

# CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA: Glimpse of its Genesis and Impact in India and Abroad

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## Abstract

Around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, **Aryans** from Europe entered into Indus Valley and assumed their superiority over native Dravidians, gradually **colonizing India**. The civilization that emerged from here is one of the oldest in human history. Aryan culture created the Hindu religion and Aryans crafted the **Hindu Constitution**, ‘ManuSmruti’ for everyone. The ManuSmruti says that four persons emerged from God Brahma’s body, and they are: ‘**Brahmin**’ (Teacher), ‘**Kshatriya**’ (Warrior), ‘**Vaisya**’ (Agriculturist), and ‘**Sudra**’ (Slave of first three High Caste Hindus). This ancient civilization has created a divisive hierarchy viz., ‘**Caste System**’. The later scriptures. e.g. Ramayana, MahaaBharat, and Gita also supported the caste system, as **coming from God**. Sudras are labelled as impure, and occupations are imposed upon them, including cleaning the province and doing strenuous labour; hence they are called ‘Untouchables’. Sudras are deprived of human dignity and denied living in association with others. This paper highlights how and why the Caste System was created and what impact it has made on the lives of Indian people over thousands of years, until the contemporary era.

**Key words and phrases:** Caste, Caste Discrimination, Sudra/Shudra, Untouchables, Scheduled Castes, Dalits, Indus valley, Varna (Colour), Hindu, Dravids, Manu-Smrti, Manusmriti, Shiva/Siva.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper briefly highlights the ancient Indian Caste System, why and how it was devised, what impact it has made through different periods of history on Indian society, and how it affects the contemporary era. As a Hindu Dalit man, an ‘untouchable’, I have experienced the agony of the caste system. Although I know the fear of speaking out on this topic, I write this article out of a wish to raise awareness about issues of caste-based discrimination. Persisting discrimination and dehumanization based on caste are regularly overlooked and condoned both within India and within the diaspora community.

The word ‘Caste’ derives from Spanish and Portuguese meaning: lineage, race, breed, pure, chaste. In Sanskrit, ‘caste’ is known as ‘Varna’ i.e., colour, class. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines ‘caste’ as: ‘*Hindu hereditary class, with members socially equal, united in religion, and usually following same trades, having no social intercourse with persons of*

*other castes*'.<sup>1</sup> And 'Varna' is defined as: '*any of the four great Hindu castes*'. (Sykes J.B.1982)<sup>2</sup> The words 'colour', 'pure' and 'chaste' hold paramount importance in Hindu religion and also in the context of 'caste'. The Sanskrit word 'Varnaashram'<sup>2a</sup> (i.e., 'Caste System') is based on lineage, occupation, colour, and impurity, which is an unparalleled innovation, in India only. Since then, light skin and purity in this system identify high caste; and dark skin and impurity denote low caste.

The following sections inform us about the discriminatory inhuman Caste System and its firm grip on the Indian psyche.

## INNOVATION OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

Let us look at the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (Before the Common Era) when the Aryans<sup>3</sup> from Europe entered Indus valley. As they first settled in the Indus valley, they termed the province as 'India' and established the Hindu kingdom and Hindu religion. The Aryans were light-skinned and highly resourceful in education, defence, governing and planning, etc. At that time, dark-skinned indigenous people were living in India. In order to establish their reign over this region, the Aryans attacked the indigenous people, who were overpowered by them. Gradually, the Aryans succeeded in controlling and colonizing the whole country, after which they dictated their own terms and conditions upon the defeated native/indigenous people.

To establish their long-term supremacy, Aryans enacted rules, regulations and doctrines for everyone to follow. Hence, one of their sages and Sanskrit scholars viz., 'Manu' was entrusted with the work of devising a formula, so as to maintain law and order in Hindu kingdoms and in the Hindu religion. In devising the Caste system, Manu acted upon a mythological anecdote, which was convincing to the society, suggesting that four 'persons' emerged from the **Creator Brahma's body**. From his mouth, **Brahmin** is born; from his hands, **Kshatriya** is born; from his thigh, **Vaisya** is born; and from his feet, **Sudra/Shudra** is born.<sup>4</sup> This system has three main ingredients: birth (the first and foremost); purity; and occupation, which is linked with birth. Based on hereditary classification, 'Manu' divided, in descending order, the first three categories among Aryan groups and the last category he assigned to Sudras (the native Indians, categorized as slaves of the Aryans). Sudras (members of the lowest category) have been labelled as 'untouchables' In India, they are termed as 'Achhoot' i.e., 'Not to be touched'. The 'Constitution of India' termed them as Scheduled Castes; and now popularly they are known as 'Dalits'. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, defines 'untouchable' as a "*member of hereditary Hindu group held to defile members of higher caste on contact.*" (Sykes J. B. 1982)<sup>5</sup>

Keeping the mythological concepts in mind, sage Manu envisioned and revealed a Hindu Constitution viz., 'Manu-Smrti'<sup>6</sup> which prevailed for thousands of years in Hindu religion, solely based on birth lineage. The 'Manu-Smrti' prescribed specific occupations for specific people, in respectable and disrespectable categories from highest to the lowest. A class/colour classification or 'Caste System', called 'Varnaashram' was divided into four castes in descending order:

- (1) **Brahmin** (highly respectable Priest caste: to perform intellectual work of 'teaching and preaching').

- (2) **Kshatriya** (the second highly respected category is Warrior caste: to ‘protect and rule’ the province).
- (3) **Vaisya** (the third category is Trader/Agricultural/Merchant caste: ‘to carry out trade / till / business’ i.e., economic activity to run the society). **Presently some of them are also designated as Backward Castes (BC) and Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), but they are not untouchables.** This is a very significant distinction between ‘backward’ or ‘EWS’ castes and ‘untouchable’ castes.
- (4) **Shudra** (the last and lowest category is the Untouchable disrespected caste: to ‘clean the province’ and serve meekly the above three castes as slave/labourer, and forced to disassociate from other castes. The ‘Manu-Smriti’ even prescribed the death penalty if Shudras defy the code of conduct, for example if they come in contact with holy scriptures e.g. Vedas, or perform Hindu religious rituals in any manner. Rape of Sudra women by High Caste Hindus is not punishable. Dignified living of Sudras has thus been destroyed.

**Caste hierarchy and occupational prescriptions in verses of the ‘Manu-Smrti’<sup>6</sup> :**

Verses	Page Number/s	Prescription
87 – 88	120 – 121	for Brahmin (to <b>teach</b> ).
89	122	for Kshatriya (to <b>protect</b> )
90	122	for Vaisya (to <b>trade</b> )
91 and 31	123 and 63	for Shudra (to <b>serve</b> )
91	123	for Shudra: Your duty is to serve Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaisya.
31	63	The holy work of Shudra is to serve meekly.

From the above hierarchy, it is evident that Kshatriya’s lineage is ‘bravery’ and Shudra’s lineage is ‘slavery’. This Hindu constitution was implemented in India by the Kings and Queens since antiquity. Hence, it became an order for the people on how to lead their life in Hindu society and in Hindu religion throughout India. And so the practice of untouchability against Shudras came into force strongly after ‘Manu-Smrti’. This caste system has carved permanent pathways in the Indian psyche; and upper caste Hindus are yet to carve progressive pathways for the integration of lower caste Hindus in society. As a result, whether by overt or covert manoeuvres, Hindu High Caste and Hindu Backward Caste societies are reviving the historical injustice against Hindu Untouchables in this contemporary era; this is an everyday phenomenon throughout India.

**‘Manu-Smrti’ is the oldest constitution in human history**, enacted by Hindus who have created a discriminatory and inhuman Caste System in India. It can be inferred that the caste system is the birth place of the slavery system. The ‘Manu-Smrti’ imposed sub-human status upon the indigenous people of India and labelled them as untouchables; it also assigned a dependent status to women.

In ancient Indian civilization from the Indus Valley, it is evident that a highly sophisticated and urbanized culture existed. The ancient Indian scripture ‘Manu-Smrti’ is also evidence that a highly sophisticated inhuman practice of untouchability was imposed against native

Indians; and women were proclaimed as dependent subjects. This inhuman social structure prevailed in India for millennia.

## IMPACT OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

The **first three categories** of people (Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaisya) were assigned hierarchical respect in Indian society. These three were and are allowed to live together as a unit, as high/upper and even backward caste Hindus, minus Shudras. These three were/are living together in cities and villages; and they were and are interacting with each other as inter-dependent. They had/have access to religious scriptures. They built temples in honour of their Gods and Goddesses. High and Backward Caste Hindus share common resources, and their occupations were/are supporting each other in their living and growing. Marriages were/are confined, however, to their own group of people; their own lineage in this way is maintained, as well as the caste hierarchy. Remarriage was also prohibited for Brahmin widows.

The **fourth category** of people (Sudra) were confined in forests, at the periphery or in suburban areas of cities and villages. The fourth category of people were not allowed to live along with the first three categories; their lifestyle was made different from the first three classes; they were considered as unholy people. Hence, they were assigned the category of untouchables (**lower caste Hindus**). They were considered as impure, defile, unintelligent, asocial people etc. They were denied access to religious scriptures, rituals and temples. Mainstream resources were not accessible to them. Some Sudra women were forced to have sexual intercourse with upper caste men. Sudras were also assigned strenuous labour e.g., cleaning cities and villages, and disposing of dead animals. The practice of untouchability took place as an enactment of the caste system. This system introduced and approved heinous atrocities e.g., rapes and murders of Sudras. How to live and move, what to eat, how to dress and behave were prescribed for them. Dalits were/are not allowed to cremate their dead, but can bury them, so as to avoid the smoke reaching to localities of upper caste Hindus. Upper caste people can cremate their dead.

Additional inhuman practices have been prescribed in the 'Laws of Manu'<sup>4</sup> or 'Manu-Smriti'. [Chapter X, pages 429-430, **Verse 124** dictates: Sudra must not be allotted property; **Verse 125** directs: "*The remnants of their food must be given to him (Sudra), as well as their old clothes, the refuse of their (Brahmanas) grain*"; **Verse 126** says that: "... he (Sudra) is not worthy to receive the sacraments; he has no right to (fulfil) the sacred law (of the Aryans)"; and **Verse 129** proclaims: "*No collection of wealth must be made by a Sudra, even though he be able (to do it); for a Sudra who has acquired wealth, gives pain to Brahmanas.*"].

The impact of the doctrines of 'Manu-Smriti', can also be seen in the Hindu epic 'Ramayana'<sup>7</sup> when pregnant and stigmatized Sita (who as an infant was found in a field, hence, her heredity is unknown, and she was adopted by king Janak), wife of king Raam, was driven out of the palace and was sent to the ashram of Valmiki (a Shudra) and not to the ashram of Vashishtha (a Brahmin and guru of king Raam).

Even in the current era, some temples don't allow untouchables to enter; and having untouchable priests in such temples would be a revolution for High Caste Hindus. Mostly in villages, untouchables have no access to high caste Hindu temples. Or, untouchables don't wish to enter these temples, due to the backlash they receive. Even today, it is seen that Shudras' houses are mostly at the East side and around the entrance of villages, because they must be the first victims in case of outside attacks of any type. Localities of Shudras are neglected for basic necessities. Caste-based discrimination takes place in every aspect of life. For example in villages, their houses are on the down-side of rivers and they have separate water-wells, separate crematoriums, separate places to watch entertainment and religious events, separate places to sit at eateries etc. In short, sub-human status was imposed upon them over thousands of years, which is continuing overtly (in the form of atrocities) and covertly (denying them equal opportunities).

Despite prevalent atrocities against Shudras, the Government of India has devised many schemes so that they are given socio-economic benefits e.g., to possess houses, land, jobs, business; they are even given scholarships to study abroad. Paradoxically a recent report describes that the "Government bars scholarships for Dalits to study Indian subjects abroad".<sup>8</sup> This is to include Shudras into mainstream society and to bring an equal platform. The status of equal opportunity and respect are slowly reaching Dalits in small proportion.

### **Signs and Symbols imposed upon Untouchables**

To recognize Shudras, to prevent them from disguise, and to avoid their contact, objectivity was prescribed by way of imposing specific signs and symbols upon them so that their identity becomes conspicuous throughout India. Some of these are listed here:

**Signs:** They must remain half naked; they must not wear footwear; they must tie a broom behind their waist so that their footprints do not remain on the soil; and tie a bowl below their mouth so that their saliva does not drop on the soil.

**Symbols:** They cannot wear 'sacred thread' (known as 'Janoi' or 'Yagnopavit', worn by Brahmins and high caste Hindus)<sup>8a</sup>; they cannot keep tuft on their head; cannot wear earrings; cannot wear silver and gold ornaments; cannot keep a moustache erect.

**Names:** They cannot keep conjunct names: eg. **for females** Vishwa = of Universe, Chandrika = Moon-light, Urmila = wave; and **for males** Prithvendra = King of the Earth, Chakravarti = absolute emperor, Chaturvedi = well-versed in all the four Vedas. Their first names must be very brief and insignificant: **for females** Daani = seed, Muli = root of a plant used as a vegetable ('Muli' is my grandmother's name); **for males** Daano = seed, Mulo = a type of vegetable.

**Surnames:** They must denote derogatory words, viz., Dhed (hated), Chamaar (tanner), Bhangi/Valmiki (scavenger), Chandaala (sinful), Hidimba (witch/devil). 'Hidimba' is my mother's surname. My surname 'Revar' belongs to untouchables.

**Titles:** They cannot use respectable titles in their names. **Females** cannot use the prefix Sushri (auspicious word). **Males** cannot use the prefix Shri (auspicious word). **Females**

cannot use a suffix such as Raajey (Princess), Bahen (Sister), Amma (Mother). **Males** cannot use a suffix such as Singh (Lion), Moorty (Idol), Bhai (Brother). 'Bhai' a respectable suffix was not put in my and my father's names.

**Localities:** Designated places are allotted for Shudras to reside. Living in association with others was prohibited. In a village, we were allotted a separate locality, at the down-side of the river, with a separate water-well and a separate burial place.

**Codes of Conduct:** Shudras cannot access Hindu religious scriptures and cannot perform religious rituals. In ancient India, 'Shambuka' - a Shudra ascetic - was put to death [by *The Hindu God 'Raam'/'Ram'*] as he attempted to perform penance (see 'Wikipedia, Shambuka')<sup>9</sup>; "*At that time Gods appeared in the sky and praised him ( 'Raam ' ) for doing this act (of beheading Shambuka) in order to protect the religion*".<sup>9a</sup> Shudras are forbidden to live within mainstream localities. They cannot enter mainstream places and the houses of upper and backward castes. Their entry into temples was/is barred. They cannot keep a sword; cannot hunt; can eat the meat of dead animals and birds; cannot possess wealth; cannot be farm owners; cannot cover the whole body. They are not worthy of sacraments. In my own experience, at school, I was not allowed to sit among high caste Hindu students and was barred from entering the school water-room.

The above signs, symbols, and localities give information about a person's caste. Paradoxically, the Hindu God Shiva has signs and symbols of being Shudra. Shiva's images<sup>9b</sup> show that he is half-naked, barefoot, asocial, dark-skinned, not wearing ornaments like other Hindu gods, has very long matted hair, resides by a crematorium, keeps snakes and a bull around him, wears animal skin, keeps a trident (*Trishul*) as his weapon, and has a drum (A *Damaru* made out of animal skin is his musical instrument). The depicted information supports that Shiva is Sudra, but in the temples of Shiva, Brahmins are priests! Shiva contributed spiritual knowledge entitled 'Shiv-Sutra'<sup>9c</sup> which precedes the Vedas, ManuSmruti, Ramayana, Mahabharat, and Gita. In 'Shiv-Sutra', the caste system has no place at all. Shiva is considered in India as the 'God of Gods', with indigenous roots and married to a high caste Hindu woman. Interestingly, the Hindu religion considers animals and birds as touchable, but Shudras are untouchable.

This thousands-year-old Caste system is deeply rooted in the Indian psyche, hence, till date in India and beyond India, wherever high caste Hindus have migrated, they mostly carry this luggage of the caste system with them; and consciously or unconsciously they continue to practice casteism against untouchables.

## ANCIENT INDIANS AGAINST THE CASTE SYSTEM

From the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards, some prominent persons viz., Gautam Buddha, Ramanand, Kabir, Raidas (himself a Sudra), Nanak, and Dayananda Sarasvati, made it part of their life-mission to eradicate the caste system.<sup>10</sup> The Buddhist religion (developed in honour of Gautam Buddha) and the Sikh religion (developed in honour of Guru Nanak) established firm roots to abolish the caste system. Temples known as 'Buddha Veehaars' and 'Sikh Gurudwaras' have been established in many countries, and people in these places follow the path of Buddha and Nanak.

**Gautam Buddha** (560-477 BC)<sup>11</sup> introduced social activism by respectfully welcoming neglected and stigmatized persons to reside in his fold. Buddha approached ‘Angulimaal’<sup>11a</sup> the great robber and murderer of that area, to reside along with him; and a prostitute, ‘Aamrapaali’/‘Ambapali’<sup>11b</sup> was initiated like other followers. Buddha started to beg, though he had the heritage of a Prince; he ate<sup>11c</sup> and allowed his followers to eat the meat of dead animals<sup>11d</sup> and birds. He denounced the Caste System and embraced untouchables; he preferred a scientific approach over superstition; he advocated experiential learning rather than following ancient scriptures. Without discrimination, Buddha included everyone into his fold, which Hindu Brahmins opposed, and thus rejected the thoughts of Buddha.<sup>11e</sup> Buddhists were even murdered and burnt alive on a massive scale, and so in order to save Buddha’s philosophy, ‘Bhikkhus’ migrated to different parts of Asia. The majority of Buddha’s followers are untouchables in contemporary India. Ambedkar and Osho have also proven that untouchables were basically Buddhists.<sup>11e</sup>

**Guru Nanak** (1469-1539 AD)<sup>12</sup> The Sikh religion arose from Nanak’s philosophy and Nanak also brought social reforms. He demonstrated that ancient rituals, like offering water to the Sun, are irrational. In order to bring this fact to the fore, he started offering water from the river through both of his hands to distant farms. People laughed at him, then he replied, “If your water is reaching the distant Sun, why can’t these handfuls of water that I offer reach the farms which are much nearer than the Sun?” He also refused to wear the ‘sacred thread’ (known as ‘Janoi’ or ‘Yagnopavit’, worn by Brahmins and high caste Hindus)<sup>8</sup>; then he demanded that a ‘sacred thread’ should be made of virtues that cannot become dirty, cannot be burnt, and cannot be destroyed. He denounced the discriminatory Caste System and started respecting, and singing devotional poems of an untouchable saint, Ravidas. ‘Sri Guru Granth Sahib’/‘Adi Granth’, the sacred book of Sikh religion, has forty devotional songs or hymns of Ravidas,<sup>12a</sup> who is recognized as the ‘Polar Star’ in the galaxy of Indian Saints, as if Gautam Buddha had revisited as Ravidas.<sup>13</sup>

Nanak invited everyone to come to his place and offered free meals prepared by him and his people, so that everyone could eat and sit together, irrespective of caste, colour, gender and religion. This practice of offering ‘Free Meals’, known as ‘Langar’ or ‘Community kitchen’, to all who come to Gurudwaras is followed throughout India and abroad. Nanak’s wisdom and spiritual poems are recited daily at Gurudwaras, the temples of the Sikh religion.

## **ROLE OF ISLAM IN LESSENING ATROCITIES AGAINST UNTOUCHABLES**

Mohammedans arrived in India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, before the British. Ala-ud-din Khilji was the first Muslim ruler from 1296-1316, his empire covered almost the whole of India.<sup>14</sup> Caste-based discrimination lessened as many Sudras/Untouchables embraced Islam, in order to escape the thousands-year-old atrocities upon them. Sufis - Muslim ascetics and pantheistic mystics – also played a significant role in lessening the inhuman practice of untouchability, by accepting Sudras to sit, eat and pray with them as equal.

The signs and symbols imposed upon Hindu untouchables by the Hindu religion, conspicuously indicate that they belong to the lower caste; hence they were treated as inferior in all respects. The ‘Manu-Smriti’ divided people and degraded women, while the ‘Koran’,

the holy scripture of Islam, united people and respected women. Islam also has no caste hierarchy. The inhuman doctrines of 'Manu-Smriti' were not condemned by Hindus, rather Hindus adhered to and implemented them; this is one of the main reasons that untouchables were inclined to embrace Islam during the time of Ala-ud-din Khilji. Additionally, the message of love and equality revealed by the Prophet Muhammad has been spread by Sufis, Muslim mystics. For example, Maulana Rumi Jalaluddin (popularly known as 'Rumi' 1207-1273)<sup>15</sup> is widely read and respected by many, irrespective of caste, colour, creed, and gender.

Further, the message of love and equality has been demonstrated by Sufis and Muslim rulers throughout India, notably by famous Sufis, such as Moinuddin Chisti and Nizamuddin Auliya, who are also honoured by Hindus. Hence, Islam is also firmly established in India. Actually, **diversity is the royal road to growth and development.** Lack of diversity perpetuates despotism.

## **ROLE OF BRITISH IN LESSENING ATROCITIES AGAINST UNTOUCHABLES**

The arrival and departure of the **British between 1600 – 1947** accelerated the exit of the caste system.<sup>16</sup> The British also observed the inhuman practice of untouchability and became convinced by the wisdom of spiritual persons viz., Ramanand, Ravidas, Kabir, Dayanand Saraswati, who were against the caste system. **For Shudras, the British Raj was the real sunrise of their liberation from the shackles of the Hindu caste system.**

British reformists found out that the thousands-year-old discriminatory Caste System had forced Shudras to remain ignorant and believe in whatever had been dictated to them by religious scriptures, notably theories about birth, karma, purity, past life, and sin. Doctrines of 'Manu-Smriti' were strictly adhered to; hence, Shudras - as slaves - had been deprived of basic necessities of life, including common food, water, housing, clothes, farms etc. Oppressed and repressed Shudras had no other alternative but to follow and accept whatever was given to them by mainstream society. The main by-products of 'Manu-Smriti' are practices of untouchability, bonded labour, unpaid forced labour, exclusion and inequality. These practices raised the honour and great comforts of mainstream society, at the cost of imposing sub-human status on the untouchable castes.

The British Crown came to know about these inhuman practices; hence the British, and Christian Missionaries, accelerated the process of raising the social status of Shudras by educating, serving, and offering Christian status to them. Kannan and Anjana (2019)<sup>17</sup> noted that Queen Elizabeth granted, in the year 1600, a Charter which empowered the East India Company to make laws in India, because the laws of 'Manu' ('Manu-Smriti', the law book of Hindus which established the practice of untouchability towards Sudras) were: "... *utterly unsuited to the social conditions of either the Hindus or the Mohammedans*".

'Manu-Smriti' did not put all *people* on equal footing in the eye of the law, and the punishments were discriminatory.<sup>18</sup> In order to understand Indian culture, a Britisher, Sir William Jones translated 'Manu-Smriti' into English in 1776.<sup>19</sup> In 1834, the First Indian Law Commission constituted under the presidency of Lord Babington Macaulay,<sup>20</sup> thought to combat social vices like corruption, casteism, untouchability<sup>21</sup> etc. He observed: "*I believe*



*that no country ever stood so much in need of a code of law as India... Our principle is simply this --- uniformity when you can have it; diversity when you must have it; but, in all cases, certainty*"<sup>21</sup>. While Britain does not by any means have a great record when it comes to promoting equality and diversity, as it colonised and oppressed people around the world, it is extremely important to note this significant contribution in India. Based on Lord Macaulay and his colleagues' excellent pioneering work, the **Indian Penal Code was enacted in 1860**, which provided uniform criminal law in British India, irrespective of caste, creed or religion.<sup>21</sup>

Clifford Bob<sup>22</sup> noted that in 1936, the British *Raj* framed a "Schedule" of Untouchable castes (Scheduled Castes = SCs) who would receive many compensatory benefits from the colonial state. The British focused upon improving inhuman Codes of Conduct for Shudras. The British also accepted and employed Shudras in some jobs, including in their army. Some married Shudra women. The British accepted Shudra in the Christian fold to raise their social status, and even encouraged missionaries to facilitate their educational upliftment; hence the signs, symbols, names, surnames, and localities of Shudras started to improve.

## CONTEMPORARY INDIANS AGAINST THE CASTE SYSTEM

To uplift Shudras, education is the main instrument envisioned by pioneers like Jotiba Phooley in the Maharashtra State, Periyar EV Ramasamy in South India, and Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad (III) in Western India. The Maharaja Sayajirao gave a full scholarship to Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (B. R. Ambedkar was an untouchable himself) to study abroad.<sup>23</sup> M.K. Gandhi undertook his best efforts to eradicate the practice of untouchability in India. Then Herculean efforts were made by B.R. Ambedkar in that direction. To awaken Hindu society to the utterly discriminative and inhuman Laws of Manu, Ambedkar publicly burnt the book 'Manu-Smriti' on 25<sup>th</sup> December 1927<sup>24</sup>, supported by the British *Raj*. Ambedkar is considered as the father of the Constitution of (independent) India (1950), wherein he wrote laws to uplift Shudras in all walks of life. Ambedkar became the first Law Minister of India and the Government of India abolished the practice of untouchability in 1950.

## RESISTANCE AND CHANGE AROUND CASTE

A historical example<sup>24a</sup>: Once, Adi Shankara, a Brahmin philosopher considered as a 'World Guru' ('JagatGuru', 'ShankaraCharya') was returning from the bathing ghat of Ganga. An untouchable, Chandaal, was in his path. *Shankara asked him to move away – as was the custom in those days – to which the Chandaala asked him: "Who should move away – my body or my Atman? My body is made up of the same elements as yours and the Atman that resides in my body also resides in yours. So pray, tell me, who or what should move out of your way?"* This revelatory incident changed Shankara's perception, which his extensive study of scriptures could not do; an outcaste, Chandaal, did the work in a minute.

**Resistance is rigid, change is rare.** Hence, the majority of upper caste Hindus projected all evils upon Shudras / Untouchables / Dalits. Privileged higher caste Hindus are resisting reforms around the inhuman caste system, e.g., inter-caste marriage, conversion to other

religions, temple entry, reservation, education, etc. In short, they resisted equality in Hindu culture. Most Scheduled Castes feel uncomfortable when there is inquiry about their names, surnames, localities, symbols etc., which reveal their identities. To avoid caste-based discrimination, SCs started using names at par with mainstream castes. They also started changing their caste-based surnames. Paradoxically, caste-based questions are not asked at blood donation camps for medical emergencies, crowd-funding, or at cashier counters. Economic growth among some SCs has brought them into the localities of high caste Hindus (associated living); however, discrimination continues in the socio-cultural realm of the High Caste (HC) and Backward Caste (BC) Hindus. Nevertheless, multi-national companies in India are unconcerned about caste, hence they are Equal Opportunity employers, which is helpful to SCs to climb the ladder, socio-economically.

The Bombay High Court's bench of Justices, S.C. Dharamadhikari and Bharati Dangre (2018) observed, "*It is unfortunate that today, the image of the country is such that those living abroad feel only crimes and rapes happen in India*"<sup>25</sup> And these crimes are mostly against Dalits. This is a volatile situation, because **the bridle of drastic social change is in the hands of mainstream high caste Hindus**, from whose ancestors the unjust caste system was born. The justice system also has to pay serious attention to the warning of Elie Wiesel (Nobel laureate 1986) who says that "*Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented*"<sup>25a</sup>.

## **AFFIRMATIVE ACTION BY THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA**

In the year 1950, the practice of untouchability was made a crime according to the Constitution of India. In order to bring Shudras (Scheduled Castes) to the level of the mainstream, reservation policies were made, a form of affirmative action, through which seats were kept for untouchables/Scheduled Castes in politics, e.g., in Parliament and in the Legislative Assemblies of all States. Seats have also been reserved for people in Scheduled Castes in government jobs and in educational institutions, and the government also offers various scholarships for education. The Government also formed various departments to promote their overall welfare.

Presently there are Indian Laws to curb inhuman practices and atrocities against Dalits, but mainstream behaviour is yet to follow the spirit of affirmative action. Spirituality is shifting out of India, for example, ancient India is appreciated for its significant spiritual contribution to humanity but depreciated for its deeply rooted inhuman Caste System in Hindu religion. Paradoxically, the Hindu religion has failed to accord human status to Sudras/Untouchable Hindus. The Hindu holy scriptures have conferred sacred status even to an animal (cow) and a stone (carved as 'Shivling' which is worshipped in honour of Lord Shiva), but deprived human status to untouchables! The Hindu holy scriptures, e.g., Raamayan, MahaaBharat, and Gita, support the low and high, sacred and sinful Caste hierarchy; and these scriptures have robbed human dignity from untouchable Hindus. In the Gita/Geeta<sup>25b,c,d</sup> - the highest holy scripture of Hindu religion, the God Krishna very clearly supports the caste, colour and work divisions based on sacred and sinful caste heritage, remarkably in Chapters 4 (Verse 13), 9 (Verse 32), 18 (Verses 41, 42, 43, 44 ). **The tree of 'Divide and Rule Policy' has strong ancient roots in Hindu holy scriptures.** Strong and deep roots keep a tree alive. This statute and practice were denounced by Muslims, Portuguese, Dutch, French and British who arrived

in India, respectively from the 13<sup>th</sup> c. CE onwards, and they started to correct these inhuman spiritual doctrines in the Hindu Caste System. The British ruled for less than a hundred years (1858-1947). By strongly advocating for the 'Communal Award' in 1932, the British succeeded in removing the practice of untouchability which had prevailed in India for over three thousand years!

Further, by way of establishing such organisations as the International Labour Organization, ILO (1919), the United Nations Organization, UNO (1945), and the International Monetary Fund (1945), western countries and their Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have contributed substantial finances for the remedial work needed to abolish discrimination, and crimes against humanity. But, in contemporary India, High Caste Hindus are routinely committing heinous crimes against Untouchables in the form of rapes, gang-rapes, murders, burning alive, etc., which are no longer routine in western countries. India, as one of the oldest civilizations on Earth, and India as a 'Spiritual Lighthouse' must also face its '*Darkness at Noon*' due to Casteism. **Higher caste Hindus have no experiential pain of untouchability, hence, it is easy for them to intellectualize, rationalize and spiritualize the agony of untouchables.** This is how spirituality is shifting out of India. At the same time, untouchables have hope from high caste Hindu saints, scientists and wise people who can unanimously condemn the ongoing atrocities against Sudras/Dalits. Alas, it remains a distant dream for untouchables to be accepted without caste-based discrimination.

## BACKLASH WITHIN INDIA

As the socio-economic status of untouchables improves, high caste Hindu society has started raising objections against the special affirmative action schemes. As a result, anti-reservation agitations took place in India, during which atrocities were committed against SCs/Dalits; houses of SCs were burnt and a few SCs were killed. The government of India did not yield to such agitations. However, incidents of caste-based discrimination and atrocities against untouchables became routine throughout India. To shun Dalits from getting government jobs, merit was/is used as a pretext in personal interviews. The Times of India reported that the Parliament committee stated, "*Though eligible, SC/ST doctors denied AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences) jobs*".<sup>26</sup>

All forms of atrocities have been and are being committed against Dalits; these can be seen from the following two remarkable examples, which drew nation-wide attention:

1. On 14 Sept. 2020, a 19-year-old **Dalit girl was gang-raped** in Uttar Pradesh, India, in the Hathras district, by four upper caste Hindu men.<sup>26a</sup> She succumbed to her injuries on Sept. 29, 2020, followed by a hushed cremation at night, allegedly forced by the district administration.<sup>26b</sup> A psycho-social observation by Arlene Audergon (2005)<sup>27</sup> is pertinent to mention here, "*Rape is a systematic tactic of terror, designed to strike a community where it is most sensitive and fragile*".
2. On 11 July 2016, **four Dalit men were brutally beaten** while they were skinning the carcass of a dead cow in the 'Mota Samadhiyala' village near 'Una' in the 'Gir Somnath' district (Gujarat-India). Historically, since antiquity, taking away dead animals is

traditional work imposed upon Dalits by upper caste Hindus, and it is routine for Dalits to eat dead animals. However, a few people, upper caste Hindus, came to the site and accused them that the cow was living. The Dalits tried to convince them that they were skinning a dead cow. Not convinced, they started beating the Dalits mercilessly with sticks and pipes. They also took four Dalit men to Una town in a vehicle, stripped them half naked and beat them brutally again with sticks and pipes, in public view. The assault was video recorded and circulated on social media.<sup>28</sup> This was published in Wikipedia - an online website - entitled '2016 Una flogging incident'.<sup>28a</sup>

The Times of India, Ahmedabad (2018)<sup>28b</sup> reports, "*Atrocities against Dalits at 17-year high in Gujarat, RTI (Right to Information) reply shows*. India's 'National Crime Records Bureau' (NCRB-2019)<sup>29</sup> and news report of 'The Times of India' (2018, 2020),<sup>29a,b</sup> Wikipedia<sup>29c</sup>, show that the crime rate is rising alarmingly against SCs (Dalits) in all walks of life. Further, NCRB released **all-India prison statistics from 2020 - 2021**, which The Times of India<sup>29d</sup> briefly reports as, "*Percentage of Muslims among jail population falls, marginal rise in Hindus*". Surprisingly in India, many prominent scientists and saints are silent on the atrocities being committed on SCs.

Arlene Audergon (2005) observed, "*How we fall silent in the face of atrocity is also an active ingredient in violence*". In order to further understand this dynamic and arrive at insight, Arlene states, "*When we are unaware of how the dynamics of trauma operate inside us, both as individuals and as communities, we may unwittingly contribute to the perpetuation of violence and are vulnerable to exploitation.*"<sup>30</sup>

Albert Einstein says: "*The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil; but because of those, who look on and do nothing*", as quoted by The Times of India (December 7, 2008; p.12).<sup>30a</sup>

## **BACKLASH BEYOND INDIA**

Set patterns are resistant to change, hence backlash almost always happens in human history. In the case of change around caste-based discrimination, backlash revisits. For example, in 2020, caste-based discrimination surfaced in the United States of America's Silicon Valley companies in the State of California,<sup>31</sup> where upper caste Hindu persons oppressed and abused Hindu untouchable/Scheduled Caste employees. Caste-based discrimination also spread in Europe, where there are many Gurudwaras (Sikh temples) established by Hindu Untouchables in the name of an untouchable sage 'Guru Ravidass' so as to avoid humiliation from upper caste Hindus. Amar Diwakar (2020)<sup>32</sup> pertinently quotes Ambedkar B.R.(1916) saying that : "*...if Hindus migrate to other regions on the earth, Indian caste will become a world problem*".

Casteism and Racism have spread around the world, and are incorporated in a statement by Isabel Wilkerson (2020)<sup>33</sup>, saying that "*Caste is the Bones, Race the Skin*".

## SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS OF SCHEDULED CASTES/DALITS IN INDIA

Some well-known persons from the SC community viz., Valmiki, Raidas/Ravidaas, and Ambedkar, made an un-expunged mark in literature, spirituality, and political reforms respectively. In ancient India, Sage **Valmiki** was the first person who created an epic, the 'Raamayan' in Sanskrit, which occupies one of the highest positions in Sanskrit epics. Saint **Raidas** earned the status of spiritual Guru of kings and queen, and he occupies the sacred status in 'Sri Guru Granth Sahib'/ 'Adi Granth' - the holy book of the Sikh religion, in which his forty spiritual songs/poems have been kept.

Bhimrao Ramji **Ambedkar** (Dr. B. R. Ambedkar) became the chief architect of 'The Constitution of India' and he is also considered as the Messiah of the Dalit untouchable castes. In order to raise the self-esteem of untouchables, Ambedkar dressed in Western style, breaking the ancient dress code for Sudras. Ambedkar also burnt 'Manu-Smriti' on 25 December 1927, saying that his purpose was "...to reshape the Hindu code governing the life of people".<sup>34</sup> Ambedkar's iconic image - with western style attire and holding 'The Constitution of India' in one hand and raising the other hand with index finger up - is a symbolic message to untouchables to get rid of the ancient caste stereotype imposed upon them for millennia. A link to his image is here: <https://images.app.goo.gl/AqZPA6uxKBD7BoV38>

Ambedkar said that having been born as Hindu was not in his control, but not to die as Hindu is in his control; hence he embraced Buddhism.<sup>34a</sup> He gave a strong message to untouchables to get rid of the Hindu caste system. Dhananjay Keer (1954) quotes B.R. Ambedkar:

*"The battle is in the fullest sense 'spiritual'. Ours is a battle, not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for reclamation of the human personality."*<sup>35</sup>

## THE EVOLVING AND REVOLVING PROCESS TOWARDS GROWTH

There is a need in our time to liberate Hindu religion from the inhuman caste system. Indian socio-economic growth is going at a slower pace due to this system and there are frequent nation-wide agitations, atrocities and riots against Hindu untouchables.

In the evolution of jurisprudence in India from 'Manu' to 'Macaulay' to 'Ambedkar' it took thousands of years to abolish untouchability in 1950.

**The following reviews in a glimpse the innovation and evolution which took place around the caste system:**

Aryans entered into India between 2000 and 1500 BC and conquered native Indians known as 'Dravids'/'Dasyus' ('dark-skinned' people, whom Aryans treated as slaves). Aryans created the Vedas, and the first Veda is 'Rigved', in which the base of caste system is present.<sup>35</sup> Banerji SC (1997) notes: "*The earliest reference to Sudra, as the lowest rung of the social ladder, occurs in the Purusa-sukla of the Rgveda*" (X.90-12).<sup>35a</sup> Around this period, '**Manu-Smriti**' was written by the Aryan sage 'Manu'; who clearly created the caste

hierarchy in four categories viz., Brahmin (teaching caste), Kshatriya (warrior caste), Vaisya (trading caste), and Shudra (serving and disrespected caste, as Hindu untouchables). The commandments of 'Manu-Smrti' gradually hardened<sup>35b</sup> and were implemented after the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC in the Hindu religion. The Vedic period lasted until the time of Buddha (560-477BC) who did not believe in the inhuman caste system and included untouchables into his fold. Islam then arrived in India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, bringing the message of 'love and equality' advocated by the Prophet Muhammad, who also did not believe in casteism. Hence, some untouchable people preferred proximity with Muslims. The first Muslim ruler was Alau-din Khilji, who ruled over almost all of India from 1296-1316. The Khilji period lessened the practice of untouchability, as Shudras started embracing Islam to get rid of the unjust caste system. During the period of 1400-1500 AD, Saints Ravidas, Kabir and Nanak denounced the caste system, seeing the practice of untouchability as inhuman. These saints accepted everyone with respect. There still remains resistance against eradicating untouchability from Indian culture, even after thousands of years of significant work from the period of Buddha to Guru Nanak.

The period of British arrival and rule in India (1600-1947) was the real dawn for untouchables to gain human dignity. During their 350 years of occupation, the British government took socio-governing steps, which brought rights of employment; to marry; to be accepted in the Christian fold; and to education, including English language education. Government Acts brought rights to inherit paternal property; the right to change religion; sanctioned inter-caste and inter-religion marriages; abolished racial prejudice and granted equal opportunity to all Indians. These gradual reformative steps eased caste-based discrimination throughout India.

In 1833 Thomas Babington **Macaulay** informed the British Government that Hindus are governed by the 'Laws of Manu' and these laws are utterly unsuited and discriminatory; hence, a uniform law is required to be implemented in India to bring equality to the justice system. Hence, the Indian Penal Code (IPC) was enacted in 1860 by Macaulay, to eradicate untouchability in India.<sup>36</sup> Due to the millennia-old caste hierarchy, Indian rulers (Kings and Queens) were unable to make such laws against the caste system.

Strong resentment against British rule took place in 1857; however, the British continued reformative activities unabated, even after resentment grew much stronger in the later period. The British crown contemplated gradual exit from India, hence, they arranged three Round Table Conferences in London in 1930, 1931 and 1932; and they officially invited Bhimrao Ramji **Ambedkar**<sup>37</sup> (1891-1956) from the untouchable caste, as a member on behalf of the repressed/depressed Classes. Ambedkar attended all the three conferences and strongly represented his views to enact laws to eradicate the thousands of years-old oppressive and inhuman practice of untouchability. As a result, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald proposed the Communal Award<sup>37</sup> in August 1932, to reserve seats for Untouchable and Tribal Castes, in education and employment in all Government departments including political reservation in the Indian Parliament and in State Legislative Assemblies. As a step towards that, in 1936, the British reinforced this commendable humanitarian work by developing "...a 'Schedule' of Untouchable Castes [known as Scheduled Castes(SCs), now popularly known as Dalits] who would receive various compensatory benefits from the colonial state", so as to uplift their socio-economic status (Clifford Bob, 2007).<sup>38</sup>

In 1936, Ambedkar wrote *'Annihilation of Caste'*<sup>38a</sup> in order to awaken Hindu society to the utterly inhuman Caste System prevailing in the Hindu religion in India. Due to such progressive steps, Indian freedom movement leaders entrusted responsibility to Ambedkar for making the laws needed to safeguard the welfare of the repressed/depressed classes. Ambedkar took up this responsibility as the chief architect of the constitution committee, and made reservation laws in addition to drafting the Constitution for an independent India. 'The Constitution of India', made effective from 1950, eradicated the practice of untouchability by law and made such practise a crime. This revolutionary step took thousands of years - from 2000 BC to 1950 AD.

*'Annihilation of Caste'* is the dream of Ambedkar, which is unlikely to be realized in India. The Caste System is a cancer in the Hindu religion, and we are aware of the impact cancer can have. Arundhati Roy (2014, 2016) wrote *'The Doctor and the Saint'* as an Introduction to Ambedkar's book *'Annihilation of Caste'*.<sup>38b</sup> She sums up in the Introduction with the statement: "...*the "sick men" and women of Hindustan, who seem to have no desire to get well.*"<sup>38c</sup> from the cancer of casteism. Yet, **there is hope**, as many wise people at the helm of power in government, in government institutions and in private organizations are awakened to the need to liberate Hindu religion and Hindu society from the stigma of the caste system.

## **BACKLASH AROUND THE EMANCIPATION OF UNTOUCHABLES**

Indian Princely States could not eradicate untouchability for thousands of years but the British rule gradually enacted laws - in a planned manner over 350 years - to remove the practice of untouchability, which was constitutionally made a reality in 1950 by the Indian government. Hence, one of the greatest reformations in human history was made, which was one of Britain's major accomplishments, and they left India. In independent India, Arundhati Roy (2014) observed that: "*Democracy hasn't eradicated caste. It has entrenched and modernised it.*"<sup>38d</sup>; India is still witnessing anti-reservation agitations by upper caste Hindus, plus acceleration of atrocities against Hindu untouchables (Scheduled Castes). Hence, the government of India enacted the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989.<sup>39</sup> Despite this, India is still unsuccessfully struggling to eradicate the caste system, as this system has the support of the holy religious scriptures of Hindus. It seems impossible that Scheduled Castes can be freed from the shackles of the caste system. The Bench of Justice N. Kirubakaran and Justice B. Pugalendhi (2020) at the Madras High Court, India, remarked: "*We have to hang our heads in shame for having ill-treated and discriminated the Scheduled Caste people for centuries together... Even today, they are not getting properly treated and offences are continuing, and they are not getting appropriate basic amenities.*"<sup>40</sup>

Arnold Mindell (1992) pertinently cautioned the human race: "*A system that gives no time or space to its ghosts (background feelings in the atmosphere) will eventually be disturbed or destroyed by them (social activists).*"<sup>41</sup>

To awaken Indian and global societies about the issues of discrimination based on caste and colour, Dalit writers have written authentic materials, which are recognized and awarded by literary institutions of the Government of India. Some of these works are:

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## SUMMARY

I have described how the Caste system was created and sustained over millennia, its horrific impact, and how it persists in modern times. I've also described how the Caste system has been challenged over centuries. My purpose for writing this article is to **raise awareness** about issues of caste, which are largely ignored and tolerated both in India and internationally.

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## Author's brief Bio

Revar J.M., is from India and belongs to the 'Hindu Untouchable Caste'. He spent his childhood in poverty and in dirty slum-dwelling till his teens. As an outcaste student at school in a remote village, he was forced to sit away from High Caste Hindu students and was denied access to the school water-room for seven years. His secondary school education was in a



city, in a Government hostel meant for untouchable students. His college education for four years was on a Government scholarship. Till post-graduation he studied in the Gujarati language. He left his bank job – after entrusting responsibility of his wife and two children to his elder brother Revar K.M. - and earned a ‘Master of Philosophy in Medical and Social Psychology’ in a two-year residential course. He became Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology at Government Medical College. He received training in the USA, UK, Greece and Poland in Process Oriented Psychotherapy or *Process Work*, developed by Dr. Arnold Mindell, <http://www.aamindell.net> [www.aamindell.org](http://www.aamindell.org).

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