

A Historical Analysis of the Caste System: Origins and Evolution

Dr. Dol Raj Kafle

Associate professor, Central Department of History, TU. Kirtipur

Email: Kafledol@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive historical analysis of the caste system, focusing on its origins, evolution, and global impact. Originating from ancient Indian society, the caste system initially arose from the division of labour, categorizing people into groups based on occupation and birth. Over time, the system became more complex, influenced by social, economic, and political factors, and spread across South Asia, impacting neighbouring regions like Nepal. Although much research has been conducted on the caste system, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding its early development, the socio-political dynamics shaping its structure, and its comparative role in other ancient civilizations such as Greece, Rome, Egypt, etc. This study aims to fill these gaps by exploring not only the Indian context but also drawing parallels with other societies. By employing a qualitative research approach and utilizing secondary sources, this study examines how caste was shaped by occupation, inter-caste relationships, and regional variations, with particular attention to the colonial and post-colonial perspectives. The research further situates the caste system within global frameworks of social hierarchy, highlighting its enduring influence on contemporary societies. This historical exploration seeks to enhance understanding of caste, emphasizing its significance as both a social identity and a mechanism for asserting rights within hierarchical structures.

Keywords: caste system, occupation, inter-caste marriage, social hierarchy, global comparison, post-colonialism.

Introduction

The term *caste*, used to describe social divisions in Western countries, originates from the Latin word *Castus*, which is believed to have emerged around the 15th century. In India, the term *caste* referred to social divisions designed to preserve the purity of blood. It was used to describe groups with close affiliations or blood ties, economic rights, hereditary equality, independence, or traditional organizations (Dutt, 1968). Caste is, in essence, a classification of society that is permanently hereditary, passed from one generation to the next. It is also a class, lineage, or intermarriage group (Beremen, 1972). When examining the foundation of caste, it is evident that it represents a family group, collectively identified by a shared name. Members of a caste trace their origins to common ancestors and maintain hereditary similarities. Initially, members of a caste often engaged in the same profession and married within their group. Over time, however, castes were

subdivided into smaller groups. A caste's social status remains consistent as long as its members adhere to the social rules of their group (Dhanda, 2022). Based on these beliefs, caste can be understood as a group of people sharing the same ancestry, characteristics, and social identity.

Caste represents the foundational structure of certain communities and distinct human groups. These communities are not solely defined by racial or ethnic characteristics but also exhibit a subtle and hereditary unity. A caste is historically an established group sharing a common language and cultural similarities. Racial and ethnic differences are inherently embedded within the mutual and functional distinctions of castes. However, it is difficult to precisely determine the extent of differences between any two races (Darwin, 2012). There is no definitive guideline regarding the nature or degree of variation among castes. Instead, the focus on achieving inter-caste equality is often regarded as more significant than the disparities between different castes.

When examining the global concept of the origin and development of race, similarities in linguistic, cultural, and other diverse aspects have contributed to the formation of distinct racial groups. For instance, the Czech race in Austria, the Poshil race in Russia, and the modern Italian race comprising Romans, Teutonic groups, Itupcars, Greeks, and Arabians are examples of this phenomenon. Similarly, the United French is described as a combination of Gauls, Romans, Britons, and Teutonic castes. Although it is often suggested that a common language should unify every caste of people worldwide, it is not believed that distinct languages are necessary for different castes (Stalin, 2067). This suggests that diverse races or castes can share the same language. For example, the Dotel language spoken in the far western region of Nepal, the Maithili language spoken in the eastern Terai, and the Awadhi language spoken in the western Terai are used by people from various castes living within the same regions.

Although extensive research has been conducted on the caste system, there are still considerable gaps in understanding its intricate historical trajectory, especially regarding its origins and development across different cultural, economic, and geographical settings. Much of the existing scholarship emphasizes the caste system during post-Vedic and medieval periods, often overlooking its initial emergence and the socio-political dynamics that influenced its structure (Teltumbde, 2022). Additionally, while studies on the caste system in the Indian subcontinent are abundant, there is a lack of comparative exploration into how analogous systems of social stratification emerged in other ancient civilizations, such as Greece, Rome, and Egypt, and their potential connections to the South Asian experience.

Moreover, the prevailing literature predominantly examines caste as a religious or social phenomenon, offering limited insights into its economic and occupational aspects or its evolution through inter-caste relationships, migration, and regional differences. The role of colonial and post-colonial perspectives in shaping modern interpretations of the caste system has also received insufficient attention. This study seeks to bridge these gaps by delivering a thorough historical examination of the caste system, focusing on its origins,

progression, and diverse expressions. It endeavours to situate the caste system within a global framework of social hierarchies and assess its enduring impact on contemporary societies.

Method and Materials

This study employs qualitative research strategies within a descriptive research framework to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of the caste system, aligning with the title. The methodology is designed to address gaps in the existing literature, particularly the insufficient exploration of the caste system's origins, its socio-political underpinnings, and its comparative dimensions in the context of other ancient civilizations. The research relies exclusively on secondary sources, including books, articles, and archival materials gathered from reputable libraries and private collections. By utilizing these resources, the study examines the early emergence of the caste system in ancient Hindu society, its gradual diffusion across South Asia, and its introduction to Nepal through ancient migrations. The focus extends beyond the Indian subcontinent to draw comparisons with similar systems of stratification in civilizations such as Greece, Rome, and Egypt, highlighting shared patterns and distinct features.

Special attention is given to exploring the economic and occupational dimensions of the caste system, its evolution through inter-caste interactions and regional variations, and the influence of colonial and post-colonial interpretations. To ensure the credibility and depth of the analysis, priority is given to original, well-documented, and authoritative sources. This methodological approach enables the study to bridge the identified gaps by delivering a nuanced understanding of the caste system's origins, development, and global relevance. By situating the caste system within broader social hierarchies, the research aims to contribute to a deeper appreciation of its historical trajectory and its enduring implications for modern societies.

Result and Discussion

The term *caste* was first introduced in India after the seventeenth century and was officially incorporated into the French dictionary in 1740. The development of the caste system in India is regarded as a foundational structure rooted in religion. It originated with the Indo-European Aryan people, who established the system. Since its inception in ancient times, the caste system has evolved systematically, resembling a hierarchical structure organized from the highest to the lowest ranks, much like a military order (Dumo, 2004). Fundamentally, the caste system represents a framework of class stratification, inequality, and distinctions among individuals.

In the early stages of Indian society, the origin and development of the caste system were primarily based on factors such as occupation, skill, experience, and the accumulation of wealth. The Indo-Aryan people, who had lived in the Gangetic plains for a long time, are considered the creators of the Indian caste system. These Aryans, who also played a significant role in the development of Hinduism, are believed to have originated from branches of the Indo-European, Indo-Germanic, Teutonic, Roman, and Iranian peoples.

The Aryans are thought to have had close cultural ties with the Spaniards and Portuguese in the Indian subcontinent around 5000 BC (Ghure, 1961). After their separation from these groups, the Aryan people in India developed distinct cultural practices, including the establishment of the caste system.

Ancient Indo-Iranian society was divided into four distinct sections, similar to the division of Indian society based on the Varnashram system. These sections were: Atharva (priests), Ladaku (warriors), Astriya Suyantus (cultivators), and Huitis (artisans). Similarly, in the Greek and Roman civilizations, people were categorized into three groups: Janes, Kuria, and Tribe. In ancient Greece, society was also divided into two groups: Frateria and Phile. This classification later evolved into what was referred to as the caste system in India (Dutt, 1968; Jalki, 2024). However, unlike in India, the caste system in ancient Europe did not persist for as long. Nonetheless, during the Middle Ages, the positions of priests and the ruling class continued to be regarded as the highest in society. In ancient Iran, society was also stratified based on occupation, but this classification did not endure for long either. In contrast, the caste divisions in Indian society have been the most enduring and deeply rooted over time.

The Indian caste system primarily developed to distinguish between the Aryan people, considered to be of a 'pure' race, and the non-Aryans, who were often relegated to lower social roles. At that time, priests, rulers, and those engaged in respectable occupations were regarded as Aryans, while those performing menial and degrading tasks were seen as non-Aryans (Dutt, 1968). While caste systems existed in many societies worldwide, the system in India was uniquely based on occupational distinctions. This fundamental difference sets the Indian caste system apart from similar systems in other ancient cultures.

When examining the foundations of the caste system in Indian society, it is important to first consider the early stages of human development, when there was initially only one human race. Over time, the need for distinct identities arose, leading to the establishment of separate family lineages to reflect human existence. Since personal identity could not be defined without a clear classification, the Aryans in India developed the concept of ethnicity to prioritize the collective identity of various groups. This system was rooted in the Varnashram system (Hutton, 1963: 48), which is believed to have been widely accepted in society at the time, positively influencing the identity of individuals.

This division was introduced by the Aryans in ancient India, and the caste system emerged from the Varnashram system. It first took shape in the fertile plains of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers and gradually spread throughout the country (Ghure, 1961). In modern-day India and Nepal, the castes associated with Hinduism are considered descendants of these early divisions.

Bhimrao Ambedkar, a prominent Indian analyst of the caste system and jurist, described the caste system as a "sword in the hands of a limited number of people who maintain political and administrative supremacy over the majority" (Das, 1979). While there are

varying perspectives on the caste system in India, scholars generally agree that the Varnashrama system forms the foundation of this social division. During that period, the justification for maintaining blood purity and preventing intermarriage between distinct groups was considered more compelling than other arguments.

Around the 8th century BC, during the post-Vedic period, various professions began to develop within Hindu society. As people engaged in different occupations, patterns of discrimination and differentiation started to emerge naturally. In response, sociologists of the time deemed it appropriate to classify individuals into castes based on their professions. While many experts on caste in India have argued that there is complete equality between the caste system and the Varnashrama system, there are, in fact, distinct differences between the two. Nevertheless, the caste system is fundamentally based on the Varnashrama system (Pokhrel, 2010).

By the sixth century BC, the issue of ethnic purity had become a central concern among the people of the Indian Aryan race. At that time, caste was determined based on occupation, and occupations were linked to birth (Singhal, 1972). The emphasis on maintaining ethnic purity through practices like *golden marriages* (marriages within the same caste) became prominent in Aryan society (Senart, 1975). This led to a dilemma regarding the caste classification of children born from marriages outside one's caste. As Aryan society did not always strictly adhere to these rules, the number of castes gradually increased (Ghure, 1961). It appears that this gradual expansion of castes was significantly influenced by the development of the *varnashankar* system, which involved inter-caste marriages and the resulting classification of new castes.

Although the Aryan people of ancient India initially divided castes based on occupation and developed them according to the Varna system, it is believed that the number of castes later increased based on birth (Vishwas, 1982). Many castes within the Aryan race had already developed before the time of the Buddha. By the period of antiquity, the trend of caste division had progressed rapidly. During the Pauranic period, the influence of the priestly class grew so strong that they began to regard individuals engaged in businesses outside their own as inferior, based on class distinctions (Kafle, 2023). As a result, issues of ethnicity and caste became increasingly prioritized in Indian society.

In ancient Indian Aryan society, the profession traditionally practised by individuals became the defining factor of the caste system. These professions were passed down from one generation to the next, and castes were often named based on the occupations people engaged in, such as blacksmiths, carpenters, laundresses, and hunters. In general, the castes in ancient Aryan society were closely linked to traditional occupations, maintaining a strong relationship between caste and profession (Prajpi, 1970). Even after the post-Vedic period, the practice of naming castes according to occupations continued in Hindu society. Castes such as goldsmiths, blacksmiths, laundresses, and butchers are still found in various regions of Nepal and India.

The primary foundation of the caste system was the division of labour within society, which evolved through the interplay of struggles and cooperation between Vedic and non-Vedic peoples. In ancient India, Vedic and non-Vedic peoples were classified as Arya (Aryans) and non-Aryan, respectively (Prashrita, 2006). This division gave rise to distinctions based on profession, class, and social status, with certain occupations being considered prestigious and others inferior, creating a hierarchical structure based on both occupation and class.

From the post-Vedic period onwards, various specialized professions emerged, including barbers, carpenters, chariot makers, medicinal weavers, ironworkers, leatherworkers, leather charmers, chariot makers, gatekeepers, potters, weavers, and more (Vitezović, 2022). Castes such as Nishadh or Panjika (for making bows), Ishukrit (for crafting bows), Svani (for raising hounds), Magadha (for reciting praises), Shailush (for actors), Surakar (for brewing liquor), and Rajak or Sarga (for breaking ropes) developed based on these occupations (Prashrita, 2006). Thus, the caste system in Indian Hindu society was largely shaped by occupations, inter-caste marriages, and traditional businesses, which became central to the development and structure of the system.

In the context of the development of the caste system, the idea that the "caste system ceases when the structure of the class system is fully consolidated in one or more areas" is widely discussed (Baral, 1993). In Indian Hindu society, the caste system developed on a large scale, with social classes determined by birth. After the Vedic period, the caste system in Hindu society evolved gradually, initially emerging from inter-class marriages. Membership in these groups was based on descent, and as the system progressed, it began to impose social restrictions on its members. Separate groups continued to engage in distinct professions, gaining control over specific goods and enforcing collective rules (Alanzi, 2022). This led to the creation of individual, homogeneous classes within society. Over time, these classes evolved into distinct castes, each with a social identity and restrictions.

Caste is generally understood as a social group distinct from one's own, characterised by inter-group marriages, restrictions on eating with other groups, fixed occupations, specific treatment of other groups, and the compulsion to adhere to group rules based on birth (Sharma, 1966). Over time, in Indian society, the differences within the caste system have increased, with growing distinctions in the treatment of one caste by another. These internal differences have become more pronounced as the caste system evolved.

As the caste system evolved in Indian Hindu society, the community became increasingly divided into distinct sections. Under this system, individuals from one caste or group were unable to join another, as they were bound to follow the specific rules of their assigned group. Failure to comply with these rules, designed to preserve the integrity of the group, often resulted in punishment (Uspenskaya, 2024). These socially coercive regulations gradually compelled individuals to remain within their caste, class, or group, reinforcing the rigidity of the caste system.

The caste system is not exclusive to Indian Hindu society but is also found in various parts of the world and among different religious groups. People in regions such as Egypt, West Asia, China, Japan, America, Rome, and parts of Europe have historically been divided into castes and ethnic groups (Ghure, 1961). In ancient Egypt, society was divided into landlords, agricultural labourers, and slaves, with the latter two groups dependent on the former. The rulers of Egypt, in the eighteenth dynasty, formally established a four-class societal structure based on government decree (Neharu, 1988). These classes included priests, soldiers, builders, and servants, with the first two classes having relatively better conditions, while the latter two were considered to serve the needs of society (Candelora et al., 2022; Ghure, 1961). Thus, the caste system is not a unique or isolated phenomenon but a classification found across different societies, serving to simplify the identity of the various groups. In this context, caste has come to function not only as a means of defining human identity but also as a tool for asserting rights within the social structure.

Conclusion

Human societies across the world have always been characterized by diversity, often categorized as different races. However, humans are fundamentally a single species, with shared evolutionary origins and genetic roots. Over thousands of years, as human beings adapted to their local environments and climates, physical and social differences emerged. These differences gradually led people to form smaller social units for self-identification, which later evolved into what we now recognize as castes. The division of people into castes has taken various forms across different cultures, but in ancient Indian society, the caste system primarily stemmed from the division of labour. The Aryan settlers in India initially divided society into four primary classes Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras based on occupation, known as the Varna system. While some scholars argue that colour or character may have been the basis for this division, many agree that occupation was the primary factor. As society grew more complex, with increasing inter-caste marriages, diversification of labour, and larger-scale occupations, the need to maintain social order through blood purity led to the proliferation of sub-castes.

This caste structure, once firmly established, persisted over centuries and remains an integral part of Indian society today. Moreover, the influence of the caste system extended beyond India, affecting neighbouring regions like Nepal and other South Asian countries, where its legacy is still evident. Despite the evolving nature of societies and the challenges to caste-based divisions, the impact of this system continues to shape social dynamics in these regions, serving as a crucial aspect of both identity and social hierarchy.

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