

## **CASTE AND COMMUNITY MOVEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY: AN INDIA PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Abstract**

*The dynamics of caste and community movements in 21st-century India unfold against the backdrop of a rapidly changing socio-political landscape. This abstract explores the multifaceted dimensions of these movements, delving into their historical roots, contemporary manifestations, and the evolving role they play in shaping India's societal fabric. In the 21st century, India continues to grapple with the intricacies of caste-based structures that have persisted for centuries. While the nation has made significant strides in economic development and technological advancement, the deeply entrenched caste system remains a complex challenge that intersects with various aspects of life, from politics to education and employment. This abstract examines the resurgence of community movements that seek to address historical injustices and advocate for social and economic equity. These movements are not confined to rural areas but extend to urban centers, where a younger generation is challenging traditional norms and questioning established power dynamics. The role of technology, especially social media, in mobilizing and amplifying the voices of these movements is a crucial aspect of this analysis. Furthermore, the abstract explores the nuanced interplay between caste and politics. Political parties often leverage caste identities to consolidate their vote banks, shaping policies and narratives that impact the socio-economic landscape. Simultaneously, there is a growing demand for more inclusive and representative governance, reflecting the aspirations of a diverse and dynamic population. In the realm of education and employment, affirmative action policies aim to address historical disadvantages faced by certain castes. However, debates around reservation policies underscore the challenges of achieving a balance between rectifying historical injustices and promoting a meritocratic society. As India navigates the complexities of the 21st century, the interwoven narratives of caste and community movements illuminate the ongoing struggle for social justice, equality, and a more inclusive nation. This abstract sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of the evolving dynamics and implications of these movements in contemporary India.*

**Keywords:** Caste, Community, Education, Employment, India

## **Introduction**

India has had a very vibrant history which unfortunately has seen a very large racial discrimination in the form of caste.<sup>1</sup> Caste was generally a social basis of segregation and it has been seen that caste change was allowed in earlier times but over ages it has become a very rigid structure which discriminate people on the basis of birth. These are mainly four castes in India and also fifth category outside caste that is called untouchables or dalits. The dalits were widely discriminated and were mainly landless labourers.<sup>2</sup> Caste system has been prevalent in India since time immemorial. Every individual belongs to some caste or the other. The backwardness of people in India can be traced to the caste they belonged to. Every Caste is associated with a particular occupation. Thus, caste is a criterion cannot totally be ignored. Hindu society is divided into four verna, a convention which had its origins in the Rig Veda, the first and most important set of hymns in Hindu scripture which dates back to 1500-100 B.C.<sup>3</sup>

Jati or caste is a second factor specifying in rank in the Hindu social hierarchy. Andre Beteille defines caste as “a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life which includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system. Despite Constitutional prohibitions and laws, most recently the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act) of 1989, violence and injustices against untouchables continues today, particularly in rural areas of India.<sup>4</sup>

Caste system of India is one of the clearest manifestations of social formation based on inclusion and exclusion.<sup>5</sup> Caste system is a form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a lifestyle which often include an occupation, status in a hierarchy and customary social interaction and exclusion based on cultural notions of superiority. Its paradigmatic ethnographic examples is the division of Indian society into rigid

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<sup>1</sup> Pandey, G., 2013. *A history of prejudice: Race, caste, and difference in India and the United States*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ghose, S., 2003. The dalit in India. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 70(1), pp.83-109.

<sup>3</sup> De, S.K., 1947. *History of Sanskrit Literature: Prose, Poetry and Drama*. Ardent Media.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed, M.N. and Chandni, M.J., 2022. The Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 & its Current Implementation Status. *resmilitaris*, 12(5), pp.1302-1320.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed, M.N. and Chandni, M.J., 2022. The Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 & its Current Implementation Status. *resmilitaris*, 12(5), pp.1302-1320.

social groups with roots in India's ancient history and persisting until today.<sup>6</sup> However, the economic significance of the caste system in India has been declining as a result of urbanization and affirmative action programmes.

### **Historical root of Caste Movement**

Here I am attempting a broader understanding of the caste and community movement in India in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The tenth mandala of the 'Rig Veda' contains the 'Purushasukta'. The purushasukta is the earliest exposition of justification for caste system.<sup>7</sup> It holds that the Brahmanas came from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaisyas from his stomach, and the sudras from the feet. It can be safely presumed that this fourfold caste system has emerged as early as the Rig Vedic period. Even in the Pre-Rig Vedic period distinctions among arya, un-aryas, mellchas, dasyus, asuras and yavanas had appeared. Distinctions amongst them were based on race, food habits, religious practices and even birth.

Caste consists of two different concepts VARNA and JATI. VARNA may be translated as class and refers to the four social classes which existed in vedic society, namely Brahman, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. JATI may be translated as caste and refers to birth. The JATIS and VARNAS have pre modern origins. Between CA 2, 200 BCE and 100 CE admixture between Northern and Southern population in India took place, after which a shift to endogamy took place. The caste system as it exists today is thought to be the result of development during the collapse of Mughal era and British colonial regime in India. The British Raj further this development, making rigid caste organisation a central mechanism of administration between 1860 to 1920, the British segregated Indians by caste, granting administrative jobs and senior appointments only to the upper caste. Social unrest during the 1920s led to a change in this policy. From then on the colonial administration began a policy of positive discrimination by reserving a certain percentage of government jobs for the lower castes.<sup>8</sup>

During the time when the British colonies existed, caste ethnology was based on Jati. After the 1881 census, colonial ethnographers in British India continued to employ caste (Jati) heading

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<sup>6</sup> Masih, P.P., 2019. Caste discrimination and its affective impact. *IAHRW International Journal of Social Sciences Review*, 7(5-III), pp.1726-1729.

<sup>7</sup> Sharma, J., 2017. *An analysis of the Varna dharma: a psychophilosophical interpretation with an Aurobindonian perspective* (Doctoral dissertation, Department of Philosophy, Pondicherry University).

<sup>8</sup> Jaffrelot, C., 2006. The impact of affirmative action in India: More political than socioeconomic. *India Review*, 5(2), pp.173-189.

to count and categorise people (Now Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma).<sup>9</sup> The 1891 Census had 60 sub-groups, with each sub-group further subdivided into six racial and vocational categories; successive censuses increased this number.

The formalisation of the policy of caste-based job reservation with lists of Scheduled Castes (Dalit) and Scheduled Tribes occurred after India gained independence, marking a new step (Adivasi).<sup>10</sup> The country's lower caste population has been the target of numerous social programmes and legislation passed since 1950 in an effort to better their economic and social standing. The Supreme Court of India has ruled that affirmative action programmes such as college admission quotas, employment reservations, and caste classifications are based on inherited characteristics and cannot be changed. According to Article 15 of the Indian Constitution, it is forbidden to discriminate against lower castes.

Many people have strong opinions about how the British Raj affected India's caste system. Under the Raj, the caste system became officially codified after the British began counting castes in their ten-year census and painstakingly codified it from 1860 to 1920. The British segregated Indians according to caste, with the upper class receiving administrative positions and senior appointments.

Both historically and in the present, the caste system was complex, multi-faceted, and defied easy categorization. Marriage, food consumption, and the acceptance of certain foods, especially water, were all influenced by social class.<sup>11</sup> Although there has been some easing of food restrictions, at least in urban India, there are still significant prohibitions on marriage. Distinct occupational groups are not the only ones that the word "Jati" can describe within the larger caste system. 'Jata,' meaning birth, is the origin of the word jati. Actually, birth is the most important factor in determining the Jati. The Hindu social structure is highly stratified along four distinct caste lines, each with its own set of rules and practises. Among Hindus, the idea of social and religious contamination is a hallmark of the caste system. As a characteristic of the caste system, there are many ritual baths and purification ceremonies, especially for the higher caste. Another aspect of the caste system in India is the intricate endogamy and exogamy

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<sup>9</sup> Pandey, B., 2019. *Caste system and case studies# indian\_society*. Lulu. com.

<sup>10</sup> Hota, P., 2023. *The Violence of Recognition: Adivasi Indigeneity and Anti-Dalitness in India*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>11</sup> Bolazzi, F., 2020. *Caste, class and social mobility: a longitudinal study in a north Indian village 1958-2015* (Doctoral dissertation, Université Paris Cité; Università degli studi (Milan, Italie)).

rituals. Both are adhered to in an intricate fashion. In most cases, people do not marry outside of their caste. Caste dictates that spouses cannot be from the same gotra or kula.

A quick review of social trends in contemporary India can help fill out the caste judgement. The goal of social reformers like Mahatma Gandhi and Rammohan Roy was to help the downtrodden and marginalised.<sup>12</sup> Generally speaking, the untouchables were the object of the social movements' compassion. By the 19th and 20th centuries, egalitarian modernist ideas had made it to India. Social reform movements and the anti-feudal movement occurred at the same time. Naturally, the nationalist freedom movement was the most prominent current. The nationalists' goal was to lead the whole populace to independence. An essential condition was the need for national integration. The affirmative action policy was born out of the Gandhi-Ambedkar accord. Affirmative action once only applied to social factors, but it has since expanded to encompass economic and even religious ones. There has been a marked shift toward greater inclusivity and equality in contemporary Indian society. Although egalitarianism is a basic principle, the constitution does acknowledge equality. M.N. Srinivasan the most famous sociologist recognises four significant elements of social transformation in modern India thus.<sup>13</sup>

- Sanskritization.
- Westernization.
- Caste mobility.
- Secularization.

There was a "Harijan temple entry movement" that Mahatma Gandhi spearheaded. Today, dalits and harijans are welcome at all main shrines. One kind of egalitarianism is the caste system. Some social groups' economic advancement is associated with the sanskritization process as well. When times were good economically, sanskritization of the area was inevitable. Due to time constraints, we will not be able to go into the sanskritization process in detail.

Another feature of modern and contemporary social developments is the process of modernization and Westernization.<sup>14</sup> On occasion, India has taken stock of her history again. Various social movements, such as Buddhism, Jainism, the great Upanishads, and Ajivikas,

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<sup>12</sup> Parekh, B.C., 1999. *Colonialism, Tradition, and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*. Sage.

<sup>13</sup> Kumar, V., 2022. How egalitarian is Indian sociology?. In *Mapping Identity-Induced Marginalisation in India: Inclusion and Access in the Land of Unequal Opportunities* (pp. 55-86). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

<sup>14</sup> Kagitcibasi, C., 2005. Modernization does not mean Westernization: Emergence of a different pattern. In *Culture and human development* (pp. 230-245). Psychology Press.

reevaluated societal structure, including the caste system, from the eighth to sixth centuries B.C. Bhakti cult, which emerged with the advent of Islam, allowed for new inquiries. Numerous religious and social reformers, including Mira Bai, Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya, and many more, had challenged the validity of caste and ceremonial brahminism. The unequal caste system was rejected by everyone. A comparable uprising was also led by saint poets in southern India. Christian thought, Western democracy, and Indian nationalism all helped to usher in a new era of transformation in contemporary India.<sup>15</sup>

Sanskritization and social mobility both predate the establishment of the caste system. Sanskritization is closely related to caste mobility. From 1871 to 1931, while the English ruled India, they used caste as a variable in their censuses.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the first political groups, there were also many caste-based communities. There were four main ways in which these caste organisations sought to improve their caste position. Claims for kshtriya status were the most common. The upward mobility movement and sphere-headed defensive movements were constants in their lives. After realising it was blind, the government abandoned the caste indicator in the 1941 census. The emergence of caste as a significant role in political structure may be traced back to the rise of figures like Ambedkar, the Justice Party in Tamil Nadu, and the dalits in Maharashtra. We have enhanced the process and will never reverse it. The role of caste in voting patterns, power dynamics, and political social engineering is growing. However, Karunanidhi's outspoken criticism of Brahmins and brahminism persists. The Brahmins and dalits' alliance is depicted in Mayabati.<sup>17</sup> When Ambedkar and many of his supporters saw that brahminic Hinduism could not guarantee equality, they moved to Buddhism, a faith within India. It is challenging to evaluate the growing political awareness of caste in relation to its effect on egalitarianism.

### **Targeting Criminal Castes and their Isolation.**

The British Colonial Government enacted a number of laws targeting Indians according to their religious affiliation and caste beginning in the nineteenth century. Castes were considered "Tribes" under the stipulations of these laws enacted during the colonial era. For example, in 1871, the Criminal Tribes Act was passed by the British Colonial Government. The Ahirs, Gujars, and Jats were the first castes to be deemed inherently criminal under this law. However,

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<sup>15</sup> Jaffrelot, C., 2021. *Modi's India: Hindu nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy*. Princeton University Press.

<sup>16</sup> Desai, M., 2007. *State formation and radical democracy in India*. Taylor & Francis.

<sup>17</sup> Oberst, R.C., 2018. *Government and politics in South Asia*. Routledge.

by the late 19th century, its scope had broadened to encompass the majority of untouchables and hill tribe castes, including the Chamars, sanyasis, and the kallars and msaravaras of southern India, as well as non-loyal castes in northern India, including the thirs, gujars, and jats, who were branded as predatory and barbarians and added to the list of criminals. At the turn of the twentieth century, with the declaration that individuals "could not be imprisoned forever on the suspicion of ill character," the practise was reversed, as it had become contentious and did not have the approval of all colonial British officials. Beginning in the early 19th century and continuing into the mid-20th century, with the growth of the Criminal Castes List in both West and South India from the 1900s to the 1930s, the criminal by birth laws were enforced against targeted castes.<sup>18</sup> By 1931, the Criminal Tribals Act had encompassed hundreds of Hindu communities; in the Madras Presidency alone, 237 criminal castes and tribes were enumerated under the Act.

### **Religion and Caste Segregated Human Rights.**

Eleanor Nesbitt, an Indian history and religion professor, claims that the British colonial administration used the caste census and a slew of laws passed at the turn of the twentieth century to further entrench caste-based distinctions in British India.<sup>19</sup> For example, in 1900, the Land Alienation Act was passed, and in 1913, the Punjab Pre-Emption Act was passed, both of which established a set of castes that could lawfully own land and denied other castes based on the census the same property rights. These laws made it illegal for members of land-owning castes to transfer their property to members of non-agricultural castes within or between generations, effectively limiting the mobility of wealth and erecting caste barriers in India.

### **Further Development**

The British colonial era fostered preconceived notions about the nature and evolution of India's caste system, and the ten-year census, especially in 1901 and 1911, which counted the people into strict categories, further solidified caste identities.<sup>20</sup> This policy was changed because of the social instability that occurred in the 1920s. From that point on, the colonial authority started a programme of positive discrimination by setting aside a specific number of government positions for members of lower castes.

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<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey, C., 2017. *Modern India: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Mosse, D., 2020. Outside caste? The enclosure of caste and claims to castelessness in India and the United Kingdom. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 62(1), pp.4-34.

<sup>20</sup> Haan, M.D., 2000. The population of India as a colonial category: The British Censuses of 1872--1911.

In August 1932, during the round table conference, Ramsay Macdonald granted Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Anglo-Indian, European, and Dalit representation in accordance with a communal award that Ambedkar had requested of the then-prime minister of Britain, Ramsay Macdonald. The electorate for these economically disadvantaged groups was divided into special constituencies where only members of such groups were eligible to cast ballots. Scheduled Castes (Dalit) and Scheduled Tribes lists were formed when India gained independence, establishing a policy of caste-based job reservation (Adivasi).<sup>21</sup>

### **Recognition**

Under the umbrella terms of Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Castes, respectively, the Indian government formally acknowledged historically discriminated-against communities like the untouchables. The Mandal Commission recommended a 27% quota for economically disadvantaged groups to the government in 1990.<sup>22</sup> Since then, India has set aside 27% of government-owned firm and agency positions for SEBCS. Currently, the reserve for seats has been increased to 38.75 percent at various educational institutions, primarily in our state.

### **Affirmative Action**

Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits discrimination based on caste and Article 17 declared the practice of untouchability to be illegal.<sup>23</sup> In 1955, India enacted the Untouchability (Offences) Act renamed in 1976 as the Protection of Civil Rights Act. The SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was passed in India in 1989.

- The National Commission for SC & ST was established to investigate, monitor, advise and evaluate the socio-economic progress of SC & ST.
- In 2007 Uttar Pradesh the popular State elected Mayabati as the Chief Minister.
- In 2009, the Indian Parliament unanimously elected a Dalit Miera Kumari as the 1<sup>st</sup> female Speaker.
- The presence of lower caste people in highest paying, senior most position jobs in India has increased by ten-fold from 1.8% in all jobs in 1959 to 10.12% of all jobs in 1995.
- Reservation system for people classified on SCs & STs has existed for over 60 years.

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<sup>21</sup> Bijoy, C.R., 2003. The adivasis of India-A history of discrimination, conflict, and resistance. *PUCL Bulletin*, pp.1-7.

<sup>22</sup> Maheshwari, S., 1991. *The Mandal commission and Mandalisation: a critique*. Concept Publishing Company.

<sup>23</sup> Prabhakaran, S., 2021. Article 15 of the Indian Constitution-No Discrimination. *Issue 5 Int'l JL Mgmt. & Human.*, 4, p.1058.



### **Effects of Government Aid**

In a 2008 study it found that a significant increase in lower caste children in primary school.<sup>24</sup> The number of Dalit children who completed either middle, higher college level education increased three times faster than the national average.

- A 2007 nationwide survey of India by the World Bank found that over 80% children of historically discriminated castes were attending schools.
- In 2007, the literacy rates in India's lowest castes was 55% compared to a national average of 63%.
- The childhood vaccination levels in India lowest castes was 40% in 2001, compared to a national average of 44%.
- Access to drinking water within house hold or near the household in India's lowest caste was 80% in 2001 compared to a National Average of 84%.
- The poverty level in India's lowest castes dropped from 49% to 39% between 1995-2005 compared to a National Average change from 35 to 27%

### **Conclusion**

A composite population resides in India. Since there are many different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups in India, the country's population is very diverse. Along with Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Others, there are Pariahs. Additionally, there are disadvantaged groups, such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The Indian society at the time of independence was, at best, divided, and had already instituted a system of reservation for the backward, which they called Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. This system is still in place in India today. One can observe this in numerous cases of caste-based violence in India, such as the Kherlanji massacre, the Chunduram massacre, the Neerukonda massacre, and the Icondhamala Donga in Odisha. More than half of India's population lives in rural areas, where caste restrictions are less strictly enforced than in larger cities. Rarely does it reach the level of court action because it is considered an internal affair. Affirmative action would be a strong policy choice in this situation, even in contemporary India. It has been observed that the representation of SCs and STs in government employment and educational institutions has grown significantly over the years. Legislative reservations have also opened

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<sup>24</sup> Saravanakumar, S. and Palanisamy, M., 2013. Status of primary education of scheduled caste children. *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(8), pp.54-61.

doors for SC and ST members to participate in executive branch and decision-making roles. A demand for equal downgrading of caste has emerged in post-independent India, in contrast to the robust efforts for horizontal upward movement within a large caste that existed in India prior to independence (demands for inclusion of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe category). Positive benefits are the source of the downgrading demand. The Indian caste system is unlike any other civilisation. No period in history has seen caste as a fixed social institution. It is undeniable that, for some segments of Indian society, the caste system is fading into oblivion. The caste structure does not require defence.