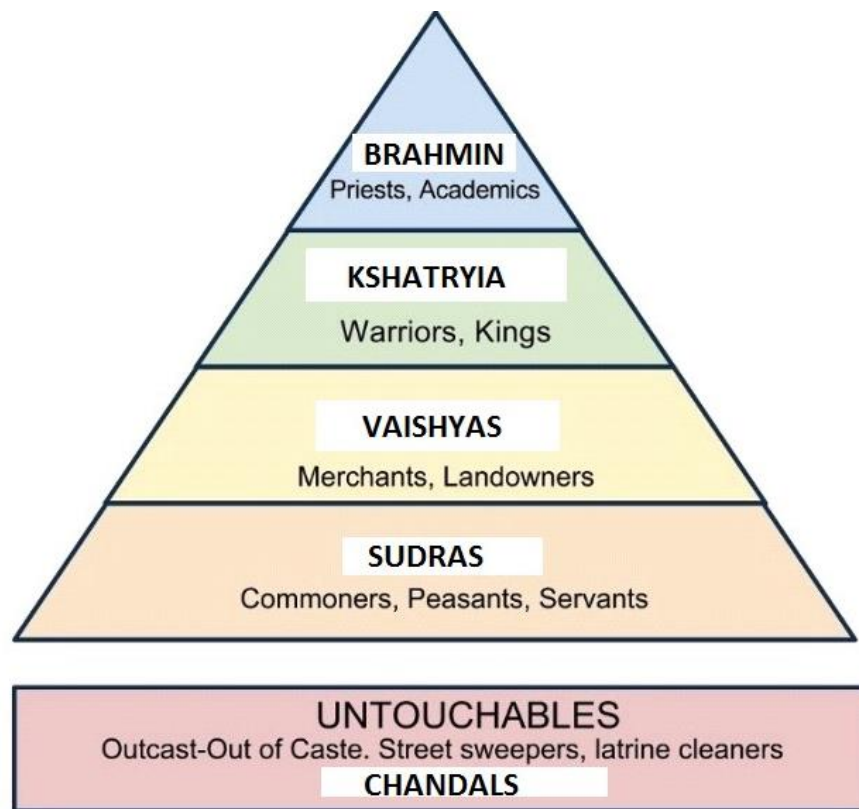


Curses of the Caste System



INTRODUCTION

The Caste System has found its inroads into Iowa from the countries of origin which mainly include India, Bhutan and Nepal – all in South Asia.

Although, progressive-minded Hindus claim they are free of this social evil, it is still practiced covertly or overtly. Discrimination on the basis of caste, or “untouchability”, would include the practice of banishing entry of Sudras into the so called higher-caste homes and an obsession with supremacy of birth - which still continues unabated.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that some changes are taking place particularly among the educated mass who do realize that Casteism is an inhuman practice. There is a tendency to break the barriers. For instance, there have been cases of inter-caste marriages, dining together in public places, visiting temples and some limited entry into the houses of the so-called upper caste Hindus.

It is seen that the problem among those so-called high-caste educated Hindus who denounce the caste system is their conservative parents and relatives who do not want to break with the past. By any standards, a human being is a human being. It is needed for our society to wake up from this long slumber and help bring an end to this infamous caste system.

ORIGINS OF CASTE – A HISTORY LESSON

The four-fold division of the society came down from the time of Lord Krishna, the Hindu deity who was on Earth some 3,500 years ago, according to the Vedic Calendar. The subsequent literature talks about a four-fold order of the human society based on occupation and attributes.

The upper class consist of the *Brahmanas* who are seers, scientists, teachers, politicians, and the like.

While next in line are the *Kshatriyas* who are defendants of the society in the form of soldiers, policeman and guards.

Below them are the *Vaishyas* or the producers like the farmers, agricultural and industrial workers.

The *Sudras*, or the lowest in order, are service providers like tailors, blacksmith, cobblers, carpenters, etc.

Sudras are “untouchables” to the higher three caste group. The Vaishyas are also “untouchables” to the upper two castes. There is also some discrimination of the Brahmins on the Kshatriyas, too.

Outside this four-fold order is another group who are deemed as outcaste; they are called Chandals, and they live like scavengers eating dog meat and staying beyond the city limits.

What had been overlooked from then to now is the fact that Krishna himself confirms many times in the Bhagavad Gita (the holy book of the Hindus) that He composed the four groups on the basis of action performed or occupation, and attributes or qualities.

However, in the course of time, because of many social factors, the four-fold division took the form of an evil caste system which was largely followed on the basis of birth and discriminatory inhuman practices - contrary to what it was originally intended. The discrimination prevailed vertically, as per the strata of social order with the Sudras being the hardest hit.

BASIS OF SOCIAL DIVISION

We know Krishna, the exponent of the four-fold division's agenda, for establishing this order to ensure effective performance of society's duty. Originally, Krishna never proposed untouchability, discrimination, harassment and social violence. It must also be taken into account that Krishna never proposed birth as a factor either.

Words coming out from the lips of Krishna as they appear in the [Bhagavad Gita](#) are as follows:

“I composed the four groups in the society on the basis of quality and action.

The one who sees God in a cow, elephant, dog, chandal and a priest is a true Gnani [Wise].

Anyone is born as a Sudra. He raises to higher platforms with his samskaras [deeds]. The one who reads the vedh [Scripture – Holy Book] is a vipra [reader of the vedh]. The one who knows the Brahma [absolute] is a Brahman.”

This should be a guiding light for those upper class Hindus who are defying the very principles enshrined in their own scriptures and inhumanly suppressing their own brothers and sisters with a false notion of supremacy on the grounds of caste.

EVILS OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

The evils of the caste system have penetrated deep into the hearts of society in and around the Indian subcontinent because of the age-old cultural misconception.

First, there is discrimination against the Sudras which is characterized by the dehumanizing practice of untouchability. A lower caste person cannot come near or touch a higher caste person let alone touch food or other items of consumption. They are not allowed to enter into the house of the higher one or such other places like sacred temples. Inter-caste marriages are strictly banned. Presence of such cases are severely dealt with.

INSTANCES OF CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN IOWA

- A young man of so-called higher group married a Sudra girl in Iowa recently. The relatives of the young man came into his house, scolded him and asked him to leave the house immediately because they were now untouchables. Although the man's parents were willing to let his newly-married son and daughter-in-law live with them, the so-called representatives of the caste-perpetuating society would not let them do that.

- In another case, a Sudra requested a priest to do the birth rituals of his newly born cousin to which the priest out rightly denied - saying he would not do that in a Sudra's house.
- A young, educated Brahmin invites his friends, including some Sudras, to his marriage party. But because of his parents' and relatives' pressure, he sends a second notice to them saying not to come to his house or participate in the marriage rituals.
- Just a year ago, a Sudra person decides to buy a house in the Des Moines area, where there were Brahmins living in the locality. Malicious rumors sprang up saying a Sudra is moving nearby, and he should not be allowed in our locality. The said Sudra decided not to buy the house and moved elsewhere.
- Recently, a Sudra-labeled individual went to the funeral rites of his friend's father with monetary support and gifts for the family. The people hosting the rituals called out from the place where the rituals were being performed denying them entry - in an insulting manner.

These are few that are known to me. There could be other similar incidences which may have gone unreported. The cause of the evils related to Casteism are because of vested interests, greed, lust for power, conceit and animalistic nature of the so-called guardians of the society themselves.

Historically, the political systems in most parts of the world have been feudalistic, and this is very prevalent in Hindu-cultural majority nations. This created a breeding ground for caste-based discrimination, and they continue to flourish even now in the 21st Century. The suppression has continued to grow because the orthodox group has asserted the birth factor as their right against the lower caste. Thus, the situation is of the very custodians of the social order openly defying the very basis on which the system was founded.

RELEVANCE IN OTHER SOCIETY

The social fabric in all other societies of the world, consciously or unconsciously, is very much based on this four-fold order. Societies flourish because we have those taking charge of our responsibilities. But the big difference is that for any kind of occupation, there is dignity, social harmony, intermingling of the caste groups and freedom to undertake any trade on the basis of personal choice and capabilities. A cobbler in United States enjoys the same dignity as the president. This is, however, missing in the countries of origin of the system where there is rampant discrimination and prevalence of the evils in the society.

HOW TO SPOT THE PRACTICE OF CASTEISM

- An open manifestation of Casteism may be viewed where Hindus congregate. Do they only entertain the upper class Hindus although they claim it is a space for all Nepali-speaking Bhutanese? Upon further observation, do they provide services to all Bhutanese or do they fail to designate priests to the houses of the Vaishyas and Sudras - be it for death rituals, marriage, birth or other social ceremonies. (*This is happening despite the fact that all Hindus have exactly the same ceremonial procedures. But, the situation is that the implementation of the caste discrimination has effectively led to social segregation.*)
- In any social function where the Brahmins and Kshatriyas offer tea or snacks to the guests present, they will make arrangements for the Vaishyas and Sudras to sit away from them – for fear of touching.
- Walk a Sudra friend to a Brahmin's house and observe how they would keep him or her away from the main room or kitchen. As an example, once during a festival, a person deemed as lower-caste had visited a friend's house hoping to chat with them. But to his dismay, the friend and another guest, who were both Brahmins, stayed in the kitchen enjoying a drink while they made this person stay away from the room and brought him a drink outside. (*This humiliating incident is common place.*)
- If circumstances require cultural rituals, the Brahmin priest would not come to the house of a Vaishya or a Sudra.
- The caste barrier is most visible when someone dies in the house. Sudras and Vaishyas would not be allowed to come near the dead body nor the people performing death rituals. However, they will still accept money and other gifts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the sensitivity and the extremity of human rights violations accruing from the practice of Casteism, it is imperative for those who can make a difference to lay concerted efforts to emancipate human kind from this dehumanization. Besides the incidences highlighted above, there are many exclusionary instances taking place on a daily basis.

Theoretically, it must be made clear that practice of this system has been recognized as a crime against humanity in countries like India and Nepal. And, its manifestation constitutionally abolished. It is also reported that other countries affected by this or where there have been large settlements of Indian diaspora are also taking measures to legally end this practice. However, it has only been in name because the discrimination continues as ever before without much sign of betterment for the suppressed.

In the context of Iowa and the United States towards achieving racial harmony, peaceful coexistence and a humane environment and equal dignity for all, it must be worthwhile to consider the following:

- Undertake a survey on the cases of caste discrimination in Iowa and the United States.
- Approach law makers to denounce the caste system in all its forms, and proclaim or otherwise officially recognize policies that safeguard the rights of all minorities with a mention of the so-called lower-caste Hindus.
- Work to make Iowa a caste-free and discrimination-free state through systematic monitoring, documenting, advocating and establishing up a state-level board to undertake that function effectively.
- Provide Human Rights Education on the basis of the US Constitution and the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the need to refrain from caste-based discrimination or other inhuman treatment.
- Set up a network that would allow for speedy and convenient reporting of the caste-based discrimination in the state.

This article was authored by a member of the South Asian community residing Iowa. The name is not provided in order to protect anonymity and any castigation upon this person and family members for writing this piece - giving "outsiders" a glimpse into the practice of Casteism in Iowa.