
Debunking the Myth: Hinduism's Firm Stand Against Caste Discrimination

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"Hinduism is synonymous with humanism. That is its essence and great liberating quality". H.G.wells

"I am a Hindu because it is Hinduism that makes the world worth living. I am a Hindu; hence, I love human beings and all living beings."- Mahatma Gandhi.

Abstract:

In India, Caste is an inescapable aspect of one's identity, akin to a shadow that never leaves. Regardless of a person's level of education or talent, their Caste continues to be the primary means of identification. While the caste system has intertwined with Hinduism in various ways throughout history, it is essential to distinguish between the two. Hinduism, as a dynamic and evolving religion, has harbored movements and philosophies that challenge the caste system. There is no strong correlation between Hinduism and the caste system, neither spatially nor temporally. Even after the emergence of the caste system in Hindu society, significant social and occupational mobility existed. The defining features of the caste system were not strictly observed, particularly in the classical period. Contrary to supporting the caste system, Hindu canon, and philosophy were actually against it based on birth.

Hinduism created legends that condemn the caste system as immoral and invalid, further discrediting its association with the religion. Throughout history, numerous movements within Hinduism have emerged to challenge and combat the caste system, starting from the Bhakti movements and continuing into modern times. The caste system's survival is attributed to factors unrelated to the Hindu religion, highlighting its complex socio-economic roots.

The paper's primary objective is to provide logical and documentary evidence to demonstrate that Hinduism, including Vedic and classical Hinduism, does not support caste discrimination. Instead, it actively opposes it in principle and practice, indicating that the caste system is not an integral part of Hinduism's core beliefs, philosophy, or practices. The caste system in India is not an inherent part of Hinduism but rather a social construct with its roots in historical and societal factors.

Keywords: Hinduism, Caste System, Varna, Scriptures, and Caste discrimination.

Introduction

The description of the varna system in our Veda and other scriptures is only for the division of labor among people. This varna system has nothing to do with touchability or untouchability. Indeed, diversity is a natural and enriching aspect of human existence, making our societies vibrant and dynamic. However, the challenge arises when these differences are turned into forms of discrimination, whether based on race, religion, gender, or any other characteristic. Differences in race, religion, gender, and other attributes should ideally be celebrated as they bring various perspectives, experiences, and cultures into our communities. This diversity can lead to a more inclusive and tolerant society. Many individuals vociferously criticize the caste system for perpetuating inequality and discrimination. Simultaneously, a significant number of people, including those who condemn the caste system, actively avail themselves of the benefits provided through reservation policies. Finding a balance between condemning the caste system and supporting reservation is challenging but necessary. Continuous evaluation and reforms in reservation policies can help address the concerns of both sides. Ultimately, the goal should be to promote social harmony and ensure equal opportunities.

The association between Caste and Hinduism has often been a matter of interpretation, and throughout history, there have been significant dissenting voices within the religion. Scholars and religious leaders have interpreted Hindu scriptures in various ways, leading to differing perspectives on Caste. Some interpretations have perpetuated the idea that Caste is divinely ordained, while others have argued against such notions. The rigid, birth-based system we often associate with Caste was not always the prevailing norm. Instead, social hierarchies appeared to have a significant degree of fluidity, allowing for social and occupational mobility. While Caste may have found a place within Hindu society, it is not an inherent aspect of Hindu religious doctrine. Over centuries, the caste system became deeply ingrained in Indian culture, influencing every facet of life, from marriage to occupation and social interactions. However, it is crucial to recognize that the religious texts of Hinduism do not explicitly endorse this social structure.

Historical Background

The caste system did not appear overnight but evolved over centuries. It can be traced back to the Vedic period, which became more rigid and stratified. It provided a clear social hierarchy, which can be appealing in societies as it gives individuals a sense of identity and belonging. People could identify themselves with their Caste, providing a structure to society.

India is known for its diverse culture and rich history that dates back thousands of years. The caste system is a hierarchical social structure that assigns individuals to different ranks or castes based on birth and occupation. The four main castes were Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (laborers). Outside of these four main castes were the Dalits, who were considered "untouchables" and subjected to extreme forms of discrimination. Chakravarty Uma stated in the book *Gendering India through a Feminist Lens* that: "Caste is not merely the opposition between pure and impure but at a fundamental level it incorporates other kinds of oppositions such as domination and subordination, exploitation and oppression, based on unequal access to material resources" (2003:21).

Over time, the hierarchical structure within each Caste became increasingly rigid, leading to societal divisions based on one's birth rather than one's abilities or achievements. During British colonial rule, the discriminatory practices associated with the caste system became even more pronounced.

The British government implemented policies that reinforced traditional power structures and discriminated against lower-caste individuals. These policies included land-tenure systems, which allowed wealthy landlords from high-caste communities to control large areas and exploit lower-caste workers.

The caste system is a historical expression of human oppression and domination that has been sanctified in the garb of religious validation. The caste system in India had a different purpose, primarily aimed at organizing society based on skills and vocations. However, as time passed, it evolved into a system characterized by discrimination and negativity. Over time, the caste system underwent a significant transformation. Instead of focusing on skill development and vocational specialization, it began to be used to discriminate against certain groups based on their birth.

Historical intent behind divisions like the caste system in India, which was initially created to utilize human talents efficiently. Over time, these divisions evolved into systems of discrimination, with individuals being judged and treated based on their birth rather than their abilities or potential. While acknowledging the historical realities of the caste system, it is also crucial to recognize that modern India is striving for a more egalitarian and inclusive society where caste-based discrimination is actively challenged and addressed. The dynamic nature of Hinduism and its ability to adapt and evolve offer hope for a future where the caste system's negative impacts are progressively diminished. The caste system evolved, adopting different characteristics and interpretations in different periods. This evolution is a testament to the adaptability and resilience of Hindu society, which absorbed various influences and experiences while preserving its core religious beliefs.

The Characteristics of the Caste System:

The essential features of the caste system are:

1. It is not just a division of labor based on occupation but also a division determined by birth with no social mobility.
2. It is a rigid system that separates and restricts inter-dining and inter-marriage between castes, emerged from a deep-seated fear of varna sankara (mixing of varnas).
3. It is hierarchical, with the fourth varna and untouchables facing more disabilities.
4. It is associated with the notions of purity and pollution, with Brahmins being the purest and untouchables being the most impure.
5. The system and its restrictions are authenticated by religion.
6. The foundation of the caste system is a subsistence-oriented production system, with relations based on mutual dependence.
7. This system is not geared towards generating economic surplus for the larger market but rather for meeting local needs.

Social and occupational mobility:

Despite the rigidities of the caste system, social mobility began to increase. Education and economic opportunities became more accessible to a broader section of society. With the spread of modern education and economic development, individuals from lower castes started challenging the traditional hierarchies.

Hinduism has allowed for social and occupational mobility through various means. For example, the inherent qualities of an individual were believed to determine their occupation, and individuals were free to change their occupation if they acquired new skills or knowledge. Moreover, Hinduism created legends to impress on the minds of the people that social and occupational mobility was possible. For instance, the legends of the sixth century depict people from lower castes achieving high positions in society through their merit and hard work.

Occupational mobility in Hindu society refers to the ability of individuals or groups to change their occupation or social status within the hierarchical structure of Hinduism. Social mobility in Hindu society is closely related to the concept of Caste, which divides Hindus

into four main categories: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and Shudras (servants and laborers).

Some occupations are considered ritually neutral or flexible, such as artisans, artisans, musicians, or actors, and can be performed by members of different castes. Some castes have also undergone upward or downward mobility over time due to historical, political, or economic factors.

Occupational mobility in Hindu society has implications for India's social and economic development and the human rights and dignity of its citizens. Some studies have suggested that occupational mobility can enhance social cohesion, reduce poverty and inequality, and foster innovation and entrepreneurship.

The social and occupational mobility of Caste refers to the ability of individuals in a society to move up or down the social and economic ladder regardless of their traditional caste background. - The caste system model, with its defined features and rules, did not work in practice due to numerous exceptions and deviations from the theoretical model.

- Exceptions and occupational mobility have been observed throughout history, with Brahmins engaging in occupations outside their varna-based occupation and Shudras serving as soldiers.

- Examples from the Vedic and Upanishadic periods, such as Satyakama Jabala and various rishis, show social and occupational mobility regardless of caste status.

- The Bhakti movement in India also witnessed many saint poets from lower castes becoming prominent.

- Social mobility and intermixing of castes were every day in ancient India, evidenced by mixed marriages and the lack of caste determinants based on race or color.

- The fact that both upper and lower castes could possess a range of complexions suggests intermarriage among castes.

Concept of Caste (Varna) in Hindu scriptures:

In the ancient Hindu scriptures, including the Vedas and other significant texts, profound statements emphasize that Caste should be determined by one's merits, qualities, and actions rather than birth, and

true Brahmanhood is not a result of one's lineage but is derived from one's knowledge and inner qualities. They underscore the importance of recognizing the potential in every person, regardless of their social background, and encourage a more inclusive and merit-based approach to Caste. Swami Dayananda's remarks also strengthen this view – "If a man's father be low, should his son also do wicked deeds"? No, never. Instead, all individuals should learn from their parents' virtues and not their vices. Those who believe that one's social status is determined by birth and not by character, achievements, and possessions should be asked whether they do not recognize someone as a Brahmin if they have left their social Class and become outcasts, Christians, or Muslims. The only answer they can provide is that the person has failed to fulfill the duties required of a Brahmin. This shows that only those who perform the high duties of a Brahmin can be called Brahmins. Even if a person is of low birth but possesses the qualifications, character, and achievements of a higher class, they should be recognized as such. Similarly, if a high-born individual behaves like someone from a lower class, they should be demoted.

Here are some quotes that highlight this principle: -

Rigveda 5.29.10:

"Let the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya, and the Shudra, each according to his qualities, diligently worship his caste (varna) without despising its duties."

Bhagavad Gita 4.13:

"According to the three modes of material nature and the work ascribed to them, the four divisions of human society were created by Me. Moreover, although I am the creator of this system, you should know that I am yet the non-doer, being unchangeable."

Rigveda 10.90.12:

"Indra, the ancient sage, divided humanity into various categories according to their attributes and activities. May your efforts and qualities determine your status."

Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva:

"By birth, one is not a Brahmin, nor a non-Brahmin; by deeds alone, one becomes a Brahmin or a non-Brahmin."

Manu Smriti 2.168:

"In this world, no one is a Brahmin by birth alone. It is one's conduct that determines one's Caste."

Manu Smriti (Chapter 10, Verse 32):

"Because of his qualities, a Shudra is a Shudra, and a Brahmana is a Brahmana, not by birth alone. Even if a Shudra acquires the ability to listen to and read the Vedas, he becomes a Brahmana."



Manu Smriti 10.65:

"As the son of a Shoodraa may attain the rank of a Braahman if he were to possess his qualifications, character, and accomplishments, and as the son of a Braahman may become a Shoodraa if he sinks to his level in his character, inclinations, and manners, even so, must it be with him who springs from a Kshatriya; even so with him who is born of a Vaishya. In other words, a person should be ranked with the Class whose qualifications, accomplishments, and character he possesses."

Yajurveda 26.2:

"One's varna is not determined by birth, but by one's qualities and actions. A virtuous person, even if born in a lower caste, should be considered as belonging to the higher Caste."

Bhagavad Gita 18.41:

"Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras are distinguished by their qualities of work, O chastiser of the enemy, by the modes of nature."

Rigveda 10.90.11:

"Let the intelligent, the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya, and even the Shudra meditate on their respective duties, and all shall attain the supreme perfection."

Some legends fighting against casteism:

These legends often resonate with the popular mind and convey powerful messages against caste discrimination.

1. **Tiruppan Alvar:** The legend of Tiruppan Alvar, a devotee of Lord Ranganatha, highlights the idea that devotion to God should be paramount, regardless of one's Caste. In this legend, a priest's humiliation of Tiruppan Alvar leads to a divine intervention that ultimately elevates Alvar's status as a saint.
2. **Kanakadasa:** Kanakadasa's story, where Lord Krishna turned his idol to allow Kanakadasa, a lower-caste devotee, to have a glimpse of the deity, underscores the belief that God transcends caste boundaries and welcomes all sincere devotees.
3. **Bhakti Movement:** The Bhakti movement originated in different parts of India and was crucial in challenging the caste system. Saints from various backgrounds, including lower castes, emphasized devotion to a single God and rejected caste-based discrimination.
4. **Basavanna and the Veerashaiva Movement:** Basavanna's Veerashaiva movement in Karnataka actively opposed the caste system. Basavanna promoted the dignity of manual labor, leading to social and occupational mobility among his followers.
5. **Legends Reflecting God's Identification with Devotees:** Legends about God participating in the daily lives of lower-caste individuals and sharing their struggles convey the message that God empathizes with all devotees, regardless of their social status. This challenges the notion of untouchability.
6. **Narayana Guru and Ezhavas:** Shri Narayana Guru's efforts to elevate the Ezhava community in Kerala through education, self-help initiatives, and temple entry movements demonstrate the potential for constructive change within Hinduism. These efforts aimed at breaking down caste distinctions and promoting social equality.
7. **Nadars:** The Nadar community in Tamil Nadu also achieved significant social mobility through education, entrepreneurship, and

self-help initiatives. Their success underscores the potential for positive change within Hinduism's framework.

8. Relevance of Conversion: The examples of Ezhavas and Nadars demonstrate that conversion to other faiths is not the only path to addressing caste-based discrimination. Constructive efforts within Hinduism can also be highly effective.

9. Conciliation over Confrontation: Leaders like Shri Narayana Guru and Mahatma Gandhi adopted conciliatory approaches, seeking cooperation and support from upper-caste communities rather than creating adversaries. This approach was often more successful in effecting change.

10. Modern Hindu Movements: Modern Hindu movements and spiritual leaders, such as Ramakrishna Mission and Aurobindo, have shown that Hinduism can evolve and thrive without rigid adherence to the caste system. These movements emphasize spirituality, moral values, and service to humanity over caste distinctions.

Factors responsible for the survival of the caste system:

The caste system emerged and survived due to complex historical, social, and economic factors. It was not a static system but rather one that evolved. It is a social hierarchy with historical, economic, and political underpinnings. Over centuries, the caste system became deeply ingrained in Indian society, influencing every facet of life, from marriage to occupation and social interactions. The caste system also survived because of resistance to change. People became accustomed to the system, and there was social pressure to conform. Breaking away from caste norms was often met with resistance and ostracism. The caste system in India emerged and survived for a long time due to its ability to perform certain functions that were valued by society. These functions were primarily secular and related to life's social, economic, and political aspects. However, a combination of factors, including social reform movements, economic and technological changes, legal reforms, political shifts, changing values, and urbanization, contributed to the decline of the caste system as a dominant social institution. While the system itself has lost much of its relevance, caste identities and associations persist, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of India's caste

system and its evolution over time.

Although reservation policies in India are intended to correct historical injustices done to certain castes by the so-called upper castes, far from reducing the power of Caste, they retain and strengthen caste divisions. This is because reservation introduces a form of identity politics that makes Caste more visible when the goal should ideally be the eradication of Caste.

Some critics argue that the reservation policy has flaws. For instance, it emphasizes Caste or tribe rather than income or wealth. This means that well-off groups from the depressed classes may benefit from reservation while poorer groups may fail to do so. However, while reservations play a role in sustaining caste identities to some extent, they also serve as a tool for social justice and equality. The challenge lies in ensuring these policies effectively address caste-based disparities without reinforcing caste divisions.

Role of vote bank politics to sustain differences:

Politicians often exploit Caste and religious identities to create vote banks. Political parties align themselves with particular castes, tribes, or religious groups, promising to safeguard their interests and promote their well-being in exchange for electoral support. This strategy has the potential to influence electoral outcomes significantly. Caste in Contemporary Indian politics plays a significant role behind the facade of parliamentary government. The political behavior of people is influenced by Caste, as is evident during the time of distribution of tickets and composition of ministers. It is estimated that people vote for the candidate who belongs to their Caste, and people prefer candidates of their Caste as leaders irrespective of their qualities and weaknesses.

Moreover, when a single party is not able to get a candidate of their own, alliances are formed based on Caste to recommend the name of the person, and arrangements are made according to the satisfaction of the constituents; there are very few people who vote based on merits and qualities else all is Caste based politics, Caste based politics is one of the primary weapons to reach out to people for politics. As a positive aspect, political parties began recognizing the importance of caste-based voting blocs, which increased political

representation for lower-caste communities. This shift in political dynamics further contributed to weakening the traditional caste hierarchy.

Reservation policy needs some revisit:

With the advent of modernity and the struggle for equality, a contradictory approach exists among some individuals and communities. This approach involves criticizing the caste system while simultaneously availing the benefits of reservation in various aspects of Indian life.

Reservation policies have provided opportunities for education, employment, and political representation to historically marginalized communities, contributing to their socio-economic progress. A significant number of people, including those who condemn the caste system, actively avail themselves of the benefits provided through reservation policies.

Reservation policies should temporarily be required to uplift marginalized communities who have suffered for centuries. One of the critical reasons for the continued existence of the caste system is the social security it provides to its members.

Whether a level playing field will be achieved after a lapse of 75 years or it will create more rifts is a big question. Continuously evaluating and reforming reservation policies to promote social harmony and ensure equal opportunities are paramount.

Conclusion:

In contemporary India, there is an ongoing quest for a more egalitarian, inclusive, and caste-free society where caste-based discrimination is actively challenged and addressed. As India gradually shifted from an agrarian and subsistence-based economy to a more industrialized and market-oriented one, the traditional division of labor based on Caste began to lose relevance. New occupations and industries emerged that did not fit neatly into the caste-based framework. Factories, modern businesses, and service sectors did not adhere to the caste system, further eroding its significance in economic life.

Technological advancements, such as mechanization and automation, also disrupted traditional caste-based occupations. Tasks

that were once the domain of specific castes were now performed more efficiently by machines, reducing the need for hereditary skills passed down within families. This shift contributed to the breaking down of the caste system's stranglehold on various professions. As India modernized and urbanized, traditional values and social structures transformed. In urban areas, where people from diverse backgrounds interacted more freely, the rigid caste distinctions began to blur. Urbanization led to a more cosmopolitan society where individual identity and achievement mattered more than one's caste background.

The dynamic nature of Hinduism and its ability to adapt and evolve offer hope for a future where the caste system's negative impacts are progressively diminished.

The aspiration to move beyond categorizing individuals by their community, Caste, or religion is aligned with the ideals of democracy. While legal equality is a significant step, achieving social equality requires continuous efforts to challenge discrimination, promote education, and foster inclusivity. It is a collective endeavor involving individuals, communities, institutions, and governments working together to ensure everyone enjoys equal rights and opportunities. While the caste system has deeply influenced Indian society, it is not an inherent or exclusive part of Hinduism. As a religion, Hinduism is characterized by its diversity and adaptability, allowing for a wide range of beliefs and practices.

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