

# A Pragmatic Approach to the Conceptual Tangle of Caste

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Caste endogamy increases by many times the chances getting genetic disorders.

Photo, Lewis H. Hine, 1924

## What Population Genetics Tells us about Caste

Though caste is defined as an endogamous social unit its historical existence as an endogamous unit in the subcontinent has been challenged by modern population genetics research which shows that caste endogamy became strict only about 1900 years ago before which intermarriage between different populations was widespread. But the mixing of populations started about 4200 years ago when inter-group marriages occurred even among the most isolated tribal groups.[\[i\]](#) The practice of marrying within one's own caste seems to coincide with the writing of *Manusmriti*, the book of religious codes which prohibits marriage between varnas and castes.[\[ii\]](#)

The existence of castes as endogamous units is of a relatively recent origin. But religious myths about the origin of varna system – like the one that occurs in Purusha Sukta, said to be one of the last hymns to be added to the *Rig Veda*,[\[iii\]](#) which equates the creation of varnas with the creation of mankind – have deeply influenced caste beliefs and prejudices though caste (*jati*) is not mentioned anywhere in the *Rig Veda* and occurs only in texts composed centuries after the *Rig Veda*.[\[iv\]](#) These caste prejudices, coded in religious narratives and turned into religious laws, and responsible for a relatively strict practice of caste endogamy, have also been responsible for social evils like caste discrimination and caste atrocities.

Caste prejudice is better understood as a psychological rather than a sociological phenomenon. But the consideration of caste as a social fact rather than as a presupposition (a product of the mind) which determines social relations and the creation of endogamous communities has strengthened prejudices

and increased acts of discrimination and violence especially towards the Dalits. So it is important to emphasize the fact that caste prejudice is nothing more than a psychological problem shared by individuals and communities which goes on to create the social reality of caste.

Castes which are numerous are part of a hierarchy of graded inequality called varna system made up of the four varnas, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, and the excluded category of Dalits. (But it must be noted that Manu does not recognize the fifth category of Dalits and sees them as belonging to the fourth *varna* of Shudras.)

But interestingly caste prejudice, supported by this hierarchical structure, seems to be a problem without *depth*—there is no reason which can adequately explain why certain castes are, or have been, held in contempt. Sociologists have tried to explain the prejudice on the basis of diet ('they eat, or used to eat, beef'), occupation ('they do, or did, menial jobs considered unclean') or their past religious affiliation ('they were Buddhists who antagonized the Brahmins'). But all these explanations are rationalizations of prejudice retrospectively constructed to make the prejudice meaningful (because Brahmins themselves ate beef in ancient times, did menial jobs without losing their high-caste status and called Buddha, in as early as the first millennium A.D., an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu[[vi](#)]). Most caste prejudices in religious texts are stated without any explanation and in the form of affirmative sentences; verse 9:32 of *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, states that women, Vaishyas and Shudras are born of evil wombs.[[vii](#)] Caste prejudice therefore is an irrational notion and an affect of contempt which seeks to categorize and exclude certain communities in order to affirm the categories of pure and chosen communities.

A prejudiced mind is one driven to anxiety by *the different* and it seeks to overcome this anxiety by dehumanizing or demonizing that which is different in terms of caste, gender, colour, ethnicity and religion. Caste prejudice arises out of a search for a metaphysical ground for the status of people in society and a permanent law that governs this status. Ancient Brahmins posited varna hierarchy as the cosmic law, and caste prejudice is the internalization of this hierarchy and the effect of deriving one's social status from it. By identifying oneself in the varna hierarchy one attempts to render oneself pure and superior by imagining and seeking social consensus for the impurity and inferiority of the other—the other being anyone below one's hierarchy in the varna system. If

this is the religious basis for social hierarchy, there are other popularly determined and locally varying hierarchies which can be ascertained through empirical methods.

Caste system is sustained by the existence of caste prejudice and its distribution among people in the society and among people of past societies—and people who no longer exist have left behind texts, rituals and practices which are either supportive of, or are opposed to, caste prejudice. A majority of classical Sanskrit texts (if we exclude the vast body of philosophical literature of both the *astika* and *nastika* traditions a majority of which are, interestingly, atheistic and antagonistic to caste-system) uphold the caste system or at least mention the supremacy of the Brahmins. But this is not surprising as Brahmin men, who were the only ones allowed to learn, speak and write in Sanskrit, were writing these texts for other Brahmin men. But women and non-Brahmin men who speak Prakrit in some of the literary texts are also made to declare the superiority of Brahmins and vow to uphold and protect their superior status. That this ideology of Brahmin supremacism can be found even in *Cilappatikaram* a Tamil epic written by Ilanko Atikal, a Jaina poet, is what makes the power of priestly caste over the production of a certain kind of textual reality really palpable.

The intensity of caste prejudice is determined by its distribution: more the number of people who harbour the prejudice the stronger it is. Therefore, caste prejudice is more of a horizontal problem of distribution rather than a vertical problem with 'roots' in the material world, and because it is a horizontal problem it must be possible, especially in the conditions created by capitalism, to eliminate it by confronting it squarely and rationally. (Those who see caste as an ideology which is written into the very structure of modern social institutions would of course dismiss this as a naïve position.) A man harbours caste prejudice because he thinks everybody is secretly prejudiced, and when others voice this prejudice it validates his own. If nobody shares his prejudice, or if he finds others condemning it, there is a good chance that he would let go of it. The materiality of caste exists in the form of texts and textual interpolations—texts which are themselves compilations of, or appropriations from, a vast range of sources including oral narratives of women, 'lower' caste bards, non-vedic/desi epics as well as pre-vedic gods, totems, myths and legends. This process, identified as Desification, is always hidden or

downplayed while the opposing concept of Sanskritization, which stands for non-Brahmin castes adopting 'Brahminical' practices to get a higher social status (as if vegetarianism, general hygiene, love of scholarship etc., are the exclusive preserve of the Brahmins) is played up. But the materiality of caste mainly manifests in the form of endogamous marriages, religio-social practices of inclusion and exclusion and rituals of purity and pollution.

Since caste prejudice is distributed widely finding the roots of prejudice in ancient religious/ legal/ literary texts is not helpful in fighting it. Caste prejudice arose at a certain point in time just as irrationally, and contingently, as prejudices arise today but it became part of the Indian civilization because the prejudice was made the backbone of the Brahminical religion—by giving it cosmic validation in Vedic texts and by making it part of the religio-legal system that we find recorded in the Dharmashastras. Caste system in the form of endogamous marriage and imposition of restrictions on sociality is the institutionalization of caste prejudice—and once institutionalized the institutions of marriage and family propagate, reproduce and distribute the irrational prejudice by linking them with other baseless prejudices like a caste- and clan-consanguinity, and related practices like restriction of sociality within bounds of consanguinity and maintaining of the 'purity' of caste through caste endogamy.

So caste prejudice is 'deeply-rooted' only in the sense that it is rooted in mythological and 'historical' texts and has religious validation but castes are not endogamous units in any real, material sense—a caste does not indicate a historical cluster of relationships uncontaminated by marriages outside the caste, nor does the *gotra* (clan) within the caste represent a pure patrilineal line descending from an ancestor as described in caste and clan mythologies.

Caste system therefore is better understood as a 'widely-rooted' problem: widely rooted because people assume there are objective, material bases for their prejudice. All 'generative' accounts of this prejudice – like the cosmic creation of the society into four occupational varnas; the pollution of body by coming into contact with leather, cattle carcass, dirt etc.; the association of certain castes with criminality, sloth, ignorance, darkness, excessive sexuality etc. – are themselves narratives of prejudice which seek to obscure the fact that caste-stigma was (and unfortunately still is) attached at birth and determined what one did and not the other way round, that is, one's occupation

did not determine one's social status. Only the privileged *dwijas* or twice-borns (*i.e.* Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya males), according to the Dharmashastras, had the option of determining their social status through their occupation while women and non-*dwijas* were condemned to accept the irredeemable status of servitude. Caste prejudice also requires the metaphysical concepts of karma theory and transmigration of souls to explain itself, and so if caste system can be said to be rooted in anything it is in the Hindu religion.

### **Medical Consequences of Caste Endogamy (or why inter-caste marriages produce healthy children)**

Caste endogamy often means marriages take place between closely related individuals (cousins, relatives, members of one's own caste). If a population practices caste endogamy for many generations the probability of genetic relatedness increases, and this coupled with chances of individuals having a common ancestor (autozygous allele), would lead to the accumulation of many harmful alleles (homozygous alleles; an allele being one of a number of alternative forms of a gene, and homozygous alleles being a pair identical alleles, dominant or recessive, for a trait) in the gene pool. The accumulation of harmful alleles results in numerous genetic diseases leading to sterility, increased mortality and reduced fitness. In contrast, marrying a genetically unrelated individual (inter-caste, inter-faith, inter-racial marriages) results in increased fitness, better adaptability and greater resistance to diseases (heterosis or hybrid vigour).

In conditions of caste endogamy with every generation the heterozygosity of alleles (possession of one allele each for a particular trait: Aa) will be reduced to half of that of the parent, and homozygosity of the offspring (possession of two dominant or recessive alleles for a trait: AA and aa) will increase by a quarter of that of the parent. That is, half of the parent's heterozygous alleles (Aa) are transferred to the offspring whose homozygous dominant and recessive alleles (AA and aa) have increased by a quarter each. [\[viii\]](#)

Let us consider the example of a hypothetical plant. After the first generation of self-fertilization a plant produces  $\frac{1}{4}$  AA,  $\frac{1}{2}$  Aa and  $\frac{1}{4}$  aa. Here the heterozygosity (Aa) of the plant is reduced to half of that of the parent. And since only Aa genotypes can again produce heterozygous plants, after the second

generation of self-fertilization heterozygous alleles will be reduced to  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the first generation. And in the third generation, they will be reduced to  $\frac{1}{8}$  and so on.... On the other hand, the plant's homozygous alleles will increase by  $\frac{1}{4}$  ( $\frac{1}{4}$  AA and  $\frac{1}{4}$  aa) in every generation. After some time, the plant population will lose all heterozygosity and will consist largely of homozygous individuals.[\[viii\]](#)

Caste endogamy often leads to the accumulation of homozygous recessive and dominant alleles in human population, and accumulation of homozygous recessive alleles is known to cause diseases like Cystic fibrosis, Adenosine deaminase deficiency, Albinism (type 1), Phenyl ketonuria, Sickle cell disease and Tay-Sachs disease.[\[ix\]](#) And increased homozygous dominant alleles cause diseases like Aniridia, Achondroplasia, Marfan syndrome, Osteoporosis, Huntington diseases and Neurofibromatosis.[\[x\]](#)

A perfect example of the dangers of endogamous inbreeding can be seen in the Onge tribe of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, considered one of the oldest tribes in the world. Once a tribe of hundreds of thousands of individuals living in and defending the forest, it is now reduced to a mere hundred individuals due to increased homozygosity resulting in sterility and inbreeding depression.

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[\[i\]](#) Moorjani, Priya, Kumarasamy Thangaraj, Nick Patterson, Mark Lipson, Po-Ru Loh, Periyasamy Govindaraj, Bonnie Berger, David Reich and Lalji Singh, [“Genetic Evidence for Recent Population Mixture in India,”](#) *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, Volume 93, Issue 3, 5 September 2013, pp. 429-430. Print.

[\[ii\]](#) *Ibid*, p.430

[\[iii\]](#) Doniger, Wendy. *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*, Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2014, pp.29-30. Print.

“...the fact that it [Purusha Sukta] is one of the latest hymns in the Rig Veda is evident from its reference to the three Vedas.”

Colebrooke, H.T. *Miscellaneous Essays*, London: Wm. H. Allen, 1837, pp.309-310.

Print.

“That remarkable hymn [Purusha Sukta] is in language, metre, and style, very different from the rest of the prayers with which it is associated. It has a decidedly more modern tone; and must have been composed after the *Sanskrit* language had been refined, and its grammar and rhythm perfected. The internal evidence which it furnishes, serves to demonstrate the important fact, that the compilation of the *Vedas*, in their present arrangement, took place after the *Sanskrit* tongue has advanced, from the rustic and irregular dialect in which the multitude of hymns and prayers of the Veda was composed, to the polished and sonorous language in which the mythological poems, sacred and profane (*puranas* and *cavyas*), have been written.”

Müller, Max. *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature*, London: Williams & Norgate, 1859, pp. 570-571. Print.

“There can be little doubt, for instance, that the 90th hymn of the 10th book [Purusha Sukta] is modern both in its character and in its diction. (...) It mentions the three seasons in the order of the *Vasanta*, spring; *Grishma*, summer; and *Sarad*, autumn; it contains the only passage in the *Rigveda* where the four castes are enumerated. The evidence of language for the modern date of this composition is equally strong. *Grishma*, for instance, the name for the hot season, does not occur in any other hymn of the *Rigveda*