“So, you want to marry my daughter?”
The Caste System: An Overview
First speaker: Prof. M Narasimhachary, Senior Associate Fellow, Oxford Centre for Vaishnava and Hindu Studies

Preamble

The phenomenon of Caste has aroused more controversy than any other aspect of Indian life and thought. Some see India’s caste system as the defining feature of Indian culture and some have dismissed it as a colonial artefact. Since the days of the British rule, both historians and anthropologists referred to India as a ‘caste society’. Obviously this is an overstatement of the importance of caste. But for many leading personalities, caste was, and is, a real force in Indian life. As explained by experts in the field such as Dr Susan Bayly, caste is not the essence of Indian culture and civilization. It is rather a contingent and variable response to the enormous changes that occurred in the subcontinent’s political landscape both before and after the colonial conquest.

Definition of Caste: the concepts of Jāti and Varṇa:

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines Caste as “a Hindu hereditary class of socially equal persons, united in religion and usually following similar occupations, distinguished from other castes in the hierarchy by its relative degree of purity or pollution.” The term Caste is commonly used to refer to two distinct concepts of corporate affiliation: the ‘Jāti’ (birth group) and the Varṇa (order, class or kind). The term Jāti is used for the units of thousands or sometimes millions of people with whom one may identify oneself for such purposes as marriage. There

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1 Casta, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age, Cambridge University Press, 2001
are thousands of titles associated with specific Jātis in different parts of the country: Rajput, Chamar and Jat – these terms have come to be widely recognised. But these terms are unfamiliar to people outside a limited geographical area. In contrast to this profusion of Jātis or birth-groups, the concept of Varṇa involves a scheme with only four divisions. Thus what would now be called Hindu society is conceived of as being divisible into four very large units which transcend specific regional associations. These are: Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra. They are commonly understood as a ranked order of precedence. Then there is another caste called the ‘fifth’ one (called Pañcama), the so-called ‘untouchable’ (the hill and forest population who are called tribals, inclusive). This group occupies a place below, outside this Varṇa scheme.

The Brāhmaṇas are commonly identified with those who fulfil the calling of priests and spiritual preceptors. The Kṣatriyas (etymologically, the ‘protectors’) are usually rulers and warriors. The Vaiśyas are those who have commercial livelihood, and are associated with other producers and wealth-creators as well. The Śūdras are toilers and artisans. People belonging to the ‘fifth’ group perform ‘unclean’ services such as cremation, killing animals for food, etc.

Caste in Theory and Practice:

Those sharing a common caste identity may subscribe to at least a notional tradition of common descent, as well as a claim of common geographical origin and a particular occupational ideal. For instance, an individual claiming Brahman parentage is not obliged to follow a priestly or preceptoral livelihood. A man professing princely descent automatically is not expected to wield a sword. But those claiming Brahmin or Kṣatriya origin do not expect others to think that their ancestors were humble labourers or providers of menial service, as would be the case for an individual identified by a low-caste Jāti designation such a Paraiyan or Chamar. In theory at
least, civilized ‘caste Hindus’ regard it as wrong and unnatural to share food or have other intimate social contact with those who are dissimilar to them in terms of caste. The implication is that to be of a high or low caste is a matter of innate quality or essence. This is what is stated in many Indian scriptures dealing with caste ideals. But in real life, these principles have often been widely contested and modified. The implication would be that all who are born into the so-called ‘clean’ castes, rank as high and pure, regardless of wealth, achievement or other individual circumstances. Dr M.N. Srinivas has brought in the ‘theory of Sanskritization’, an historical process of a group moving upward socially through the embrace of the high or ‘Sanskritic’ practices, as opposed to local or popular forms of social and religious practices. Thus in his view, caste-society is mobile and fluid, rather than static and inflexible.3

Caste is explained by many specialists as a system of elaborately stratified social hierarchy that distinguishes India from all other societies. It has achieved much the same significance in social, political and academic debates as ‘race’ in the United States, ‘class’ in Britain and ‘faction’ in Italy. It has thus been widely thought of as the paramount fact of life in the subcontinent, and for some, it is the very core or essence of south Asian civilization.

The earliest beginnings:

The Puruṣa Sūkta of the Rgveda (X.90) (@ 5000 B.C.) contains the first symbolic reference to the emergence of the four castes, Brāhmaṇas, Rājanyas (Kṣatriyas), Vaiśyas and Śūdras, from the mouth, shoulders, thighs and feet respectively of the Cosmic Being. Interpretation then came into play, claiming that these castes are in the descending order of importance. As a matter of fact, the Hindu castes are not related to heredity or birth. What is implied in this symbolic description

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3 The cohesive role of Sanskritization and other essays, Delhi, 1989
of the emergence of the four castes is that human society is given its ‘voice’ (mukham),
‘order’ (bāhu), ‘form’ (ūru) and ‘change’ (pad) respectively. The vocational choice was mainly need-based and circumstantial, in terms of the availability of labour in certain places and certain times.

Manu the Law Giver explains the principle of caste as a universal law of life. The key principle of ‘caste Hindu’ thought is understood as the code of duty, religious law and right human conduct which defines the path to virtue (Dharma) and spiritual fulfilment for all humankind. According to Manu, the source of this Dharma is the Will of the Divine Creator who gave each of the four human archetypes or Varnas a distinct moral quality, and a calling to follow. God, the ‘lustrous one’, made ‘separate innate activities’ for the different orders of humanity, says Manu. He called these, ‘Varnas’ and laid down their duties and responsibilities so as to make life in society comfortable and meaningful. He also laid down the Āśrama Dharmas - duties of celibates (brahmacārins), householders (grhaṣthas), forest-recluses (vāna-prasthas) and ascetics (saṁnyāsins). The caste system was designed and expected to make social life a well-knit, self-dependent unit, implying of course, mutual dependence. Everybody was expected to contribute his mite to the well-being of the society at all levels. Manu also explains that the classification of castes based on profession, does not disqualify the members to inter-marry. He speaks of anuloma-type of marriages (in the descending order) according to which a man belonging to the higher order may marry a woman belonging to the lower order. The Varna classification was of course, not rigid or inflexible. In the Rāmāyaṇa for instance, Paraśurāma who was a Brahmin by birth but behaved as a Kṣatriya. Viśvāmitra who

4 Cf. I.87: sarvasyāsya tu sargasya guptyarthāṁ sa mahādyutīḥ | mukhabāhurupajjānāṁ prthakkarmānyakalpayat ||
was a king by birth became a Brahmin by virtue of his spiritual attainments. Droṇa and Kṛpa in the Mahābhārata were Brahmins by Jāti but became Kṣatriyas by profession.

The Bhagavadgītā (ch.I. 38 ff) glorifies the sanctity of caste. Without caste, there would be corruption of humanity’s most precious standards of domestic honour and sexual propriety (v. 41). In IV.13 the Gītā makes it clear that this system of four divisions (cāturvarṇyam) is based on the division of guṇas and activities corresponding with those guṇas. Ch.XVIII (v. 41) elaborates that all occupations are important and correspond to various needs of the segments of society and are dispensed according to ability (svabhāva) on the basis of qualifications (guṇas). The duties relating to each adopted vocation are also listed (vv.42-44). It is pointed out in XVIII (vv. 45-46) that no matter what a person’s duty or task is, one attains perfection or heavenly bliss if he is fully dedicated to it and performs it with pleasure and interest as if it were a service to the Lord Himself.

It is thus clear that there was no ‘rigidity’ in regard to the caste divisions in ancient times, but it became unfortunately, a point of discord in course of time. Narrow walls were raised between one community and another. The Brāhmaṇas, supposed to be the repositories of sacred knowledge, with the favour of the ruling class (kṣatriyas) became the wielders of absolute power in religious domain. The affected party was the Śūdra or the working class and the Pañcama (out-caste).

The root cause of the problem:
The sole cause of discord and animosity that affected various sections of society is non-discrimination between the two segments ‘Jāti’ (caste by birth) and ‘Varṇa’ (caste by profession). One may claim to have been born in a particular Jāti and

\[\text{Cf. brāhmaṇa-kṣatriya-viśāh śūdrāṇāṁ ca parantapa | karmāṇi pravibhaktāni svabhāvaprabhavaiḥ guṇaiḥ ī} \]
consider oneself as 'śuddha' (pure) or 'śubha' (auspicious). But the division in terms of caste by profession (varṇa) remains flexible. E.g., professions as those of Doctors, Lawyers, Engineers, Professors and Musicians. Those born in any Jāti can take up any of the above professions. That was the original import and intention of ancient scriptures and law-texts. But in India, in the middle ages, people began to think of only one type of caste, i.e., caste by birth or Jāti. An individual began to think of himself or herself as superior or inferior to others. This is the chief cause of malady in India. All the ruling parties in the country, since the dawn of Independence, both at the Centre and in different States, have been missing this point and are as a matter of fact, widening the rift between one Varṇa and another. It is time this truth is brought out in bold relief, publicised and popularised by all our statesmen, politicians, social reformers, educationists, religious and spiritual leaders, heads of monasteries and other organizations if they are really interested in creating an egalitarian society.

**How did Caste emerge?**

To be frank, the emergence of caste cannot be reduced to any single causal factor. In contrast to other areas of Asia, the paramount fact of Indian history has been the subcontinent’s remarkable array of contrasting ecologies, languages, religions and political systems, as well as its great political fluidity, with persistent oscillations between prosperity and dearth, commercialisation and subsistence, pastoralism and peasant agriculture. One striking element of Indian life has been the presence of very large subordinated populations who have been identified as distinct from other Indians culturally, morally and even biologically. These are the people called ‘tribals’ and ‘untouchables’. These cultural, ethnic and historical diversities are reflected in the profusion of different meanings that Indians have given to the term Caste or caste-like groupings with which they have identified themselves.
Later Stages:

In the post-Mughal period, the religious atmosphere in India tended to show what may be described as ‘casteless’ and anti-Brahmanical signs. The religions during this period and even before, derived their support from the Bhakti traditions inspired by great teachers like Rāmānuja, Guru Nanak, Caitanya and Kabir. Also, the fourth Āśrama of ascetics is supposed to be ‘casteless’ in the sense that they are above the denominations of caste. By the 16th century, the rise of Muslim-ruled kingdoms in the Deccan and North, spread the teachings of Islam to both humble and elite groups. After the decline of Mughal power in the early 18th century, Muslim pīrs (well-versed in mysticism and devotional traditions known as Sufism) continued to be revered by both Muslims and non-Muslim Hindus. These pīrs or cult saints attracted constituencies which were similar to the followings of the Hindu bhakti teachers and Sikh gurus, and which shared many of their ideas and spiritual practices. Thus, from these sources also, Indians encountered messages of devotion to a Deity which was to be seen not only as transcendent, but also as dissolving all divisions of rank and hierarchy through practices of personalised mystical devotion. The teaching of devotional approach (bhakti) simply gave to the ordinary caste-Hindu, an experience of mystical and apparently ‘casteless’ union with the Divine.

But at the practical level, the position did not change. The lay adherents did not deny or give up claims for the validity of their caste distinctions. Especially where marriage was concerned, lay initiates who worship through the personal ‘guru’ rather than a Brahmin ritualist would still accept that the ‘untouchable’ was radically different from the devotee of respectable caste origin. Many bhakti sects denied initiation to ‘unclean’ groups. Some allowed only those of Brahmin birth to become gurus. Further, the activities of these ‘conversion’ faiths and ‘sampradāya’-networks...
gave rise to assertive counter-movements like Bengal’s early 19th century Dharma Sabha organisations which rallied self-professed preservers of orthodox faith to the defence of Brahmanical authority. In many cases both before and during the colonial period, battles took place in the Bengal between organized groups of Hindu ‘modernisers’ and ‘traditionalists’. This only helped to heighten the awareness of Jāti and Varna concepts for people of varying social backgrounds, both before and after the colonial era.

From the later 19th century all the ideas about caste were given new impetus by their collision with two new forces in Indian life. The first of these was the encounter with notions of individual rights and nationhood which derive primarily from the writings of Western social theorists of the period. The second was the increasing self-confidence of the large and growing Indian intelligentsias which had been expanding rapidly since the 1950s. Beginning in the late 19th century, controversies about whether caste was a degenerate social evil or an embodiment of progressive spirituality and nationhood were pursued both in the liberal English Journals, especially the Indian Social Reformer (founded in 1890), and in pronouncements by defenders of orthodox Hindu tradition. Those who involved themselves in these debates included such celebrities like Swami Dayananda Sarasvati, founder of the Arya Samaj (1875) and Swami Vivekananda, founder of the Ramakrishna Mission Movement (1897). Many other important social and political leaders also played an active role, most notably M.G. Ranade and other leaders of India’s most influential pre-1st World War ‘reformist’ voluntary association, the National Social Conference.
Those who participated in these debates did not accept the existence of hierarchical ‘Jāti’ and ‘Varṇa’ affinities as neutral facts of Indian ethnography. In their view, the values and solidarities to which they attached the English term ‘caste’ raised issues requiring ‘public men’ (and sometimes women) to take a stand in the rapidly proliferating print media. What they wrote was an explicit challenge to those orientalists who saw caste as an immoral institution which had prevented Indians from acquiring the bond of a universal ethical code, thus debarring them from the achievement of nationhood. By the end of the 19th century three basic views of caste had emerged:

1. The incubus view that caste in all its forms is a divisive and pernicious force, and a negation of nationhood;

2. The golden chain view that ‘caste’ as a Varṇa is to be seen as an ideology of spiritual orders and moral affinities, and as a potential basis for national regeneration;

3. The idealised corporation view that Jāti is to be seen as a concrete ethnographic fact of Indian life, a source of historic national strengths and organised self-improvement or ‘uplift’.

The National Social Conference (1887) was founded by the Bombay High Court Judge M.G. Ranade (1842-1901) and the Madras Civil Sevant R. Raghunatha Rao (1831-1912). The supporters of this Conference were expected to endorse the so-called uplift for untouchables, as well as the education of women, the banning of child marriages and the abolition of penitential seclusion for widows. Those who participated in the 1909 Conference declared that Caste was an alien and slavish institution which had been created in relatively recent times under pernicious ethnological and
historical circumstances. Caste values were the badge of a ‘degraded’ and unfree people and a source of ‘irksome and painful customs’ which had rigidified a once free and open social order, ‘trenching on the liberty of anterior times’ and ‘shackling’ Indians within a ‘prison house’ of superstition and social oppression.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) condemned the oppressive treatment of the so-called untouchables and other subordinate castes. He re-echoed contemporary Western ethnological themes in his remarks about the ‘natural differences of ability and character’ that separated persons of unlike Varṇa. His views became a source of inspiration to Mahatma Gandhi in dealing with the problem of Casteism. Swami Vivekananda wrote: ‘Each caste has become, as it were, a separate racial element. If a man lives long enough in India, he will be able to tell from the features what caste a man belongs to ‘ (Works VIII: 54). ‘Two different races mix and fuse, and out of them rises one strong distinct type. This tries to save itself from admixture, and here you see the beginning of caste. Look at the apple. The best specimens have been produced by crossing, but once crossed, we try to preserve the variety in tact (Ibid: 274). ‘Caste has its bad side, but its benefits outweigh its disadvantages.’ (Ibid: 242). ‘It is in the nature of society to form itself into groups. Caste is a natural order, I can perform one duty in social life and you another; you can govern a country, and I can mend a pair of old shoes, but that is no reason why you are greater than I, for, can you mind my shoes? Caste is good. That is the only natural way of solving life. (Ibid: 245-246)’
The publications of Mahatma Gandhi in 1920s and 1930s contain passionate polemics about the doctrine of untouchability as a ‘horrible and terrible’ stain on the Hindu faith, as an ‘evil’ and an ‘insult to religion and humanity’. His insistence on ‘religious’ solutions to the problems of untouchability lay behind his adoption of the term ‘Harijan’ (meaning, son of Hari, i.e., God). This term became widely used since 1930s though in recent times, its use has been condemned by self-styled representatives of low-caste groups.

Since the 1970s, many campaigners have sought to replace it with the word Dalit (the oppressed) which has connotations of modernity and militant class struggle rather than pious self-effacement, implied by the term Harijan. After Independence in the year 1947, important Hindu temples were declared open to Harijans. Even today, law and public policy are said to be anything but ‘casteless’. But there are flaws and inconsistencies in this procedure. For example, in the Punjab, the members of the Khatik caste were deemed eligible for Scheduled Caste benefits. But in the neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, this same community was classed as ‘forward’, rather than as ‘backward’. So attempts were made in some States to ‘de-Schedule’ several of the broadest regional Harijan communities. Even now, some of the leading national news papers publish long columns of ‘matrimonial classifieds’ asking for brides or grooms of a particular community or caste. Marriages between people of substantially different caste background are still as rare in the countryside as they are in the cities. Further, in both towns and nucleated village settlements there are still older housing areas containing single-caste residential streets. These include the ‘Brahmin-only’ streets surrounding many Hindu temples as well as the
concentrations of impoverished Harijan-untouchables who still live apart from the so-called ‘clean’-caste populations in their own separate hamlets and urban slum enclaves.

Thus the making of caste-society in India has involved a sequence of complex but intelligible changes, notably in the areas of religion, state power and material environment.

The present position:

Even after fifty years of Independence, Caste continues to be a major theme in Indian politics. Many political parties try to make caste an issue in the electoral arena and cash in. They denounce it as a social evil and attack others for being ‘backward-looking’ and ‘casteist’. Many aspects of the contemporary caste-life in India echo the principles found in classical Indian religious scriptures. But in the West, neither race nor class can be related to any comparable body of codified texts and teachings. For all its diversity and its points of comparison with schemes of social differentiation to be found in other parts of the world, Caste stands alone, as a mode of thought and action. This distinctiveness is undeniable, even though caste certainly has much in common with other complex ‘invented traditions’, most notably those of nationhood and ethno-religious community. India’s nationalist and communal religious ideologies have both interacted with the ideas and experiences of caste, sometime reinforcing their claims and sometime challenging them, but never fully overriding or replacing them.

The Government, in the name of creating a casteless, secular society, and to compensate the injustice meted out by the so-called higher castes to the oppressed, downtrodden, economically poor, educationally backward masses of India, created a
plethora of ‘new’ castes. These new castes are classified as Backward Classes, Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Tribal people are included in the Scheduled Tribes. These new castes are ‘protected’ by the Quota System or Reservation Policy for widening their educational and employment opportunities. The Tamil Nadu Government has created one more Community called the ‘Most Backward Class/Community’ so as to benefit certain other groups. These people are preferred to all other groups for getting admissions to Schools, Colleges and Universities, and also for getting selected for different types of jobs. The higher classes have been called the ‘Forward Classes’; and people belonging to this group face a tough challenge in what is called an ‘open competition’. This ‘reservation policy’ has been in vogue for quite some time and will continue indefinitely for some more years. No deadline has been set for this policy officially. The resultant picture is that merit gets the back seat and people using their rights of reservation are benefited at all levels, however unqualified they may otherwise be.

**What is the solution?**

In the light of this, we have to come to certain conclusions and offer viable solutions to the problems created by a wrong understanding and application of the principle of Caste in India. What has been there for centuries cannot be undone in a day or two. There is no magic wand by which we can create a ‘casteless’ society overnight. We have to take the horn by his bulls and try to solve the problem. It is rather, a problem with our own understanding and interpretation of Caste. There is nothing wrong as such with the concepts of Caste as understood and practised by the wise of yore. As pointed out earlier, one has to draw a distinction between Jāti (caste by birth) and Varṇa (caste by profession). Indians wherever they live, should understand that there is no clash of interests between one Varṇa and another or...
between one Jāti and another. So long as one can identify himself or herself as belonging to a particular birth-group and believe that they belong to a ‘pure’ origin, there is nothing wrong, so long as they do not harm others verbally or physically on the ground that they belong to a lower Jāti and that they are not equal in social, religious and other matters. One should not and need not make much fuss about this factor. Then the division of society into the four Varṇas and the distribution of labour is what should really cause worry to many. Even here, there need be no discord or dispute so long as the social needs are provided by different people who are proficient in different fields. A man of Brahmin Jāti, for example, may be proud of his lineage and parentage; but he may, by virtue of his educational qualifications and aptitude become an engineer or marine biologist and contribute to those departments of study. He may if he so desires, join military forces and combat the enemies. He may still retain his Brahmin identity.

Towards the end of the 20th century and on the threshold of the 21st century, inter-caste, inter-racial and inter-continental marriages have become quite common. A Brahmin boy may, for instance, marry a non-brahmin girl. A Hindu girl may marry a Muslim boy. Or an Indian may marry a French or English. In a majority of cases, there may be a cultural and commensal change. Those who were vegetarians are fast becoming non-vegetarians and vice-versa. Drinking wine is no longer a taboo in many Hindu families. Some do it openly and others, due to some compulsions, do it secretly. This is to point out that the original divisions of society into Jāti and Varṇa are fast losing their relevance and sanctity. The worst affected parties are the parents of the orthodox Hindu bent of mind. They are unable to make their daughters and sons stick to their old identities and habits. Nor are they able to live away from them. They have to ultimately yield to the wishes of their children, and be content that at least
they themselves are able to preserve their identity. On the top of this, many Hindu ascetics (saṃnyāsins) are crossing the seas and visiting foreign countries for preaching their religion and philosophy to the Hindus living abroad, which was once considered highly unorthodox and objectionable. Therefore there is change everywhere – in the thinking of people about caste, community, religious and philosophical values, and the like. Nothing is wrong so long as we do not wrong others. Nothing is objectionable so long as there is no compulsion, hatred, animosity, ill-will and hypocrisy. The world is created by God in a wonderful and mysterious way. Diversity is the Art of Nature; but Unity is the Heart of God. This is what the Rigveda (I.164.46) declared ages ago: ‘ekān saca vrīrā bahuṣdhaḥ vadanti’ (What exists is One but wise men call it by different names). Let people practice what they think is right and good for them; but let them not fight in the name of religion, philosophy, race, caste, class, community, faction, cult, group or political affiliations. All have their own place, their own grace and role to play in making the world beautiful and habitable. Let there be an understanding of the basic values of life. Let there be sympathy for the under-privileged people of society. Let there be the spirit of cooperation and help. This again is the prayer of a Vedic bard:

‘saṃgacchadhvaṁ saṁvadadhvaṁ saṁ vo manānsi jānatāṁ

(Come together; speak to one another; let your minds be of one accord!)