

Jul-1984

# Is There A Caste System In India?

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## Recommended Citation

Thomas, Abraham V. (1984). Is There A Caste System In India?. *Bridgewater Review*, 2(3), 8-11.  
Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol2/iss3/7](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol2/iss3/7)

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# IS THERE A CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA ?

## A Personal and Sociological Appraisal

by Abraham Thomas

American news media as well as American textbooks, both college and secondary schools, present India as a unique society because it practices the caste system, which is then described in terms of its presumed traditional characteristics. Americans thus learn to picture the Indian society as extremely static and assume that the caste system still continues in its traditional form. The fact is that even in traditional times, the caste system never existed as it was theoretically supposed to operate. In modern India, the caste system exists, but not as westerners generally conceive of it.

Having lived in the United States for more than two decades (and being a naturalized U.S. citizen), I have observed close parallels between the caste system in India and racial relations in the United States, in both the traditional period and the modern era. Once divested of its exotic names and descriptions, the caste system is nothing more or less than any system of social inequality involving changing patterns of domination, exploitation and rebellion, the likes of which are found the world over.

I was born and brought up in a farm family in Kerala State (Southwestern part of India) where my father owned rice fields and cultivated them with the help of what may be called bonded labor. When my grandfather partitioned his land among his three sons, including my father, he also divided the thirty or so families who worked for him in the fields throughout the year among his sons. My father was responsible for providing work for these families year round and for looking after their needs. They in turn were obligated to work for us exclusively and to be loyal to the family. They lived on my father's property and were dependent on him for work and for protection. They addressed my father as well as other members of the family by the term "Thampuran" meaning "lord" and the men took off their turbans in the presence of adult members of the family. They never entered the house except when asked, for performing specific tasks. They remained in the courtyard and father would talk to them from the veranda of the house. When they were given food, they had to eat outside the house.



In a society where much respect was shown to older people, and all older people within one's own community or caste were called by respectful titles, it was normal for us youngsters to call older workers from the lower castes simply by their first names and even to use terms that boys would normally use in addressing each other.

All this was true about thirty or forty years back. Now, however, only in rare cases (some of the older generation) will the children of those workers call the present generation of upper castes by any special titles. By government law, all landowners, including my family, were obliged to let long-term tenants keep one-tenth of an acre, where they could live. Many of the workers' children are not working in the fields, but have been educated in the schools and colleges in nearby towns and have come back to the area as government officials, teachers and politicians. Nobody would dream of treating them the way their parents were treated three decades ago. When they have occasion to come to your house or office, they have to be treated with

dignity and equality. (Neither my father nor my three brothers in India are engaged in direct farming anymore).

My family belongs to the ancient Syrian Christian Community of Kerala (the Malabar Coast), one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. We trace our origin to Brahmins, the highest caste, who were believed to have been converted to Christianity by St. Thomas the Apostle in A.D. 52 and to the Syrian immigrants who came to the Malabar Coast in A.D. 345 under the leadership of a merchant prince named Thomas of Cana. (Thus, my name, Thomas, is not really Welsh, but very much Indian or Syrian). Because of these associations, the Syrian Christians were given a high status in the caste system, even though, strictly speaking, the caste system applies only to Hindus, the majority community of India. The workers that I referred to were from the Pulaya and Ezhava communities, both classified as very low caste. The relationships between the upper caste Hindu landlords and their lower caste workers were even more hierarchical.

Today workers are members of agricultural labor unions owing allegiance to different political parties of the State. They work for anyone they like, under contract rather than the traditional exchange of goods and services. Many younger members of the traditional upper caste farming families have received professional education and have gone to cities, some of their former workers have found enough money (often using low-interest loans from the government) to buy small plots of land and work for themselves.

This brief description of my personal experiences, I hope, gives you some idea of the fluidity of the caste system as it exists now. We shall discuss other changes later. Before we do that, however, I would like to put the caste system into a sociological context. I will describe briefly how the system was supposed to have functioned in the ancient past and how flexibility existed within the system.

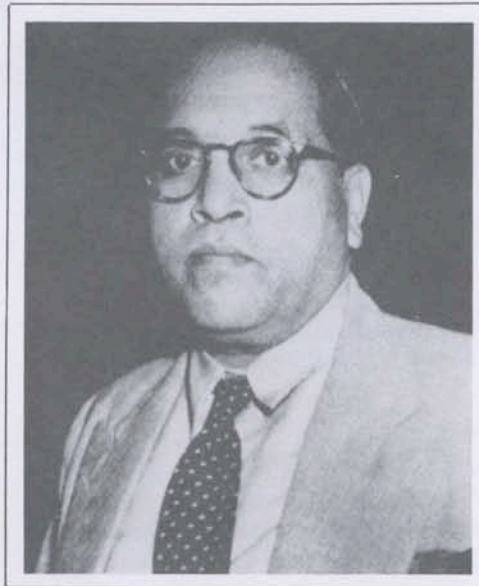
Every society has inequalities -- inequalities of wealth, status, power and other privileges. The particular ways in which these inequalities manifest themselves vary, and the names used, both formal and informal, to denote these inequalities will be different in each society. However, the basic fact of inequality of privileges enjoyed and deprivations endured is universal. The system of inequality present in modern western society is known as class. Most people in the United States would approve of the class system because they believe that it corresponds to the different levels of ability that people are endowed with at birth and the different levels of effort they put forth. The class system is also seen as justified because it is believed that there is plenty of opportunity for people from the lower classes to move up if they work hard.

Systems of inequality found in other societies, especially nonwestern societies, are seen by most Americans as being radically different not only in name but also in principle from the American system. However, although the caste system is seen by most Americans as completely alien to their system, it is in fact not that different from past or present systems of inequality that exist in the U.S. The packaging -- the names used for the different groups and the justification given for the system -- may vary, but the content, the effects for the people, is the same.

## CASTE IN THE PAST

First, a brief description of the caste system as it was supposed to have been practiced in India. The vast majority of Indians are Hindus. In the caste system, sanctioned by the Hindu scriptures, there

were four major divisions called Varnas. ("Varna" means color and it is argued that caste divisions may have had something to do with color of skin). They were: 1) Brahmins, the priestly class; 2) Kshatriyas, the warriors; 3) Vaishyas, the merchants; and 4) Shudras, those who engage in different trades and service occupations such as launderers, barbers, etc. However, the most menial jobs, such as cleaning toilets and moving carcasses, were relegated to the so-called "untouchables" who were considered to be beyond the pale of the caste system. As the name implies, touching them or even coming near them would pollute the ritual purity of the upper castes and if it occurred they had to go through the process of ritual washing and offering prayers. So, in effect, there were five castes. The untouchables were given the name "Harijans" by Mahatma Gandhi (himself a "Vaishya") meaning "children of God." For Gandhi, the most despised of the land were the ones closest to God.



Dr. B. R. Ambedkar  
Minister for Law in the first Indian Cabinet, architect of  
India's Constitution and leader of the Untouchables.

It should be noted that the "Varna" was not a homogeneous group. Each had up to a thousand sub-divisions called "Jatis" which formed a hierarchy within each caste. Not all Jatis were to be found in all parts of India. Within a small village, for example, there may have been present representatives of only fifty or sixty Jatis. Some of the well-known names of Indians are really Jati names and show the traditional occupation of their families. So, the names Nehru, Gandhi, Desai, Patel, Menon -- denote not only their Varna and Jati but to some extent their traditional occupation. Patel and Menon both referred to village chiefs, and Namboodiri was a priest. Of course, not all Jati names referred to an occupation.

The traditional Indian caste system

required strict endogamy, i.e., marrying within one's own group -- primarily the same Jati or closely related Jatis. Occupations were generally connected with one's Jati; hence both were inherited. Thus a "Kayastha" was a scribe, a "Vaidya" was a doctor, an "Asari" a carpenter, and a "Musari" a pot maker. One's status and ritual standing within the village was determined by the position of one's Jati within the caste hierarchy. Brahmins enjoyed the most prestige and the Harijans the least.

However, in spite of the fact that the descriptions of how the caste system was supposed to operate, taken primarily from the early Hindu scriptures, seem very strict and inflexible, close scrutiny shows that there must have been a great deal of flexibility built into the system. For example, there were provisions for the ruler to upgrade a man's caste standing as a reward for outstanding services in time of war. Individuals of proven religious, especially ascetic achievements, were held in high honor irrespective of their caste. Seemingly strict rules such as prohibition against inter-dining was interpreted in such a way that, in practice, people of different castes could eat together without breaking the rule. Thus, although it was against caste law for people of different castes to eat sitting in the same row, sitting in different rows was acceptable. In practice it was also true that a rich Vaishya had often more power than a poor Brahmin in a given village.

The fact that certain rules exist does not necessarily mean that they will be followed. For example, even though the Roman Catholic Church strictly prohibits the use of artificial means of birth control by its members, it is obvious that not every Roman Catholic follows the rule. Only empirical studies based on description of actual behavior can reveal the degree of conformity to rules.

The period between the seventh and seventeenth century A.D., especially in northern India, was marked by the establishment of Moslem religion and Moslem rule. The proselytizing programs of the Moslems, it is argued by several scholars, created a defensive reaction among the Hindus, who clung to their traditional religion including aspects of the caste system even more than before. Hence, the caste system may have been most strictly observed during this period.

The seventeenth century marked the beginning of significant western influences. The British, who ruled much of India by 1857, abolished some of the extreme forms of the caste system. (On the other hand, British policies had the effect of strengthening many caste divisions.) Hindu social reformers such as Vivekananda,

Tagore, and Gandhi helped in the acceleration of this process from within the Hindu community. Western Christian missionary work was seen as a threat to the survival of the Hindu religion and hence pressures for reform from within increased.

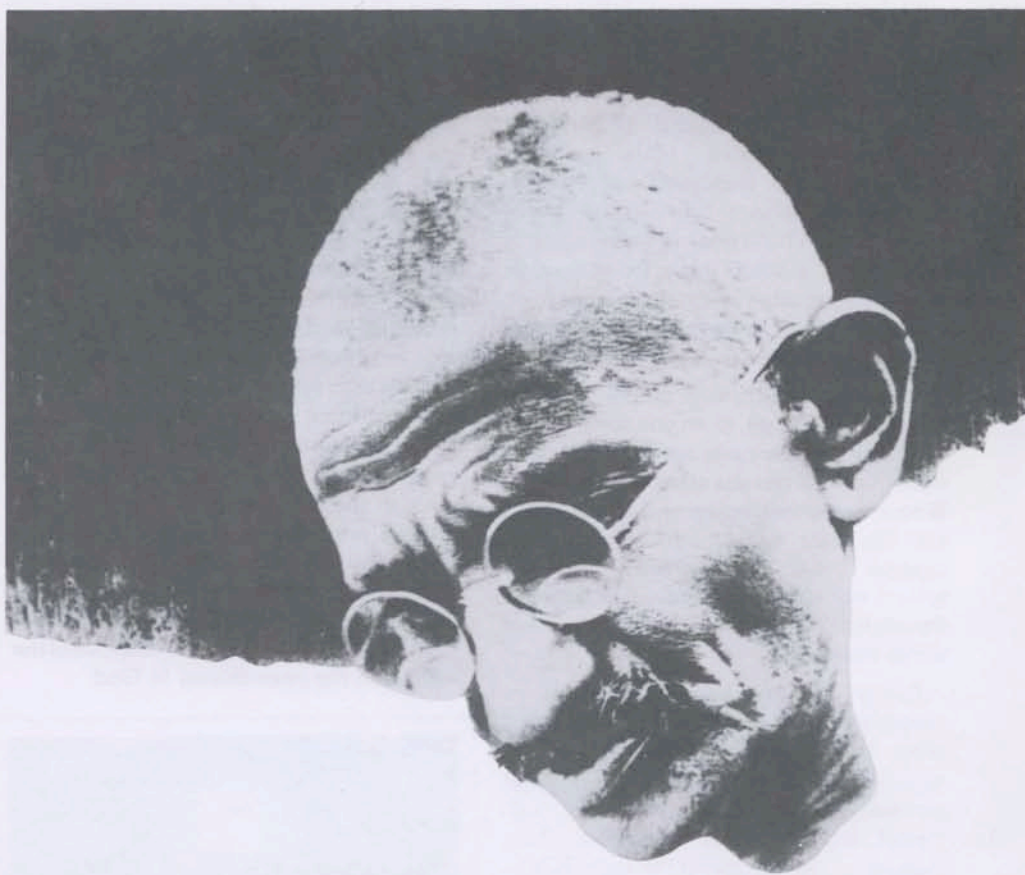
### **CASTE IN MODERN INDIA**

With Indian independence in 1947 and the establishment of a democratic republic, the largest in the world, in 1950, any discrimination based on caste was abolished by law. India is also perhaps unique in the fact that not just "affirmative action" but what I would term "affirmative discrimination" (usually known in the U.S. as "reverse discrimination") became the official policy of the government. Members of backward and scheduled castes were given preference for government jobs, admission to educational institutions and in many other areas. A certain number of seats was also reserved for members of these castes in the elected bodies at the state and federal levels.

In India also, the same type of controversy that is heard often in the United States regarding affirmative action policies was aroused by programs to promote the welfare of the backward and scheduled castes. Opponents argue that showing preference to members of the lower castes in the long run will work to their disadvantage, that such preference is unjust and that it creates negative feelings among the upper castes. Leaders of the lower castes however argue that these programs are necessary to counter balance effects of century-old policies of discrimination. They also claim that in spite of much talk, little progress toward equality has been made, since institutionalized discrimination still continues in most areas.

Obviously much can be said on both sides of the argument. There is no doubt that tremendous progress has been made in removing legal discrimination. There is no argument in India about "affirmative action," that is, programs to assure equal access to jobs, only about "affirmative discrimination," namely, showing preference to low-caste members. Even here, most members of the upper castes argue that after thirty-five years it is time to stop the policy of showing preference on the basis of low-caste membership, but rather to base such policies on economic class membership, irrespective of caste. It is argued that there are many poor people among the upper castes who deserve special treatment and that the rich among the lower castes do not deserve such preferential treatment.

Every time I return to Kerala after the interval of a few years, I am amazed at the



*Mahatma Gandhi, India's "Father of the Nation," constantly fought against caste discrimination.*

changes that have come about in the social relationships between different castes. Gone are the days when upper castes were addressed with respectful titles, although there may be some exceptions among the old people. In the villages, the members of the lower castes usually make up the majority and they elect members of their group to village councils and other elected bodies. The greatest transformation is among the young people, many of whom receive full scholarships to schools and colleges and find government jobs. Very few of the younger people follow the traditional occupations of their parents and Jati. A few have been elected to political offices.

Although these educated members of the lower castes expect to be and generally are treated as equals by the upper castes, this does not mean that in intimate social relationships, such as friendship and marriage, caste does not play an important part. Most marriages still take place among members of the same varna or caste (the Jati or sub-caste distinctions are more easily ignored now). However, inter-caste marriages have become much more

common. Organizations exist to promote such marriages, and it is the semi-official policy of the government to encourage them. Prominent examples of inter-caste marriages have occurred during the past three or four decades so that they are no longer considered unusual.

### **CASTE AND POLITICS**

As mentioned earlier, India is in theory a secular state, and religion and caste are not expected to play any part in politics. The major political parties of India, like the Congress Party of which Indira Gandhi is the leader, publicly oppose paying any attention to caste and religious affiliations in picking their candidates for elections. However, members of the lower castes have discovered that caste and religious consciousness and allegiances can still be easily exploited for political advantages. All political parties unofficially recognize this and play caste politics, and most of the caste and religious organizations which have developed since Independence have taken a distinctively political orientation. Either by

forming their own political parties or by being a major influence in the already existing political parties, they succeed in electing candidates from their own communities to the state and federal legislatures. The influence they wield is then translated into policies and programs which will benefit their castes or communities. Caste organizations, especially those of the lower castes, hold statewide conventions to rally support among their members and to make their demands known to the political parties.

Being low caste has even become a source of pride, as members of the many lower castes have changed their traditional names. So "pulayas" one of the lowest castes who did menial work call themselves "Cheramar," and claim that their ancestors were the rulers of Kerala in ancient times.

Similarly, in Kerala State the Ezhava Community has discarded the old term "Chovan" and has built up a cultural and educational organization known as SNDP. This Ezhava organization sponsors its own political party and run several colleges, hospitals, numerous schools and other institutions. This is not to say that all Ezhava members support only one political party. As a matter of fact, a high percentage of them are said to support the two Communist parties in the State. However, even the Communist party is expected to give caste representation in their leadership positions.

The flexing of political muscle and assertion of power in local villages have given rise to conflict in many areas. Members of the upper castes, who have been used to receiving respectful treatment from the lower castes, often consider their present behavior to be arrogant and aggressive. Most of the landowners and the middle class are still upper caste, whereas most of the workers are from the lower castes. Even upper caste workers often identify with the more well-to-do members of their own caste rather than with lower caste workers. Upper caste landlords, with the help of workers belonging to their caste, may try "to teach" the lower caste workers a lesson by physically intimidating them. But more often than not, especially in many of the rural areas, the lower caste people are able "to teach" some of their current or erstwhile masters a lesson also. In many parts of North India mutual punishments, which often result in atrocities such as large-scale killings, take place between the upper castes and the lower castes. In many areas where the upper castes are all too powerful, the lower castes have no choice but to endure their ancient portion of suffering and exploitation. However, this too will be a passing phase, as the lower castes get more organized and powerful, and will eventually

challenge the authority of the upper castes, as they have done successfully in many parts of India.

When I was in India last year doing research on the social mobility of lower castes, I interviewed several lower caste members who now occupy positions of authority. One, a member of the elite Indian Administrative Service (IAS) who headed a major department in the state government, obviously has many members of the upper castes who work under him. I also interviewed a retired university professor, as well as officials who headed the Harijan Welfare Board (a government department to look after the interests of the lower castes) all belonging to backward classes. Needless to say, they all have high social status. In the federal as well as state governments, members of lower castes occupy high positions; in fact, they have sometimes headed state governments. For well-educated, politically active, lower caste members there are a great many avenues of social mobility. However, in the rural areas, while radical changes have already taken place in social relations, much change has yet to take place economically and socially.

### COMPARISONS WITH THE U.S.

Do any of the situations described above sound familiar? I would submit that the traditional race relations between blacks and whites in the U.S. are strikingly similar to the traditional Indian caste system. By the same token, modern changes in caste relations clearly parallel changes now taking place in the relations between blacks and whites.

Not long ago, for example, older black men could be addressed as "boys" not only by white adults, but also by white youngsters. Only two decades have passed since the blacks began to press the demand that they be addressed by the name of their choice, namely "Black," rather than the names given by the whites, namely "Negro" or worse. "Black is beautiful" is still a new concept for many, and claims of a glorious and proud black heritage are still not widely accepted by the whites.

Inter-caste marriages are perhaps more common in India than inter-racial marriages in the U.S. But, black politics, especially in 1984 with Jesse Jackson's candidacy for the presidency, is not in the background anymore. Blacks have made slow but steady progress in this area by using the ballot box, an experience clearly paralleled by the lower castes in India. However, the multi-party system of Indian parliamentary democracy gives greater scope to caste politics. As mentioned earlier, controversies regarding Affirmative Action and reverse discrimination abound in both societies.

While whites point to the progress blacks have already made, most blacks see the distance they have yet to travel. The situation seems to be somewhat similar in India. In both countries legislation has achieved a great deal, but without quantum changes in attitudes progress will be slow and perhaps violent. Although the blacks have "captured new turf" in many northern cities, and the lower castes dominate many of the rural areas in India, state and national political structures in both countries are overwhelmingly controlled by the dominant group -- the whites in the U.S.A. and the upper castes in India.

### CONCLUSION

Does caste exist in India? Sure it does. But just as racial discrimination in the U.S.A. is not the same as it was two hundred or one hundred or even twenty years ago, the same is true with caste in India. It exists, but in ways radically different from those of the past. In both societies the same social dynamics are at work. What is more important to note and understand are the similarities in this process in the two societies, rather than the differences, which are comparatively speaking superficial. In both India and the U.S., questions of caste and race are intertwined with questions of economic justice and equal opportunity in the broadest sense. Thus, rather than looking at the caste system as unique, it would be more profitable to look at it from a comparative perspective, as one of the numerous systems of inequality to be found the world over.



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