

CHAPTER 17

CASTE

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Summary: Caste is a Portugese word that confuses a spiritual concept with a social hierarchy that is not part of Hindu teachings. Hindu scriptures categorize people by different temperaments – known as varna-- and prescribe special duties for those in each varna. Persons who are intellectuals, Brahmanas, are required to preserve knowledge of the scriptures by studying and teaching them; those who love power, Kshatriyas, are required to use their power to protect the weak; those who love money, Vaishyas, are required to pay taxes and build social infrastructure; those who have no special calling, Sudras, are required to serve their employers loyally. These classifications by varna were not hereditary. In contrast, the social phenomenon known as jati meant that children generally took on the professions of their parents forming a rigid hierarchy that was hereditary. The combination of varna and jati, came to be known as the caste system. The oppressive practices based on caste were not part of the scriptural classification into varnas; they were an outgrowth of the rigid social classification by jati.

What relation does the caste system have to Hinduism? Answering this question requires understanding the distinction between the religious dimension and the socio-cultural dimensions of the practice of Hinduism in India. The word ‘casta,’ meaning ‘race’ or ‘breed’ was used by the Portugese to describe the social hierarchies they found in India in the 15th century. In doing so they fused two separate concepts: *varna* that has a scriptural foundation; and *jati* that defines community. The consequences of this confusion have been profound; and made worse by social and political influences in recent centuries.

Hindu scriptures use the word *Varna* to describe a way of understanding the diversity of classes and human temperaments in all human societies. In any society there are some persons who are intellectuals; others are focused on exercising power and leadership; others are engaged in productive occupations and amassing wealth; and many have no special calling, content to function as workers and followers in society. Based on these four temperaments, Hindu scriptures assign tasks and responsibilities to each *varna* so that all people contribute to society in ways for which they are best qualified: the *Brahmana* functions as the priest or intellectual and is required to preserve knowledge of the scriptures by studying and teaching them; the *Kshatriya* is a ruler of society and is required to use his power to maintain social order and especially to protect the weak; the *vaisya* is the trader or businessman and is required to support society by funding the state treasury and building social infrastructure; the *sudra* is required to serve his employers loyally.

Which of these human tendencies we are born with is the result of how we lived our past lives: what qualities we endeavored to cultivate and the attitudes that we brought to our work. Recognizing this as a source of diversity among human beings, our scriptures give us all a two-

fold message. First, discharge the duties and functions that accrue naturally to us in our lives -- diligently and in a spirit of dedication to God. Second, do our best to cultivate nobler qualities that refine our temperament in this and in future lives. Thus, whatever our particular temperament or social status in this life, we each have the opportunity to evolve spiritually toward the ultimate goal of liberation from the cycle of births and deaths.

Scriptures emphasize that we do not inherit our *varna* from our parents. They reflect our inherent qualities, not our parentage. Nor is there an implied social hierarchy. Those in each *varna* contribute to the betterment of society in their own ways; and spiritual rewards come to those who best fulfill their own obligations as defined by their *varna*.

In modern discourse, this fourfold classification of human temperaments is mistakenly referred to as the ‘caste system.’ The social hierarchy understood by the term ‘caste’ is better described by the term *jati*, which means communities. There are several thousand *jati*’s prevalent in India, each with its own religious and social practices and bound by numerous conventions governing their interactions and perceived hierarchies.

Confusing the concepts of *varna* and *jati* has led to the mistaken conclusion that the caste system is an integral part of the Hindu religion. This is what has been misleadingly taught to generations of school children in USA. The reality is that *varna* is a feature of the religion and *jati* is a feature of society, with no basis in scripture. *Jati* is inherited; *varna* is not. Being a Brahmana by *varna* requires the cultivation of qualities that characterize this *varna*; and being born of Brahmana parents is neither necessary nor sufficient to be a Brahmana. *Jati* defines occupation, similar to the prevalence of guilds in medieval Europe; *varna* defines personal temperament. Traditionally, the mapping of the thousands of *jatis* into the four *varnas* changed over time. While Brahmanas were the privileged class in the performance of rituals and in educational attainment, this privileged status did not extend to other aspects of social power, wealth or influence. Even in the religious context, some of the greatest saints and teachers in the Hindu tradition were not born of Brahmana parents. There are numerous examples, including the sage Vyasa who is the author of numerous revered spiritual texts such as the Bhagavad Gita and the sage Valmiki who is the author of the Ramayana, the most widely known religious story in India. Even the famous Gayatri Mantra, one of the holiest in the Hindu tradition was revealed to the sage Visvamitra who was not born of Brahmana parentage.

But over history, several distortions emerged that led to the practice of the ‘caste system’ as we know it today: the mapping of *varna* into *jati* became more rigid; caste became an inherited attribute that gave rise to a rigid social hierarchy; and dominant castes oppressed the weak. *Jati*’s that were engaged in “unclean” occupations such as scavenging or animal slaughter were treated as “outcastes”, (since variously known as “untouchables”, “harijans” [people of God] or “Dalit”), a category that has no place in the Hindu scriptures. Caste distinctions became a social curse and the source of much suffering. It is important to recall that odious practices based on caste were not part of the scriptural classification into *varnas*; they were an outgrowth of the

rigid classification by *jati*. That *jati* is a social, not religious, phenomena is further evidenced by the fact that caste discrimination is common in India among Christians, Muslims and Sikhs as well, although these religions officially reject caste distinctions.

Caste discrimination and oppression violate a fundamental principle in Hindu philosophy that we should recognize the common divinity in all beings and treat them as we would treat ourselves. The political Constitution of independent India outlaws discrimination by caste. The communities that were classified as outcastes were offered special privileges under official programs of affirmative action in education and employment. The caste system as currently practiced has been roundly condemned by Hindu religious leaders, in the tradition of social reform movements in Hinduism over several centuries. With improved status and opportunity, some Dalits have become very prosperous. With democratic elections, castes that are more numerous have gained greatly in political influence. However, exploitation and poverty among the lower castes undoubtedly continues to be a major social problem in India.

In conclusion, the caste system is a compound of religious and social factors: social hierarchy and attendant oppression has been superimposed on a classification system that is offered in Hindu scriptures as a way of understanding human diversity and defining paths for spiritual evolution. It is seriously misleading to claim that the caste system is an integral part of the Hindu religion. The caste system, which is fundamentally different from the *varna* system that is found in the Hindu scriptures, is undoubtedly a serious social evil. Laws and regulations in India are in place to remedy centuries of abuse of the lower castes. Hindu religious leaders remain active in working against caste discrimination. There is evidence of considerable progress but the lower castes continue to face serious problems.

Note: Further information and copious references on this subject may be found at:

1. *"Hinduism: Not cast in caste: Seeking an end to Caste-based discrimination"* published by the Hindu American Foundation, 2011. Downloadable at www.hafsite.org
2. *"The Caste System"* by Dr. Raj Pandit Sharma, Hindu Council, UK, Feb 2008. Downloadable at <http://www.hinducounciluk.org/reports/333-the-caste-system>

Appendix: Excerpts from Hindu Scriptures

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Those who claim that the caste system is an integral part of the Hindu religion cite, and misinterpret, the following texts:

1. *The fourfold order (of varnas) was created by Me (the Supreme Being) according to the divisions of guna (quality) and karma (work).* Bhagavad Gita 4.13

This verse is misinterpreted to claim that the caste system is part of the basic design of Hinduism. But note that the verse is about *varna*, not caste. “The emphasis is on *guna* (aptitude) and *karma* (function) and not *jati* (birth). The *varna* or the order to which we belong is independent of sex, birth or breeding.”⁷⁶

2. *Of Brahmanas, of Kshatriyas and Vaishyas and also of Sudras...the activities are distinguished, in accordance with the qualities born of their nature.* Bhagavad Gita 18.41

This verse is misinterpreted to mean that Hinduism locks each person into his/her caste by birth. However, what this verse points out is the need for each of us to be comfortable with the qualities with which we are born. “Each individual has his inborn nature, and to make it effective in his life is his duty....So long as our work is done in accordance with our nature, we are righteous, and if we dedicate it to God, our work becomes a means of spiritual perfection.”⁷⁷

3. The *Purusha Sukta* is a famous hymn in the Vedas that describes the whole universe as emanating from the body of the Cosmic Person (*Purusha*). Some excerpts:

The Purusha, with a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand legs, pervades all the Universe....The entire universe of happenings and creatures constitute but a quarter of Him. The remaining three quarters of His Glory consists of the immutable Consciousness....He pervades all beings that eat and things that never eat. From that yajna came horses and all creatures with two rows of teeth...cows, sheep and goats. From the face of the Purusha were born the Brahmanas, from His arms the Kshatriyas, from His thighs the Vaishyas and from His feet the Sudras. From the Purusha's mind came the moon, from His eyes the sun, from His mouth Indra and fire, and from His breath came vital air. From the Purusha's navel emerged 'inner space' and from His head 'outer space'; from His feet the earth and from His ears the 'directions'. Thus the worlds came into creation....” Rig Veda 10.90.1-16; Yajur Veda 31.1-16.

The reference to the four *varnas* emerging respectively from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet is misinterpreted to indicate a hierarchy and a license for the Brahmanas to oppress the Sudras. The purport of this hymn is different. Just as the head, hands, thighs or feet alone can never be the whole person and every part

⁷⁶ The Bhagavad Gita, by S. Radhakrishnan, Unwin Paperbacks; page 160

⁷⁷ Op cit. page 364

is as essential as the other, so are the four *varnas* of equal importance.⁷⁸ Persons of each *varna* are all part of the body of the same Cosmic Person.

⁷⁸ The Universal Person, by Swami Chinmayananda, Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 1991; page 44.