

Caste System in Ancient India



Origins of caste system

- Castes were first described in the book called “Rig Veda”, one of the main manuscripts of the Vedic Period (1500-1000 BCE). So the caste system is about 3000 y.o.
- Caste system is based on *religious understanding* of the world. Castes are given from above, they are sacred because they are the way this world was created by gods (the primary God Brahma).
- **Caste system** – division of people into segregated social groups different one from another by *professional occupation* as well as *rights and obligations*.
- Caste limits the mobility of an individual, his/her freedom of choosing profession and marriage partner, getting education and knowledge, having special kinds of food and etc.



Brahmins
priests & teachers

Kshatriyas
warriors & rulers

Vaishyas
farmers, traders & merchants

Shudras
labourers

Dalits (outcastes)
Street sweepers,
latrine cleaners

Castes System

Brahmins: most educated, advising the rulers, rituals of serving to the Gods, praying, white color

- **Kshatrias:** educated, powerful, war and governance, protection of brahmins, women and the weak, red color
- **Vaishyas:** farming or commerce, wealthy, ancient “middle class”, had their own houses, yellow (golden) color
- **Shudras:** not educated, labour workers, servants, didn't have own houses, lower caste, black color
- Untouchables (outcaste): “dirty” work, living outside of the settlements, no access to water sources, no access to temples

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Castes in Modern India

- Modern India context:
 - 1.3 billion people
 - 80% of population is rural
 - Over 50% is poor
- There is more than 3000 castes and subcastes, depending on ethnical diversity of the population of the certain region
- 90% of marriages are still made inside of the caste (land of origin, family network, social-economic conditions)

Castes in Modern India

- Is caste system legal?
 - In 1930s the British changed the legislation of India by establishing quotas for the representatives of lower castes in the governmental institutions
 - 1950, Article 17 of the Constitution of India: “Untouchability is a punishable offense”.

Caste System – In Practice

- Because of the law of Karma, people do not resist the caste system.
- They believe they are there because of their actions in previous lives.
- This encourages the individual to fulfill his role or duty of his or her caste, because their position in the next life is sure to improve.
- If you did something outside your caste, you could be excommunicated from your caste. That would cut you off from doing any work to support yourself because you could only do the jobs allowed by your caste.

Conclusion

- Caste system is a historically inherited reality of modern India's society which is still visible
- Caste system helps to sustain the hierarchy and power, as well as social and economic inequality
- Caste system is a challenge for modern India to improve human and civil rights protection of each citizen

Thank you!