Caste System in India

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Introduction

The Indian caste system is a system of social stratification and social restriction in India in which communities are defined by thousands of endogamous hereditary groups called Jatis.
The Jatis were grouped formally by the Brahminical texts under the four well known categories (the varnas): viz Brahmins (scholars, teachers, fire priests), Kshatriyas (kings, warriors, law enforcers, administrators), Vaishyas (agriculturists, cattle raisers, traders, bankers), Shudras (artisans, craftsmen, service providers). Certain people like foreigners, nomads, forest tribes and the chandalas (who dealt with disposal of the dead) were excluded altogether and treated as untouchables. Although generally identified with Hinduism, the caste system was also observed among followers of other religions in the Indian subcontinent, including some groups of Muslims and Christians, most likely through cultural assimilation over centuries.
History

- There is no universally accepted theory about the origins of the Indian caste system. The Indian classes and Iranian classes ("pistras") show similarity, wherein the priests are Brahmins, the warriors are Kshatriya, the merchants are Vaishya, and the artisans are Shudras.

- From the Bhakti school, the view is that castes were originally created by Krishna. "According to the three modes of material nature and the work associated with them, the four divisions of human society are created."
Social Reforms

- There have been challenges to the caste system from the time of Buddha, till then several thinkers discussed and opposed this Jatis/Varna system. We will discuss here only three thinkers Jyotiba Phule, Mahatama Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh.
Jyotiba Phule

**Born:** 11 April, 1827  
**Died:** 28 November, 1890
Contributions

- Jyotiba Phule was one of the prominent social reformers of the nineteenth century India. He led the movement against the prevailing caste-restrictions in India. He revolted against the domination of the Brahmins and for the rights of peasants and other low-caste fellow. Jyotiba Phule was believed to be the first Hindu to start an orphanage for the unfortunate children.

**Attack on the sanctity of Vedas**

Jyotirao Phule's critique of the caste system began with his attack on the Vedas, the most fundamental texts of Hinduism. He considered Vedas as 'idle fantasies' as 'palpably absurd legends'. He considered Vedas a 'form of false consciousness'.
Satya Shodhak Samaj

- After tracing the history of the Brahmin domination in India, Jyotirao blamed the Brahmins for framing the weird and inhuman laws. He concluded that the laws were made to suppress the "shudras" and rule over them. In 1873, Jyotiba Phule formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth). The purpose of the organization was to liberate the people of lower-castes from the suppression of the Brahmins. The membership was open to all and the available evidence proves that some Jews were admitted as members. In 1876 there were 316 members of the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj'. In 1868, in order to give the lower-caste people more powers Jyotirao decided to construct a common bathing tank outside his house. He also wished to dine with all, regardless of their caste.
Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

- **Born:** 2 October 1869
- **Died:** 30 January 1948
Contributions

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a pre-eminent political and ideological leader of India during the Indian independence movement. As a practitioner of *ahimsa*, Gandhi swore to speak the truth and advocated that others do the same. Mahatma Gandhi is one of the most fascinating personalities of the 20th century. The way in which he stood up against discrimination in South Africa and in India using non-violence combined with the theory he developed on his methods make him one of the most important examples in the history of humanity. He has been the inspiration for many people including Martin Luther King.
M.K Gandhi is widely portrayed in and outside India as the main champion of the cause of the Untouchables (Dalits). It is, however, far from the truth. Mahatma Gandhi called them "Harijans" (children of God) although that term is now considered patronizing and the term Dalit (downtrodden) is the more commonly used. Gandhi's contribution toward the emancipation of the untouchables is still debated, especially in the commentary of his contemporary Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who frequently saw Gandhi's activities as detrimental to the cause of upliftment of his people.
Support of Caste-System

- There is no doubt that he wanted the untouchability to be abolished but he, at the same time, was a strong supporter of the caste system. Supporting the caste system he said: "I believe that caste has saved Hinduism from disintegration." He also said, "To destroy the caste system and adopt the Western European social system means that Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation, which is the soul of the caste system. The hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder." (Fazlul Huq, Gandhi: Saint or Sinner (Bangalore; 1992), p. 68.)
Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

- **Born:** April 14, 1891
- **Died:** December 6, 1956
The Person

Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar also known as Babasaheb, was an Indian jurist, political leader, Buddhist activist, philosopher, thinker, anthropologist, historian, orator, prolific writer, economist, scholar, editor, revolutionary and a revivalist for Buddhism in India. He was also the Chairman of the Drafting Committee of Indian Constitution. Born into a poor Mahar (considered an Untouchable caste) family, Ambedkar spent his whole life fighting against social discrimination, the system of Chaturvarna — the categorization of Hindu society into four varnas — and the Hindu caste system. He converted to Buddhism and is also credited with providing a spark for the conversion of hundreds of thousands of untouchables to Theravada Buddhism. Ambedkar was posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award, in 1990.
Facts about Dr B.R. Ambedkar

- In Indian context, to fight against untouchability and for equality of all was a very challenging task. The attitudes of disappointment amongst dalits were very deep rooted because of their social, economical and political exploitation from the centuries together. Because of these considerations, it was very challenging to motivate them to stand up to fight against their exploitation and for their self-respect.
Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar spent his whole life in this challenging task relentlessly. Dalits as other part of Indian society were themselves divided in to many castes and sub castes because of ignorance, backwardness and given social structure.
Movement against Caste-System

According to Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar the caste system in India has been a divisive instrument from the very beginning. He had a firm view that till this caste system continues, the outcastes liberation is not possible. This was the reason that he started a strong movement against caste system.
His Legacy

To fight against the disparities in society and discrimination against dalits, he felt a need of cultural revolution and called the out caste people to come forward, get education, get united and fight against injustice. He also motivated them not to wait for someone to come for their rescue but to fight against this slavery themselves.
His Contribution

What is absolutely clear in this centenary year is that Dr Ambedkar represented, in the truly national sense, the profound side of the socio-political struggle which formed an irrepressible part of the nationalist movement, although it was not often understood (by conservatism and orthodoxy in politics) to be such. Politically moderate, he tended towards radicalism and uncompromising struggle in the social arena in which he generalised many battles. His lifelong concern with religion, morality and justice in the idealistic sense was marked by a restlessly serious attempt to get the intellectual, social and political measure of these things. He did not believe in class analysis, but intuitively and intellectually grasped the link between caste and class in India.
Bhagat Singh

- **Born:** 28 September 1907
- **Died:** 23 March 1931
The Person

Bhagat Singh finds a place not only among India’s but world’s greatest revolutionaries. His life, work, struggle and the way he kissed and embraced death bring him in league of world’s great revolutionaries such as Socrates, Bruno, Joan of Arc, Che Guevara etc. His martyrdom will continue to inspire many generations of revolutionaries to sacrifice their lives in defence of truth, justice and freedom. Bhagat Singh is widely hailed as a martyr as a result of his execution at the hands of oppressors and, as such, he is often referred to as “Shaheed (Martyr) Bhagat Singh.”
On Dalits

Bhagat Singh writes, “You are the real proletariat...get organised.” This is a great lesson to the Indian left who has never taken into account the social question in determining the class who would provide vanguard sections of revolution. The dalits are economically and socially the most oppressed sections of Indian society. He says “Bring revolution through social movements and then be prepared for political and economic revolutions.” This is yet another important formulation of Bhagat Singh. Hence Bhagat Singh takes the position that they are the real proletariats.
Conclusion

Right from Jotiba Phule to Dr Ambedkar all have stressed upon the importance of social revolution in bringing about the final revolutions in political and economic sectors. Bhagat Singh who otherwise devoted major part of his short life for socialism and national liberation. In conclusion we can say that Caste-System in India is a important issue.