Caste: Conflating Varna and Jati

Overview

Caste is one of the most complicated and misunderstood concepts encountered when attempting to understand India and Hinduism. While the social hierarchies that became known as "caste" did develop in India and were influenced by religious elites, they are not specifically sanctioned by the Vedas, one of the oldest Hindu sacred texts. Moreover, the system was initially neither rigid nor hereditary (birth-based). The notion of caste passing down through family, not to mention caste-based discrimination, is a later social development and is neither intrinsic to the practice of Hinduism nor does it span all of Hindu history. What began as a way to understand individuals through personality types based on inherent qualities (*varna*), in conjunction with how it was actually organized by occupation (*jati*), evolved over time into a hereditary, birth-based system supported especially by many members of the religious orthodoxy. To better understand caste, it is important to delve into its history.

The Varna and Jati

The Vedas make reference to four personality or psychological types which are known as *varna*. Various Hindu texts have come to use the term, which has a variety of meanings (including form, figure, character, and hue) to describe a way of understanding the diversity of personality types or human temperaments found in any society. In most societies, there are some individuals who are more strongly adept in intellectual pursuits; some who are more capable in governance and exercising power; others who gravitate to materially productive occupations and wealth accumulation; and those who prefer to work with their hands, or otherwise function as laborers.

Initially, an individual was not born into a *varna* social role, but instead became identified as such through their abilities and actions. Traditionally, there are four *varna*:

- *Brahmin* - Those who pursue knowledge
- *Kshatriya* - Those who exercise power
- *Vaishya* - Those who seek to own land or engage in commerce
- *Shudra* - Those who grow, make, and labor

The Vedas do not state that *varna* is based on familial birth, nor that it is a determinant of an established social hierarchy. Instead, they associate one's *varna* with the individual's predominant personality type. A personality type is determined by varying combinations of three inherent qualities.

Gunas, karma, and varna

According to Hindu philosophy, everything in existence consists of three inherent qualities or *gunas* -- *sattva* (harmony); *rajas* (activity); and *tamas* (inertia). The three *guna* manifest at varying levels and under varying circumstances. They are understood to influence at three levels of worldly existence -- physical, psychological, and spiritual.

Guna influence both non-sentient and sentient life forms. In human birth, varying combinations of the three guna present as characteristics or qualities which, in turn, are the basis of different personality types. The characteristics associated with each *guna* are as follows:

Sattvic (state of sattva): good and intelligent energy which brings about balance, harmony, compassion, and selflessness

Rajasic (state of rajas): dynamic and active energy which brings about restlessness, change, passion, and self-centeredness

Tamasic (state of tamas): cyclical and fixed energy which brings about heaviness, inertia, ignorance, and selfishness

sattva
harmony

rajas
activity

tamas
inertia

Rajas and *tamas* have both positive and negative aspects. Some schools interpret rajas as the opposite of tamas, while others hold sattva and tamas to be opposites. Regardless, the goal of religious and spiritual discipline and practice is to intentionally expand *sattva*. And because *guna* manifest in the form of desires, likes and dislikes, the ultimate goal is to transcends all three *guna*.

An individual's current *guna* composition is shaped by past and present *karma* or conduct and actions (this is why some Hindus may insist that *varna* is birth-based, but should not be confused with familial birth). Every human also has the unique ability to change their *guna* through their present and future karma, ie. by changing how they interact with and react to the external world.

The predominance of a particular *guna* shapes an individual's overall personality type, disposition, or temperament. But the dominating *guna* may also be different from thought to thought and action to action. *Guna* can be redirected or changed with every thought and action through knowledge, awareness, intention, and effort. One's overarching *guna* can also change or be changed over time. This is key to the Hindu understanding that every individual has the capacity to evolve spiritually.
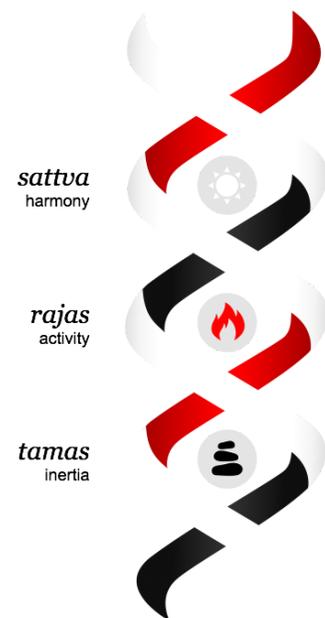
Guna are integral to the understanding of *varna*. The varying levels of the three *guna* are seen as indicators of the best way in which an individual can serve society based on their temperament and innate tendencies, ie. personality type. In other words, different personality types are necessary to ensure a society which can live comfortably, cooperatively, and in harmony.

Accordingly, the four *varna* should stem from determining one's predominant *guna* or personality type:

> Brahmin: Those with predominant *sattva guna*, some *rajas*, and least of *tamas*
>
> Kshatriya: Those with predominant *raja guna*, some *sattva*, and least of *tamas*
>
> Vaishya: Those with predominant *raja guna*, some *tamas*, and least of *sattva*
>
> Shudra: Those with predominant *tamas guna*, some *rajas*, and least of *sattva*

Those associated with each *varna* were expected to contribute to the betterment of society in their own ways; and spiritual rewards were said to come to those who best fulfilled their own obligations as defined by their *varna*. While *brahmins* were afforded cultural capital in ancient Indian society, being a *brahmin* was not necessarily a birthright nor was it associated with political power or material wealth. There are numerous examples of *brahmins* not being born into *brahmin* families, including the sage Vyasa, who is considered the author of numerous revered spiritual texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, and the sage Valmiki, who is attributed with writing the Ramayana. Even the famous Gayatri Mantra, one of the holiest prayers in the Hindu tradition, was revealed to the sage Visvamitra, who was not born a *brahmin*.

Jati

Jati refers to the communities defined by occupation, and can loosely be compared to medieval European trade guilds. Those who worked different occupations became their own communities such as priests and teachers, became associated with *brahmin*; warriors and kings, became associated with *kshatriya*; trader and merchants, became associated with *vaishya*; and laborers, became associated with *shudra*. Over time, thousands of *jatis* developed in India, each with its own religious and social practices, and bound by numerous conventions governing their interactions and perceived hierarchies. The rules within each *jati* were not tied to scripture as they were by passed down traditions and norms, which slowly became associated with birthright. If anything, the Europeans' understanding of caste emerged from observing the daily practices within *jati*.

The Evolution Into Caste

The jati system grew more complex, more formalized, and eventually birth-based over the centuries, and not only amongst Hindu communities, but across all religions. Although Hinduism is essentially non-doctrinaire and non-dogmatic, the life experience and circumstance of any individual identified with a particular *jati* community came to be equated with the qualities associated with the
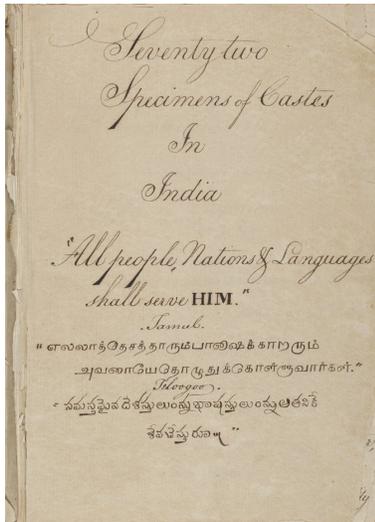
broader *varna* classification of the *jati*, rather than the inherent qualities of the individual. As a result of this societal conflation, many Hindus also began viewing reincarnation and karma through the lens of jati and society's perceived hierarchies. Similarly, perceived hierarchies based on jati evolved in other religious communities. By the time the Portuguese arrived in the 15th century, many in India (including present day Pakistan and Bangladesh), across all religions, had their own formal *jati* identities and customs.

The British utilized and thus further formalized caste with the introduction of the census in the 19th century as a way of tracking the different groups in the colonial subcontinent. Although the connection between *varna* and *jati* had long been in existence, it had generally been more regional and loosely defined until the British reified and formalized the system. This codification led to a more intractable social hierarchy and was done to better facilitate social and political control of India and its people.

Untouchability

The British, with the assistance of Christian missionaries, catalogued various jatis to develop a "Schedule of Castes" which permanently ossified a hierarchical social structure.

One group that had long been relegated to the bottom of the social ladder outside the *varna* system were what the British referred to as "Untouchables," a fairly accurate translation of the various indigenous labels for them. It is critical to emphasize that while support for a hierarchical caste system can be seen in certain texts of social laws, no sacred text or book of social law ever prescribes or defines this category of "untouchables". Untouchability is a purely social evil, not recognized anywhere in the Hindu tradition and which arose nearly 2000 years after the Vedas were compiled.

The official term for "untouchables" is "Scheduled castes", from a schedule of castes created by British colonial administrators that listed *jati* names. In the early twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi began calling untouchables "Harijan" (children of God) to show his support and concern. In the latter part of the century, some members of the group started an anti-Hindu and anti-government movement called "Dalit Panthers." The term "dalit" gained widespread use in the media and in academic and activists circles from the late-1990s onwards. Many of the prominent activists who first began using the term "dalit" consisted of those among SCs who had converted out of Hinduism to other religions.

Although caste and untouchability have become a part of the religion for many Hindus, they are not inherent to the foundations of Hinduism, nor are they exclusively practiced by Hindus. In India, caste discrimination is practiced by people of all religious traditions, including Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians. Each has established social hierarchies laden with norms and dogmas that govern interaction within

those groups. Inter-jati conflicts have existed among all faith traditions in India, which continue to complicate efforts to abolish the system.

Changing "Caste"

Movements in the historic past against caste-based discrimination have been led largely by Hindu spiritual and religious leaders. Many Hindu religious figures, including Basaveshwara (11th Century, CE) and Dayanand Saraswati (19th Century, CE), condemned caste as being outside of Vedic teachings. Other Hindu leaders argued that caste discrimination and oppression violate a fundamental principle in Hindu philosophy that we should recognize the common divinity in all beings and treat them as we would treat ourselves. After independence from the British, Indian leaders enshrined a ban on caste discrimination in the Indian Constitution. Additionally, the Indian government instituted what is arguably the most aggressive affirmative action program in the world for the scheduled castes and other communities historically vulnerable to discrimination. As a result of those opportunities, as well as India's economic development, those once classified as outcastes began to enjoy increased social and economic mobility. In 1997, India elected its first Scheduled Caste president, K.R. Narayanan.

Today, caste still pervades as a social distinction, though there are still some religious undertones, and various forms of discrimination remain, especially in the more remote areas of the country. Many from the lower castes–have converted to other religions such as Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. The reality is, however, that in spite of converting to religions that often claim to be "caste-free," lower castes continue to face discrimination and social ostracization in their respective faith communities. The majority remain practicing Hindus.

Many lower caste communities have benefited from official programs, and many Dalits/Harijans have also become more prominent economically and politically. Meanwhile, the poor among many higher castes continue to suffer from the same disadvantages poor Dalits/Harijans do, but without the benefits that come from the Indian government. In many ways, poverty works as a caste equalizer in terms of the poor, regardless of caste, having to take up menial or scavenging jobs in order to survive.

Caste politics is an enormously complicating factor in modern India. Politicking for caste-based affirmative action benefits has become a mechanism to extract concessions from the State. Thus, caste remains alive today because people see its utility in social and economic upliftment on the one hand, and in political mobilization on the other. Thus while representative democracy and affirmative action policies have enabled lower castes to reach the highest echelons of government, one consequence has been the reinforcement rather than amelioration caste identities and divisions, and the election of legislators largely based on the individual's caste, rather than his policies. In casting their vote, Indians are often accused of voting their caste.

As should be apparent, the dynamics of caste in India are far more complex than what most textbooks suggest. In fact historians such as Valerie Hansen and Kenneth Curtis note that "most outside observers

tend to exaggerate the rigidity of caste in modern India" (Hansen and Curtis, 2011: p. 64). Still, the stigma of caste and caste-ism is a problem in India that reformers - both religious and secular - are working to change.

Key Takeaways

- Caste is a social practice prevalent throughout South Asia and not intrinsic to Hinduism.
- *Varna* is a personality type classification based on inherent qualities or guna. *Jatis* were traditionally based on occupation.
- Everything in existence consists of three qualities or gunas -- sattva, rajas, and tamas.
- *Guna* can change or be changed over time, acknowledging everyone's capacity to evolve spiritually.
- What started as an organic organization of Indian society became more rigid and birth-based over many centuries.
- Caste-based discrimination in modern India is illegal, though it still exists.