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INTRODUCTION

Caste system in India is a composite structure of different social classes in the Hindu religion. Caste system in India has a long history dating back to the ancient past. It dates back to that era when people used to believe that people were born into a particular social status. They also believed that experiences in past lives and good deeds can actually reincarnate one into higher social strata in the next life. The Indian caste system has gone places with the changes that have taken place in the society. Education has been massively instrumental in bringing a change in the state of mind though a large section of a society, mostly the older generation is still under the curse of this social ostracism.

Development of Caste System in India

The development of the caste system in India never seems to be having any universally accepted history as such. Though there is a general speculative faith that the earliest settlers to this land, the Indo-Aryans might have actually established the caste system, gradually placing them in the higher ladder of the society. There is a whole lot of controversy regarding the theory of the Indo-Aryan migration.

The Hindu scriptures can also be taken into consideration in this regard, which has some passages that can be interpreted to sanction the caste system. This also indicates that the caste system is not an essential part of the Hindu religion. The Vedas or the most ancient ‘shruti’ texts emphasise very less on the caste system, same is maintained in a hymn from the Rig Veda. Later scriptures like Bhagavad Gita and Manu Smriti propounds four Varnas, to be God’s creation. There is a general idea believed by scholars that may be in the initial

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2 Dirks, Scandal of Empire (2006, p. 27): “The institution of caste, for example, a social formation that has been seen as not only basic to India but part of its ancient constitution, was fundamentally transformed by British colonial rule.”
phases the caste system was a bit flexible. Migration from one caste to the other was possible by switching jobs. Various passages from Manu Smriti and other scriptures emphasise that the caste system in India was originally non-hereditary.

**Varna and Jati in India**

Ancient Hindu scriptures have the citations of four varnas or colour, which is the basic social class in the caste system in India. Bhagavad-Gita says that varnas are decided on the grounds of Guna which is the amalgamation of the five elements of ether, air, fire, water and earth, and Karma which is the concept of action. In accordance with the powers of the born nature, works of Brahmans, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudras differ. Four varnas that are mentioned by other shastras are the Brahmans destined as teachers, scholars and priests, the Kshatriyas as kings and warriors, the Vaishyas were the trading class and the Shudras were agriculturists, service providers, and some artisan groups. These are further classified into jatis. Another group excluded from the main society was called Parjanya or Antyaja. This is the group of former untouchables who were considered either the lower section of Sudras or beyond the caste system altogether. Varna and jati are two different concepts.3

**Indian Caste and Social Status**

India is a multicultural, multilingual country which adopts a liberal attitude towards its diverse religious practices. One can find the prevalence of the caste system more in Hinduism than any other religion. Caste system in India has a history and it defines how caste has evolved through the ages. Caste and social status has always been quite puzzling. In the British era, they tried to equalize the caste system in India with the class system. Castes are the divisions, into which a certain section of the community belongs, which also enjoy social status accordingly. What is generally meant by the social status is the prestige or the honour that is being attached to one's position in the society. An individual might acquire more power and privilege due to a characteristic; this puts him among the privileged group of the people who enjoy high status. Brahmans are the priestly class, the protector of religion while the Kshatriyas hold the political power. Therefore caste and social status were inter-related. A higher caste individual was always looked with awe and reverence.4

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3 Ghurye, Caste and Race in India (1969), pp. 2–22
the Brahmanas, to prove that the castes were not rigidly hereditary. Even a member of the low class could be elevated to the highest caste by dint of his special qualities and learning. It can be concluded that intellectual or spiritual attainments sometimes outweighed heredity in determining the caste of a person. As people of the lower classes were elevated to higher ranks for exceptional qualities, so those of the higher strata were relegated to lower ranks for heinous acts. The study of the Veda and the performance of Vedic sacrifices were denied to Sudras. 6

Kalpasutra states the disabilities of Sudras. According to these works they had no right to Vedic study. In their sacrifices, the recitation of Vedic mantras was forbidden. All Samskaras were prohibited for them. A particular section of Sudras had to live outside the village; because Vedic study was prohibited for a Brahmana living in the same village with them. However, in comparison with the earlier ages, the Kalpasutras appear to have allowed certain privileges to Sudras. In some sacrifices, the participation of Sudras was essential. Sudras also had the right to obtain property by all valid modes of acquirement. From the picture of the society, reflected in the Kalpasutras, it is clear that Sudras were not a class of slaves without any right to property or security of life. In the Kalpasutras, Sudras signifies not merely the fourth caste, but also includes various disabilities and derogatory treatment they were subjected to can be found. Some works in Sanskrit literature refers to people beyond the pale of the four castes. The Jatakas throw considerable light on the position of low-class people and they also testify to the fact that even low-class people were allowed to resort to mendicancy. 7

Caste System in Age of Epics

In the Ramayana, Sudras appear as labourers and domestic servants. They are subject to certain disabilities, for instance ineligibility for Vedic study, performance of sacrifice, etc. In certain portions of this epic, regarded as genuine, caste system does not appear to have been severely fixed by inheritance. A man of a lower caste, by impress of severe self-discipline, could attain the status of a higher caste. A number of sub-castes have been mentioned in the Mahabharata. The members of four castes were no doubt barred from inter-marriage, inter-dining and other intimate associations with these people. Further, in Smriti sashtras many references to Sudras and the various disabilities and derogatory treatment they were subjected to can be found. Some works in Sanskrit literature refers to people beyond the pale of the four castes. The Jatakas

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