caste” to mean *lineages of related families from among which parents arrange their children’s marriages*, here are seven prevalent misconceptions about India’s caste system:

1. *The caste into which one is born determines one’s occupation.*

False. People in the same caste engage in (and historically have engaged in) a wide variety of different occupations. Confusion arises from the fact that according to the mythical *varṇa* system of the idealized Hindu law books, everyone is *supposed to* carry out occupations that match their *varṇas*. However, the mythical *varṇa* system and the current caste

system are two very different phenomena. Only a very few caste names listed in official publications refer specifically to occupations. Most caste names are merely designations whereby other castes identify a given caste.

2. *Caste designations are changeless.*

False. There are many historical instances of castes changing (or trying to change) their caste names and behavior in order to receive advantageous treatment. Trying to convince someone in authority to label one's caste more highly in a public document is one well-tried way to change one's status. Some efforts to "move up" have succeeded; others have failed. There are instances of castes moving to new areas and thereby changing their names and status. When members of a caste acquire wealth or political leverage, they can sometimes use such resources to upgrade their caste.

3. *Castes relate to each other in mutually accepted hierarchical patterns.*

Frequently false. In any given locality some castes are likely to differ from other castes in their perceptions of what the "correct" local hierarchical patterns are. Disputes regarding the "correct" local hierarchy occur (and have occurred) frequently.

4. *Everyone called by the same caste name is related to everyone else called by that same caste name.*

False. Castes are assigned names by other castes living around them. Labeling coincidences frequently occur. Thus, there are numerous castes, some of whose members perform priestly functions, that are called brahmans by those around them. However, they are not related to all other castes that are called brahmans. There are castes that are called "patels," "deshmukhs," or "rajputs" (honorific civil titles) by those around them that are not related to all other castes called "patels," "deshmukhs," or "rajputs." There are numerous castes, some of whose members make (or did make) pots, that are called "potters" by those around them that are not related to all other castes called "potters." Every "gandhi" is not related to every other "gandhi."

5. *Castes are uniquely Hindu.*

False. In India castes exist among Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Muslims. Frequently the rules about marrying within one's caste and avoiding interactions with other castes are as strict among Christians, Jains, etc. as they are among Hindus.

6. *Hinduism legitimizes preferential treatment according to caste.*

Occasionally false. In the idealized *varṇa* system, being born into a high *varṇa* was seen as a reward for virtue in a previous life. Being born in a low *varṇa* was seen as punishment for sins in a previous life. However, throughout India's history, movements have appeared within Hinduism criticizing preferential ranking and treatment according to caste (or *varṇa*). These movements have included Buddhism, Jainism, *bhakti*

poets and saints, the Lingayats, Sikhism, and philosophers and intellectuals such as Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of India's constitution.

7. *Castes have been abolished.*

False. India's constitution declares that "untouchability" is abolished and anyone discriminating against "untouchables" can be prosecuted. In addition, India's government now provides certain benefits to members of the "scheduled castes," "scheduled tribes," and "Other Backward Classes." However, India's constitution says nothing about abolishing castes. That would mean abolishing lineages of related families from among which parents select their children's marriage partners, and that would not be possible.

In the United States, discrimination on the grounds of race and gender has been declared illegal. However, the U.S. has no laws abolishing race or gender. Just as race and gender cannot be abolished by laws (although efforts can be made to end discrimination based on race and gender) so castes cannot be abolished by laws (although efforts can be made—and some are being made—to end discrimination based on caste). ■

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NOTES

1. For a review of U.S. textbook presentations of India, see Bonnie R. Crown, "Textbook Images of India," in Barbara J. Harrison (ed.), *Learning About India: An Annotated Guide for Nonspecialists* (Albany: Center for International Programs and Comparative Studies, New York State Education Department, 1977), 21–37.
2. Vedas Rgveda, *Rgveda Samhita*, with English translation by Svami Satya Prakash Sarasvati and Satyakam Vidyalkar, vol. XIII (New Delhi: Veda Pratishthana, 1987), 4483–4487.
3. Census of India, Paper No. 2 (New Delhi: Government of India, Manager of Publications, 1960).
4. For a thorough discussion of the Government of India's efforts to improve the lives of the lowest castes and poorest classes, see Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

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Manu. *The Laws of Manu*. Trans. by George Bühler. Vol. 25. Sacred Books of the East; reprint New York: Dover, 1969.