



The Ancient Caste System in India

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**Abstract:** Classical studies on pre-modern Indian social structure have suggested apparent differences between the Indian caste system and social stratification as one can discern in other parts of the world. However, one needs to question such dogmatic assertions that such vast differences really existed. An endeavor is made in this research paper to reflect on the nature of caste hierarchy in pre-modern India. The caste system forms the significant basis of pre-modern Indian social structure. Early writers conceived the caste system of pre-modern India as something unique to India. An attempt is made to question this application of theory of uniqueness in the case of India.

**Keywords:** Caste system, Social stratification, Hierarchy, Caste mobility.

**Introduction:** People in general belong to many social categories that could either be achieved, such as one's profession, or inherited, such as one's gender. The consequences of social categorizations are often not only seen in the dynamics of social interactions, but also in the way social status is represented. For the present research, the Indian/Hindu caste system is of interest, which is an integral feature of the Indian societal structure. The caste system provides a hierarchy of social roles that hold inherent characteristics and, more importantly, remain stable throughout life (Dirks, 1989). An implicit status is attached to one's caste which historically changed from the social roles to hereditary roles. This, created status hierarchies on hereditary basis with limited social mobility. For instance, individuals born into the highest caste, that is, the *Brahmin* caste have usually been priests and scholars. Individuals born into the *Kshatriya* caste have been warriors and kings. Individuals born into the *Vaishya* caste have been merchants. Finally, individuals born into the *Shudra* caste have been laborers. Besides, there was an additional 'out-casted' group called the *Dalits* or the 'untouchables' who occupied the lowest step of the social ladder (see Ambedkar, 1925/1989; Pick and Dayaram, 2006). In modern India, the Indian government introduced a categorization scheme in which the untouchable castes were categorized as scheduled castes (SC), the backward tribes were categorized as scheduled tribes (ST) and the disadvantaged castes as other backward castes (OBC). The Forward caste (FC) community generally constitute the high caste group. The SC, ST, and OBC comprising the historically disadvantaged groups, were provided job opportunities by the government through affirmative action (Sheth, 1987; Kumar, 2001; Gupta, 2005; Dreze and Khera, 2009). The FC has historically been and, continues to be, in a strong socioeconomic position with the highest status in society<sup>1</sup>. Thus, one of the main objectives of the present research was to examine how status is cognitively represented in the Indian society as a consequence of the way caste is perceived<sup>2</sup>. Even now, people in India continue to define their self-identity by means of the caste they belong to and the social group that they find themselves in. Caste membership is thus ingrained in the society and there is considerable reason to claim that caste as a type of social identity would probably be one of the most salient identities in the Indian context. This aspect is addressed by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), to which we now turn.

**Social Identity as a Basis for Caste Identity:** Social identity claims that people derive an important part of their identity from an affirmation of membership with the group they belong to. Tajfel and Turner (1986) suggested that any group (e.g., social class, family, football team etc.) can act as a source of pride and self-esteem, therefore, we tend to enhance our self-esteem by promoting and endorsing the *status* of the group we belong to, the so-called "in-group" (as opposed to "out-groups" being those groups that we do not belong to, see also Hogg and Turner, 1987). The Indian societal structure provides a fertile ground to examine the interactive roles of multiple identities like religious, national, regional (north vs. south), class and caste wherein one could discard or fuse these identities for the benefit of societal functioning (Miller et al., 1990; Miller and Bersoff, 1992). But many researchers have stressed the importance and the influence of

ISSN 2454-308X





caste as an integral social identity among many South Asians compared to other social identities like gender and ethnicity (for example, Gayer, 2000; Mand, 2006). It has in fact been argued that caste identity may override other social identities, because of its primary importance for many South Asians (Judge and Bal, 2008). We argue that in the context of status representation, caste identity (as opposed to religion, national and regional identities) would be the most prominent identity in explaining the differences in status perception, due to the inherent associations of caste and status. Thus, according to social identity theory, individuals would strive to maintain a positive image of their caste identity. We further argue below that caste identity will especially be more salient for high caste individuals.

A strong caste identity could provide feelings of belongingness or self-esteem, thereby relying on some caste norms. Particularly, it is known that high caste individuals see caste identity as a more stable construct wherein this identity is inherited at birth. They tend to essentialise their identity and this is predominantly attributed to the feelings of connectedness with previous generations of one's caste group. High caste individuals also develop feelings of temporal continuity, positive distinctiveness, and heightened self-esteem from essentialisation of their caste identity (Jaspal, 2011). In fact, in a study conducted by Cotterill et al. (2014), it was argued that the caste system tends to be legitimized through the ideology of Karmic beliefs (beliefs that general good or bad deeds in one's life are rewarded or reprimanded by being born into a high or low caste in the next life) especially by those high on social dominance orientation (SDO), that is, those who demonstrate a general preference for hierarchical social relations (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999; Pratto et al., 2000). Furthermore, when members of higher castes essentialise their caste identity (Mahalingam, 2003) they permit themselves to stigmatize members of the lower castes. The low caste members or the *Dalits* on the other hand, do not believe that their caste identity is inherited and therefore do not essentialise it. They may thus enhance their self-efficacy, through the possibility of social mobility, based on the idea that caste identity can be seen as less permanent (Mahalingam, 2003). We thus argue that caste identity is more salient amongst high caste individuals due to the belief they have about being privileged to have inherited this positive image of high caste at birth. Low caste individuals would not have a salient caste identity because they believe that this identity is not essentialised and belonging to this group has negative consequences.

**Social Identity Threat and Caste Norms:** Social identity effects are based on the protection of self-concepts (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and thus any threat to this self-concept would be associated with strong identity effects. Research has shown that highly identified group members would find ways to protect their in-group identity (see Spears et al., 1997). However, Branscombe et al. (1999) claim that threat to one's social identity in fact depends on the degree of group identification. For instance, they suggest that those who are highly identified with their in-group are more likely to show defensive responses than those who are not so highly identified. We can assume that high caste individuals who legitimize their inherent high caste would also show strong high caste identity.

So, what specifically could elicit an identity threat related to caste? We claim that norms and expectations that are associated with caste membership, when questioned, could fundamentally be a source of threat. In fact, it is most commonly seen that a person engaging in any sort of norm violation (especially of the higher caste) is ostracized and devalued (Mahalingam, 2007). One of the most deeply rooted caste norms relates to marriage. For instance, when people violate the norm of marrying within one's own caste by engaging in inter-caste marriage, the higher caste individual is believed to bring shame to the family and this norm transgression is considered to be immoral. Branscombe et al. (1999) argued that when an identity related to the morality value is threatened, high identifiers will show more defensive reactions. We therefore argue that the threat to one's own caste, if related to moral values or norms would motivate strong caste identifiers to alleviate this threat and protect their identity.



**Norm Violation Effects and Identity:** When a norm is violated, members often perceive this deviant behavior as potentially threatening to the group identity, and therefore deal with the deviance in order to reduce the threat (Jetten and Hornsey, 2014). However, research has shown that the tendency for a group to defend the threat depends on the extent to which an individual is identified with the group (Marques and Paez, 1994). Those who are not as much identified with the group, are typically less motivated to protect one's social identity (Spears et al., 1997; Rimal and Real, 2005). It can thus be understood that high identifiers would show greater motivation to engage in in-group protection to defend the threat (Doosje et al., 1995). We argue that high caste individuals would be high identifiers with their caste, and low caste individuals would be low identifiers with their caste. However, we claim that in-group identity protection will be seen in the form of black sheep effect and not as in-group favoritism. In certain situations, in-group members are known to exclude undesirable members from the in-group in order to maintain a positive and distinctive social identity (Marques and Paez, 1994). For instance, research by Otten (2009) claims that an aggressive social interaction between a victim and a perpetrator would lead to generally biased responses that could either lead to in-group favoritism or black sheep effect; the latter effect being most likely to occur in situations. More specifically it is said that in-group favoritism is particularly observed when the deviant behavior of the perpetrator was ambiguous or unintentional (Duncan, 1976; Sagar and Schofield, 1980). However, when there is explicit evidence suggesting that in-group perpetrators deliberately “committed the crime” (see also Abrams et al., 2000; Marques et al., 2001) one would observe the black sheep effect. Wang et al. (2016) also found neural evidence showing that intentional aggressive interactions result in patterns of the black sheep effect. Thus, there is some evidence indicating that aggressive, intentional, and unambiguous interactions would lead to more in-group derogations.

**Caste and Social Consequences:** One of the most common social problems of the caste system was the discrimination of low caste members as explained earlier. In 1950, independent India's constitution banned caste-based discrimination and in order to compensate for historical injustices the authorities introduced *quotas* in government jobs and educational institutions to improve the quality of life of low castes (“What is India's caste system?”, 2016, February 26., para. 13). A *reservation system* was introduced wherein a certain number of seats were reserved for members of the lower castes at places of higher education and government jobs. However, this legislation was soon met with a lot of resistance from the high caste community who felt that the system was not meritocratic, and provided an unjust advantage to the low caste members (e.g., Siddique, 2011). We believe that the reservation system is one of the most important social consequences of the caste system in modern times, and attitudes toward the system would have to be a reflection of one's caste identity.

**Conclusion:** The present study tried to utilize basic social identity theories in explaining one outcome of a very complex social system, such as the Indian caste system. It also touched upon the most dominant identity that is useful in predicting status differences in the Indian society. Considering the complexity of the Indian caste system, it was crucial to look into a small consequence of the caste system rather than the whole structure on its own. This study also paves the way into the understanding of the black sheep effect as seen in status representation as supposed to general in-group derogation attitudes. It is fundamental to expand this study by examining other aspects of social identity threat in the Indian context, such as religion, to gain some more understanding of how multiple identities interact with each other in the functioning of the Indian society.

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