

CHANGING ATTITUDES REGARDING THE INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM

There are four major *varnas* in India: Brahmin (priestly class), Ksatriya (military and ruling class), Vaisya (merchants and traders), and Sudra (labourers). At the bottom and separate from the *varnas* one finds the Dalit, formally called untouchables. Dalit are considered unclean, and as a result, in the past interaction with those outside their group had not been permitted. There are also subgroups called jatis found within the *varnas*. *Varnas* and jatis are typically understood to make up the Indian caste system, which determines the social hierarchy in India. However, changes are taking place in India concerning how people view the caste system and how it shapes their lives. One study shows that college students have adopted more liberal ways of thinking that have diminished the importance of the ancient caste system in their eyes. Another study shows how the effects of globalization have changed the mindsets of youth in upper-class New Delhi, causing a drastic departure from the views of the older generation concerning issues such as marriage and religion. A final article explores the status of Dalit women in Indian society today and indicates that problems such as poverty, oppression, and abuse still exist in light of these changing views. Hence, while the influence of the Indian caste system may be disappearing in India, many inequalities still persist in light of changing attitudes.

Research conducted among college students in the cities of Bangalore, Calcutta, and Delhi indicates that caste distinctions among Indians are eroding and being replaced with more liberal views. As students are subjected to western ideas, pressures regarding caste, expectations for marrying within one's caste, and rules for interacting with "Dalits" (untouchables) have become less important. For instance, 67.5 percent of college students surveyed believe one's occupation, not caste, determines one's status (Anant 194). The research also says that 69.7 percent do not support the theory of karma, which suggests that actions from a previous life

determine one's caste (196). Very noteworthy is the fact that 64.4 percent believe the caste system should be abolished altogether. Sixty-nine percent say it is okay to marry someone from another caste, and 86 percent say they would eat food that was touched by a Dalit (199). An interesting point from this study is that females are generally more liberal in their attitudes than males (196). The findings of this research, done in 1978, suggest that even twenty-eight years ago, religion and the caste system were playing a less significant role in the lives of Indians, who instead opted for a more liberal view.

Another study, conducted more recently, also suggests that this trend is taking place among upper-middle class youths in the city of New Delhi. This particular study suggests the effects of globalization are causing western influences to manifest themselves among India's elite (Mathur 161). The study compares and contrasts the views of Delhi's youth aged 18-26 with those held by middle-aged persons aged 46-62. For example, 62 percent of the older group believed parents should choose their children's spouse, whereas 73 percent of the youth believed the children should decide (167). Another example indicates that 64 percent of the older generation do not believe love is an important component for those getting married. However, 57 percent of the younger generation believe love is important prior to getting married. Even more interesting is the fact that while 70 percent of the older generation believe one should marry within their religion, only 25 percent of the youth feel the same way. An interesting finding in the study indicates that while 83 percent of the older generation are proud to be Indian, 95 percent of the youth feel the same way (168). On the other hand, 59 percent of the younger generation claim they would migrate to a more advanced, developed country if given the opportunity, whereas only 30 percent of the older generation said the same (169).

The author interpreted this apparent contradiction by stating that "increasing nationalism could be one of many responses to the erosion of one's cultural identity" (170), and that "the youth are not rejecting India, but what they consider outmoded in their culture" (177). The study also makes some interesting concluding statements, declaring that "Many of the elite youths surveyed here would have more in common with youths in advanced, developed countries than with their own parents" (170). The findings of this study appear to support its argument. The article ends by saying, "most middle-class Indians have learned to de-emphasize the importance of ethnic markers to their sense of identity that they feel as Indians" (171).

Despande takes the findings even further. Taking for granted that the forces of globalization and liberalism have been at play in India for some time, the author takes a close look at how women have been effected by the diminished importance of traditional ideas pertaining to the caste system and religion. In her article she states "While a small proportion of Indians (of both sexes) can claim that caste does not matter, ...this freedom from caste is impossible for [lower caste women], who endure a combination of poverty and gender discrimination that keeps them illiterate, low paid, malnourished, and unhealthy..." (32) The author states that despite changing perspectives, "Dalit women are worse off than upper-caste women in terms of standard of living" (27). The author also explores the assumption which holds that the conduct and behavior of upper-caste women is more heavily regulated than Dalit women, and as a result, Dalit women enjoy greater autonomy in their lives. However, the research done by the author suggests that this assumption simply is not true. That is, they do not enjoy "greater autonomy to compensate for their greater poverty" (28). The author states that the majority of Dalit women are not allowed to decide how to care for themselves, nor do their husbands consult with them in making decisions that affect the whole family. Furthermore, Dalit women are also

more prone to domestic violence and abuse. She concludes by saying that, "An assessment of the material aspects of the gender-caste overlap suggest that more than fifty years after Indian independence, the economic condition of women continues to be defined and constrained by their caste status" (33). So despite changes in how the caste system is regarded, inequalities left behind by the powerful distinctions it imposed are still an important issue in India.

So one sees that the importance of caste is disappearing as people are more willing to interact and associate with those from different castes, including the Dalit. Religion has taken on a less significant role in the lives of Indians, and traditional ideas pertaining to the caste system have been challenged even by the privileged youth of the upper castes as well as by college students. Forces of liberalism and globalization have been at play, as western influences serve to weaken the status quo. Nevertheless, despite such changes, inequality, poverty, and discrimination are still the reality among women at the bottom of the social ladder. Unfortunately, even as caste distinctions disappear, problems pertaining to class inequality still remain. Thus, in light of caste distinctions being less visible now, the consequences of such distinctions continue to manifest themselves plainly.

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Further Reading

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Related Research Topics

effects of globalization on Indian society; economic and social conditions of Dalit men and women; Liberal influences in Indian culture; public education and its role in forming perceptions; attitudes of class inequality in India; socio-economic conditions of women within India; ancient Hinduism and the Indian caste system; relationship between caste and religion; intercaste relationships; views of women on the caste system as compared to men.

Notable Relevant Websites

http://atributetohinduism.com/Caste_System.htm <http://www.indiatogether.org/society/caste.htm>

<http://www.epw.org.in/showArticles.php?root=2003&leaf=11&filename=6474&filetype=html>

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