

CASTE

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1. Core Definition

The term **Caste** refers to a complex, traditional, and highly stratified system of social organization, most notably associated with classical Hindu culture in the Indian subcontinent. It functions fundamentally as a form of social stratification characterized by the **hereditary transmission of status**, often dictating occupation, ritual status, and social interactions among individuals. A caste system enforces strict social boundaries, primarily through the mechanisms of purity and pollution, which govern everything from commensality (who may eat with whom) to marriage practices. The core assertion derived from this system is that social and economic standing is inherited, meaning an individual's place in society is ascribed at birth rather than achieved through merit or effort.

This hierarchical arrangement is deeply rooted in religious and philosophical frameworks, particularly the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*, which provide legitimacy for the established order. The structure is neither monolithic nor static across all regions of India; instead, it is a multilayered system that includes broad conceptual divisions (Varna) overlaid by thousands of localized, endogamous groups (J?ti). The caste system is, at its essence, a social mechanism designed to regulate labor, maintain ritual purity, and ensure the perpetuation of specific lineages and occupations through generations, cementing the inherited nature of both social and economic privileges or disadvantages.

While often discussed in the context of Hinduism, similar forms of social stratification based on birth and endogamy exist or have existed in various forms globally, though the classical Indian model remains the most rigidly defined and influential example of a complete caste system. It operates not merely on economic lines but primarily on the axis of **ritual purity**, which is the foundational determinant of rank and interaction.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The English term **caste** originates from the Portuguese word *casta*, meaning "race," "lineage," or "pure breed." Portuguese explorers and traders applied this term in the 16th century to describe the complex, rigid social divisions they observed among the population of India. This foreign term was then widely adopted by subsequent European observers and colonial administrators to describe the indigenous system of social organization, thereby generalizing the system known locally by different names, chiefly *Varna* and *J?ti*.

The historical roots of stratification in India are ancient. The earliest conceptual framework, known

as the **Varna** system, is mentioned in the Vedic texts, notably the *Purusha Sukta* of the *ṛgveda*, dating back perhaps as far as 1500 BCE. This early framework conceptualized society into four major, ritually defined classes based loosely on occupation. However, this textual blueprint was likely more a theoretical division than a strict, birth-based reality in early Vedic society. Over centuries, and particularly during the post-Vedic and classical periods, the Varna structure crystallized, becoming increasingly hereditary and rigid, often enforced by the prescriptive laws detailed in texts like the *Dharmashastras*.

The medieval and early modern periods saw the proliferation and rigidification of the **J?ti** system--hundreds and then thousands of endogamous occupational groups that operate on a micro-regional level. It was the interaction between the idealized Varna framework and the practical, localized J?ti system that the Portuguese encountered and labeled *casta*. During the British colonial era, the system was further codified and rigidified through census operations and administrative policies that sought to categorize the vast population, unintentionally solidifying caste identities and distinctions for administrative and political purposes.

3. Key Characteristics: Varna and J?ti

Understanding the caste system requires distinguishing between its two primary organizational forms: **Varna** and **J?ti**. Varna is the theoretical, pan-Indian structure, meaning "color" or "class," consisting of four main divisions plus the excluded fifth group. Varna is based fundamentally on ritual status and is relatively static. J?ti, meaning "birth" or "kind," constitutes the practical reality of the system. J?tis are localized, endogamous groups defined by hereditary occupation, specific customs, and geographic locality. An individual belongs to a J?ti, which is then often placed within the hierarchy of one of the four Varnas.

A crucial characteristic of the caste system is **endogamy**. Marriage is strictly regulated and generally confined within one's J?ti, ensuring that caste status remains hereditary and lineage purity is maintained. This practice reinforces the social distance between different castes and limits social mobility. Furthermore, the system is characterized by rigid rules concerning **commensality** (sharing food) and physical contact, particularly between higher castes and those deemed ritually impure or polluted. These restrictions are central to maintaining the hierarchy based on purity.

Another defining characteristic is the inherited connection to **occupation**. Historically, specific J?tis were associated with specific trades, such as weaving, metalworking, or priesthood. While modern economic changes have weakened this link, the historical occupational association often remains a strong marker of caste identity and contributes to economic stratification. The entire structure functions as a system of interlocking economic and ritual obligations, where each group performs necessary tasks while maintaining their position within the established hierarchy.

4. Structure of the System (The Varna Hierarchy)

The classical Varna framework divides society into four major hierarchical classes, often conceptualized as emanating from the body of the primordial man (Purusha). These four classes, along with the fifth excluded group, form the basis of the rigid social stratification observed historically. The ranking is based strictly on ritual purity, with **Brahmins** occupying the apex.

The five traditional hereditary classes, ranked in order of ritual status, are:

Brahmins: Traditionally associated with the mouth or head of the Purusha. They are the priests, teachers, scholars, and spiritual leaders. Their primary function is learning, teaching, and performing rituals, establishing them as the guardians of religious knowledge and ritual purity.

Kshatriyas (Warriors/Rulers): Associated with the arms. They are the rulers, administrators, and protectors of society. Their duty involves governance, warfare, and upholding justice (*dharma*), often holding political power.

Vaishyas (Merchants/Farmers): Associated with the thighs. Traditionally engaged in commerce, trade, agriculture, and livestock rearing. They are responsible for the economic prosperity and maintenance of material wealth.

Shudras (Laborers/Servants): Associated with the feet. Their traditional duty is to serve the three higher Varnas. They primarily comprise manual laborers and those performing services.

Dalits / Untouchables (Outcastes): This group, historically referred to by various names including *Avarna* (outside the Varna system) or *Panchamas* (the fifth group), is at the very bottom of the hierarchy. They were historically assigned tasks considered ritually polluting, such as handling corpses, waste, or leatherwork. They suffer the most extreme forms of discrimination and are often referred to as **Outcastes**, though the self-chosen term **Dalit** (meaning 'broken' or 'oppressed') is now widely used.

It is critical to note that the Varna model represents a theoretical ideal. In reality, the complex network of thousands of J?tis often results in intricate local hierarchies that may differ regionally, though the general ranking of the four Varnas tends to hold across the subcontinent.

5. Significance and Sociocultural Impact

The caste system has had a profound and pervasive impact on the social, economic, and political life of the Indian subcontinent for millennia. Socioculturally, it defines the entire landscape of social interaction. It dictates who an individual can marry (**endogamy**), who they can share food or water with (**commensality**), and even the spatial organization of villages and towns, where lower-caste settlements were historically segregated due to perceived impurity.

Economically, the system institutionalized a highly stable but restrictive division of labor. By linking specific J?tis to specific occupations, it ensured the transmission of skills and reduced competition for resources within certain groups. However, this structure simultaneously resulted in massive economic inequality, concentrating wealth and land ownership among the higher castes while relegating lower castes to precarious, low-wage, and often polluting labor, reinforcing the principle that status and economic opportunity are inherited.

Politically, caste continues to be a crucial factor in modern democratic India. Although the system is legally abolished, caste identities remain highly salient in electoral politics, resource distribution, and affirmative action policies. Mobilization along caste lines is a defining feature of contemporary Indian democracy, where various caste groups seek political power to improve their social standing and claim a fairer share of state resources and educational opportunities, leading to complex political dynamics.

6. Debates and Criticisms

The caste system has been subject to continuous criticism, both historically by religious reformers and contemporary social justice advocates. Historically, figures like the Buddha challenged the rigid Brahminical supremacy, and later medieval bhakti saints often promoted egalitarianism, undermining caste distinctions in spiritual matters. In the modern era, the most significant criticisms center on the system's inherent violation of human rights and its role in perpetuating entrenched poverty and discrimination.

The architect of the Indian Constitution, B. R. Ambedkar (himself a Dalit leader), led the charge to legally abolish untouchability and discrimination based on caste. The Constitution of India officially prohibits caste-based discrimination (Article 15 and 17), and the government implemented policies of **reservations** (affirmative action) to ensure representation for historically disadvantaged groups, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), in government jobs and educational institutions.

However, despite legal protections and government policies, caste discrimination persists, particularly in rural areas, manifesting as violence, social exclusion, and economic deprivation against lower castes and Dalits. Contemporary debates often revolve around the effectiveness and fairness of reservation policies, the political manipulation of caste identity, and the continued struggle for social mobility and equality in a society where caste remains a powerful determinant of life chances. Global studies increasingly analyze caste as a paradigm for understanding other forms of hereditary oppression and social exclusion worldwide.

Further Reading

[Caste System in India \(Wikipedia\)](#)

Caste System (Britannica)

Varna (Hinduism)

J?ti

Dalit

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