

Competitive Exams: Main Features of Caste System Varna & Jati

Varna and Jati

According to the ancient Hindu scriptures, there are four “varnas.” The Bhagavad Gita says varnas are decided based on Guna and Karma. Manusmriti and some other shastras mention four varnas: The Brahmins (teachers, scholars and priests), the Kshatriyas (kings and warriors), the Vaishyas (agriculturists and traders), and Shudras (service providers and artisans). This theoretical system postulated Varna categories as ideals and explained away the reality of thousands of endogamous Jatis actually prevailing in the country as being the historical products of intermarriage among the “pure” Varnas-Varna Sankara. All those, including foreigners, tribals and nomads, who did not subscribe to the norms of the Hindu society were contagious and untouchables. Another group excluded from the main society was called Parjanya or Antyaja. This group of former “untouchables” (self described as Dalits) i.e.downtrodden, was considered either the lower section of Shudras or outside the caste system altogether. Passages from scriptures such as Manusmriti indicate that the varna system was originally non-hereditary.

Several critics of Hinduism state that the caste system is rooted in the varna system mentioned in the ancient Hindu scriptures. However, many groups, such as ISKCON, consider the modern Indian caste system and the varna system as two distinct concepts. Many European scholars from the colonial era regarded the Manusmriti as the “law book” of the Hindus, and thus concluded that the caste system is a part of Hinduism, an assertion that is rejected by many Hindu scholars, who state that it is an anachronistic social practice, not a religious one.

Although many Hindu scriptures contain passages that can be interpreted to sanction the caste system, they also contain indications that the caste system is not an essential part of Hinduism. The Vedas place very little importance on the caste system, mentioning caste only once (in the Purush Sukta) out of tens of thousands of verses. B. R. Ambedkar believed that even this is a much later interpolation and gave evidence to support his conclusion. In the Vedic period, there was no prohibition against the Shudras listening to the Vedas or participating in any religious rite.

In Early Evidence for Caste in South India, George L. Hart stated that “the earliest Tamil texts show the existence of what seems definitely to be caste, but which antedates the Brahmins and the Hindu orthodoxy” He believes that the origins of the caste system can be seen in the “belief system that developed with the agricultural civilization” and was later profoundly influenced by “the Brahmins and the Brahmanical religion” These early Tamil texts also outline the concept of

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equality. Saint Valluvar has stated “pirapokkum ella uyirkkum” which means “all are equal at birth” Likewise, Saint Auvaiyaar has stated that there are only two castes in the world: Those who contribute positively and those who contribute negatively. From these, it can be inferred that the caste system is more of a socio-economic class system.