

# A Study of Caste System, Family Life and Values In Ancient India

Sameer Pratap Singh

M.A. History Department of History, Rajasthan University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

## ABSTRACT

The present study explains the caste system, family life and values in ancient India. The study shows that the four primary castes are: Brahmin, the priests; Kshatriya, warriors and nobility; Vaisya, farmers, traders and artisans; and Shudra, tenant farmers, and servants. Some people were born outside of (and below) the caste system. They were called "untouchables." It also shows that the Childrearing practices in India tend to be permissive, and children are not encouraged to be independent and self-sufficient. The family is expected to provide an environment to maximize the development of a child's personality and, within the context of the Hindu beliefs and philosophy, positively influence the child's attitudes and behaviors.

**Keywords:** Caste System, Family Life, Family values, Ancient India

## I. INTRODUCTION

The origins of the caste system in India and Nepal are shrouded, but it seems to have originated more than two thousand years ago. Under this system, which is associated with Hinduism, people were categorized by their occupations. Although originally caste depended upon a person's work, it soon became hereditary. Each person was born into an unalterable social status.

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### 1.1 Theology behind the Castes

Reincarnation is one of the basic beliefs in Hinduism; after each life, a soul is reborn into a new material form. A particular soul's new form depends upon the virtuousness of its previous behavior. Thus, a truly virtuous person from the Shudra caste could be rewarded with rebirth as a Brahmin in his or her next life.

Souls can move not only among different levels of human society but also into other animals - hence the vegetarianism of many Hindus. Within a life cycle, people had little social mobility. They had to strive for virtue during their present lives in order to attain a higher station the next time around.

### 1.2 Daily Significance of Caste:

Practices associated with caste varied through time and across India, but they had some common features. The three key areas of life dominated by caste were marriage, meals and religious worship. Marriage across caste lines was strictly forbidden; most people even married within their own sub-caste or *jati*.

At meal times, anyone could accept food from the hands of a Brahmin, but a Brahmin would be polluted if he or she took certain types of food from a lower caste person. At the other extreme, if an untouchable dared to draw water from a public well, he or she polluted the water and nobody else could use it.

In terms of religion, as the priestly class, Brahmins were supposed to conduct religious rituals and services.

This included preparation for festivals and holidays, as well as marriages and funerals.

The Kshatriya and Vaisya castes had full rights to worship, but in some places, Shudras (the servant caste) were not allowed to offer sacrifices to the gods. Untouchables were barred entirely from temples, and sometimes were not even allowed to set foot on temple grounds. If the shadow of an untouchable touched a Brahmin, he/she would be polluted, so untouchables had to lay face-down at a distance when a Brahmin passed.

### 1.3 Thousands of Castes:

Although the early Vedic sources name four primary castes, in fact, there were thousands of castes, sub-castes and communities within Indian society. These *jati* were the basis of both social status and occupation. Castes or sub-castes besides the four mentioned in the Bhagavad Geeta include such groups as the **Bhumihar** or landowners, **Kayastha** or scribes, and the **Rajput**, who is a northern sector of the Kshatriya or warrior caste. Some castes arose from very specific occupations, such as the **Garudi** - snake charmers - or the **Sonjhari**, who collected gold from river beds.

### 1.4 The Untouchables:

People who violated social norms could be punished by being made "untouchables." This was not the lowest caste - they and their descendants were completely outside of the caste system. Untouchables were considered so impure that any contact with them by a caste member would contaminate the other person. The caste-person would have to bathe and wash his or her clothing immediately. Untouchables could not even eat in the same room as caste members. The untouchables did work that no-one else would do, like scavenging animal carcasses, leather-work, or killing rats and other pests. They could not be cremated when they died.

### 1.5 Caste among Non-Hindus:

Curiously, non-Hindu populations in India sometimes organized themselves into castes as well. After the introduction of Islam on the subcontinent, for example, Muslims were divided into classes such as the Sayed, Sheikh, Mughal, Pathan, and Qureshi.

These castes are drawn from several sources - the Mughal and Pathan are ethnic groups, roughly speaking, while the Qureshi name comes from the Prophet Muhammad's clan in Mecca. Small numbers of Indians were Christian from c. 50 CE onward, but Christianity expanded after the Portuguese arrived in the 16th century. Many Christian Indians still observed caste distinctions, however.

## II. ORIGINS OF THE CASTE SYSTEM:

### 2.1 How did this system come about?

Early written evidence about the caste system appears in the Vedas, Sanskrit-language texts from as early as 1500 BCE, which form the basis of Hindu scripture. The *Rigveda*, from c. 1700-1100 BCE, rarely mentions caste distinctions and indicates that social mobility was common.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, however, from c. 200 BCE-200 CE, emphasizes the importance of caste. In addition, the "Laws of Manu" or *Manusmriti* from the same era defines the rights and duties of the four different castes or *varnas*. Thus, it seems that the Hindu caste system began to solidify sometime between 1000 and 200 BCE.

### 2.2 The Caste System during Classical Indian History:

The caste system was not absolute during much of Indian history. For example, the renowned Gupta Dynasty, which ruled from 320 to 550 CE, were from the Vaishya caste rather than the Kshatriya. Many later rulers also were from different castes, such as the Madurai Nayaks (r. 1559-1739) who were Balijas (traders).

From the 12th century onwards, much of India was ruled by Muslims. These rulers reduced the power of the Hindu priestly caste, the Brahmins. The traditional Hindu rulers and warriors, or Kshatriyas, nearly ceased to exist in north and central India. The Vaishya and Shudra castes also virtually melded together.

Although the Muslim rulers' faith had a strong impact on the Hindu upper castes in the centers of power, anti-Muslim feeling in rural areas actually strengthened the caste system. Hindu villagers reconfirmed their identity through caste affiliation.

Nonetheless, during the six centuries of Islamic domination (c. 1150-1750), the caste system evolved considerably. For example, Brahmins began to rely on farming for their income, since the Muslim kings did not give rich gifts to Hindu temples. This practice was considered justified so long as Shudras did the actual physical labor.

### **2.3 The British Raj and Caste:**

When the British Raj began to take power in India in 1757, they exploited the caste system as a means of social control. The British allied themselves with the Brahmin caste, restoring some of its privileges that had been repealed by the Muslim rulers. However, many Indian customs concerning the lower castes seemed discriminatory to the British and were outlawed.

During the 1930s and 40s, the British government made laws to protect the "Scheduled castes" - untouchables and low-caste people. Within Indian society in the 19th and early 20th there was a move towards the abolition of untouchability, as well. In 1928, the first temple welcomed untouchables or *Dalits* ("the crushed ones") to worship with its upper-caste members.

Mohandas Gandhi advocated emancipation for the Dalits, too, coining the term *harijan* or "Children of God" to describe them.

### **2.4 Caste Relations in Independent India:**

The Republic of India became independent on August 15, 1947. India's new government instituted laws to protect the "Scheduled castes and tribes" - including both the untouchables and groups who live traditional lifestyles. These laws include quota systems to ensure access to education and to government posts. Over the past sixty years, therefore, in some ways, a person's caste has become more of a political category than a social or religious one.

## **III. FAMILY LIFE AND FAMILY VALUES**

In India the family is the most important institution that has survived through the ages. India, like most other less industrialized, traditional, eastern societies is a collectivist society that emphasizes family integrity, family loyalty, and family unity. C. Harry Hui and Harry C. Triandis (1986) defined collectivism, which is the opposite of individualism as, "a sense of harmony, interdependence and concern for others" (p. 244). More specifically, collectivism is reflected in greater readiness to cooperate with family members and extended kin on decisions affecting most aspects of life, including career choice, mate selection, and marriage (Hui and Triandis 1986; Triandis et al. 1988).

The Indian family has been a dominant institution in the life of the individual and in the life of the community (Mullatti 1992). For the Hindu family, extended family and kinship ties are of utmost importance. In India, families adhere to a patriarchal ideology, follow the patrilineal rule of descent, are patrilocal, have familialistic value orientations, and endorse traditional gender role preferences. The Indian family is considered strong, stable, close, resilient, and enduring (Mullatti 1995; Shangle 1995). Historically, the traditional, ideal and desired family

in India is the joint family. A joint family includes kinsmen, and generally includes three to four living generations, including uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, and grandparents living together in the same household. It is a group composed of a number of family units living in separate rooms of the same house. These members eat the food cooked at one hearth, share a common income, common property, are related to one another through kinship ties, and worship the same idols. The family supports the old; takes care of widows, never-married adults, and the disabled; assists during periods of unemployment; and provides security and a sense of support and togetherness (Chekki 1996; Sethi 1989). The joint family has always been the preferred family type in the Indian culture, and most Indians at some point in their lives have participated in joint family living (Nandan and Eames 1980).

With the advent of urbanization and modernization, younger generations are turning away from the joint family form. Some scholars specify that the modified extended family has replaced the traditional joint family, in that it does not demand geographical proximity or occupational involvement and does not have a hierarchical authority structure (Nandan and Eames 1980; Mullatti 1995; Shangle 1995). This new family form encourages frequent visits; financial assistance; aid and support in childcare and household chores; and involvement and participation in life-cycle events such as births, marriages, deaths, and festival celebrations. The familial and kinship bonds are thus maintained and sustained. Even in the more modern and nuclear families in contemporary India, many functional extensions of the traditional joint family have been retained (Nandan and Eames 1980), and the nuclear family is strongly embedded in the extended kinship matrix. In spite of the numerous changes and adaptations to a pseudo-Western culture and a move toward the nuclear family among the middle and upper classes, the modified extended

family is preferred and continues to prevail in modern India (Chekki 1996; Mullatti 1995; Segal 1998).

India is an extremely pronatalistic society, and the desire to have a male child is greatly stressed and is considered by some to be a man's highest duty, a religious necessity, and a source of emotional and familial gratification (Kakar 1981). Because male children are desired more than female children, they are treated with more respect and given special privileges. Male children are raised to be assertive, less tolerant, independent, self-reliant, demanding, and domineering (Kumar and Rohatgi 1987; Pothan 1993). Females, in contrast, are socialized from an early age to be self-sacrificing, docile, accommodating, nurturing, altruistic, adaptive, tolerant, and religious, and to value family above all (Kumar and Rohatgi, 1987; Mullatti, 1995). In rural areas, low-income women have always worked outside the home. In urban areas, there has been a substantial increase in the number of middle- and upper-class women working to supplement their husbands' incomes. In a traditional Indian family, the wife is typically dependent, submissive, compliant, demure, nonassertive, and goes out of her way to please her husband. Women are entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the home and caring for the children and the elderly parents and relatives.

Childrearing practices in India tend to be permissive, and children are not encouraged to be independent and self-sufficient. The family is expected to provide an environment to maximize the development of a child's personality and, within the context of the Hindu beliefs and philosophy, positively influence the child's attitudes and behaviors.

Adolescence and young adulthood are particularly stressful and traumatic stages in the lives of Indian youths. In one way, they desire emancipation and liberation from family but residing in the matrix of the extended family makes it difficult for them to

assert themselves and exhibit any independence in thought, action, or behavior. Social changes are gradually occurring but arranged marriages are still the norm, and dating generally is not allowed. Furthermore, sex and sexuality issues are not openly discussed, sex education is not readily available, interrelationships with the opposite sex are discouraged, and premarital sex is frowned upon. In the traditional Indian family, communication between parents and children tends to be onesided. Children are expected to listen, respect, and obey their parents. Generally, adolescents do not share their personal concerns with their parents because they believe their parents will not listen and will not understand their problems (Medora, Larson, and Dave 2000).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Life expectancy for both Indian men and women is increasing. According to the 2001 Census of India, life expectancy was 61.9 years for men and 63.1 years for women (Census of India 2001). This has led to a significant increase in the population of elderly individuals. The elderly in India are generally obeyed, revered, considered to be fountains of knowledge and wisdom, and treated with respect and dignity by family and community members. Old age is a time when a person is expected to relax, enjoy solitude, retirement, pray, enjoy spending time with the grandchildren, and not worry about running the household or about finances because the oldest son is now in charge of the finances and family matters, and the oldest daughter-in-law is generally running the household. In most instances, the elderly care for their grandchildren and assist with cooking and household chores. Even adult children continue to consult their parents on most of the important aspects of life.

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