

British Colonialism in India and its Influence on Indian Society

Revised Internet Edition



An Essay By
Sebastian Sanne

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A Introduction: Indian Society and the Denial of Change

The society living on the subcontinent that the British called India experienced many foreign influences before the European one. Surprisingly it managed to either absorb and add or reject them and thus denied any major structural transformation coming from the outside for hundreds of years. It was clearly structured on the basis of Hinduism, creating a strong hierarchy between high and low status and emphasising social groups rather than the individual. Yet the British rule over India evoked a large number of changes and shaped the country that we today know as India (and Pakistan).

During the British colonial presence two worlds met. An excellent-working political and military system was forced onto a decentralized formation of independent kingdoms and so European-British enlightened values clashed with a thousand-year old social order and deeply rooted beliefs.

This work will first give an overview of the historical development of British colonialism in India and then examine its implications for the Indian society. The focus is put on direct influences on society like education, religion and social structure, leaving out indirect ones such as politics and economy.

Please note that all Indian words of importance that are not used in common parlance are initially explained within the body of the text when they are mentioned for the first time. For further reference please refer to the glossary in Appendix A.

B British Colonialism in India and its Influence on Indian Society

I. The Historical Development of British Colonialism in India

1. The East India Corporation – Trade and the Conquest of India

In the year 1600 Elizabeth I. granted that the East India Corporation (EIC) establish trade with India and thus opened the chapter of the British in India.

Until the 1750's the EIC was a fairly normal trading company making vast profits from its major trading ports of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The hostilities between England and France soon made it necessary to make the EIC ready for fighting, which

was heavily backed by the British government. The French and the British fought for hegemony on the Indian subcontinent and both paid Indian soldiers (*sepoys*) to fight for them. They supported rulers or successors to the throne of the princely states in order to gain trade privileges and served therefore as kingmakers. This was an expensive game, and the Company's costs were often higher than its profits. In 1772 the EIC was almost bankrupt.¹ The British government, struggling with the American will to be independent, passed several acts to support the Company – and to obtain more control over it.

Due to the wars with France and Spain strategic considerations became increasingly important. A strong position in India was necessary to offset the power of France on the continent and to dissolve the tensions with local rulers. In addition to the increase of the British army's size in India the EIC heavily recruited Indian soldiers.²

In 1793 the government put an end to the EIC's monopoly. The Company was more and more dependent on taxes collected in India – consequently they had to expand the area they controlled. The reason for the success of the EIC was the British army and their technical and military superiority, the “terror of our arms”, as the officer Robert Clive put it.³

The war of conquest seemed to be more profitable than trade and with their money the leaders of the Company bought their allies, were bought by others or enriched themselves – common behaviour in the EIC. In 1815 warfare proved to be more expensive than anticipated. The army of 150,000 soldiers devoured three fourth of the annual budget and the Company had debts of £ 40 million. Critics in London called the EIC “dangerously overstretched”⁴, claimed that war substituted policy and even declared that the expansionism was wrong and new territories not necessary.

The government in London feared that the warlords in India could become more powerful than itself or the Company. They had the feeling that the “Indian empire was becoming a state within a state”⁵ and that the British in India adjusted more and more to the Indian moral, losing their British behaviour, for they used torture to get taxes.⁶

The supremacy of the British in India was necessary for the domination of Asia, and Britain's rule in India was normal for the people in Great Britain, in their eyes just the way it was done had flaws. Nonetheless, there was an agreement in one thing: the stability of India depended – despite of the *sepoys* – on the British army.

¹ KITCHEN, Martin (1996): The British Empire and Commonwealth. A Short History. London: Macmillan Press Ltd, pp. 6-9

² Ibid, pp. 11-19

³ Quoted in: JAMES, Lawrence (1994): The Rise and Fall of the British Empire. London: Little, Brown and Company (UK), p. 127

⁴ Ibid, p. 134

⁵ Ibid, p. 135

⁶ Ibid

2. Mission and Burden – The Change of Attitude

In the time of the “second empire”⁷ and the “new imperialism”⁸, when new imperial powers such as Germany, Italy, the USA and Japan had arisen, the conditions were very much changed within the British Empire.

“The days of violent revolutions and civil wars had passed and the slave trade had been ended. Now governments kept order and ... British lives and property were respected”.⁹

After the USA had taken hold of the Philippines in 1899, Senator A.J. Beveridge put into words what was on the minds of the people at that time. He called the colonisation “the mission of our race, trustees under god, of the civilisation of the world”.¹⁰ In the same year, the author and poet Rudyard Kipling called it “the White Man’s burden”.¹¹

As well as many other nations, the British changed their attitude and re-thought their empire. The Empire was vital for Britain and they decided that expansion was necessary. Darwin’s theories of plants and animals, his idea of races and the survival of the fittest, were transferred to humanity. Social Darwinism explained a “special genius of the Anglo-Saxon race”.¹² The British had a “general feeling that they were ideally qualified to rule”, that they had a “racial superiority”¹³ and that the White race had to “fulfil its historic destiny” concerning the “lesser breeds”.¹⁴

Consequently, they saw modern India as a result of their work. It was common opinion that all that was positive in India had its roots in British rule.¹⁵

“What the Indians called the *angrezi raj* (English rule) was not, however, an exercise in higher national altruism, although many ... liked to think so”.¹⁶

Britain was economically highly dependent on India because of its market for British products while Britain could not succeed on the European markets in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, a problem arose. How could a country with “liberal traditions and deeply-held convictions about personal liberty ... maintain an authoritarian empire which ultimately rests on force”?¹⁷ Their defence was quick at hand: since there is neither law nor order in India, a “benevolent despotism”¹⁸ is necessary to prevent chaos. As a result, Britain altered its approach and tried to bring

⁷ Kitchen: Empire and Commonwealth, p. 1

⁸ James: Empire, p. 201

⁹ Ibid, p. 200

¹⁰ Quoted in: James: Empire, p. 201

¹¹ Quoted in: VOHRA, Ranbir (2001): The Making of India. A Historical Survey. Second Edition. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., p. 45

¹² James: Empire, p. 205

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 206

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 217

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 219

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

western enlightened ideas to India. This became one of the main aims in the nineteenth century. The Indians, however, felt more and more uncomfortable with the British attitude. One of their biggest fears was that Christianity might be imposed on the Indian people.¹⁹

The British ignorance concerning the religion of the Indians could be seen in the *Sepoy* Mutiny of 1857. In the *sepoy* army – untrue – rumours said that beef fat was used for the greasing of their rifle cartridges and that powder of the bones of cows was mixed in the flour ration – which was horrible for Hindus who regard the cow as holy. When the *sepoys* refused to touch the cartridges, they were punished, leading to a spontaneous rebellion. The insurgents fled with troops to Delhi and declared an old Mughal-descendant – the Muslim Mughals had occupied big parts of India and had oppressed the Hindu Indians already living there for several centuries until the British rule²⁰ – Emperor of India. Insurrection, attacks and murder of white men, women and children shattered the country. The British government reacted hesitantly, but regained control after several months with reinforcements consisting of British soldiers and Sikhs. Many executions followed the British victory that was mostly based on the reputation of the British army.²¹

Government took control – the dissolution of the EIC had taken place in 1858 – and they continued the British rule in India. They imposed the ideas they considered right and good, and thus planted the seed of independence.

3. The End of the British Rule – India’s Awakening and the Mahatma

What did India look like in the beginning of the twentieth century? Politically it was a mosaic embracing over 500 princely states – ruled indirectly by the British or at least dependent on them – and provinces controlled directly by the British government. Poverty was the fate of most of the Indians. Although there were many different beliefs in India, religious tolerance was scarce. Smaller incidents came to happen often, sometimes even massacres. Religion was the “greatest obstacle to national unity”.²² This was the number one reason for the British hardliners to remain in India. In their opinion only the British army and the administration could maintain peace and order.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 220-226

²⁰ Vohra: India, p. 36

²¹ James: Empire, pp. 226-230

²² Ibid, p. 413

Indian society absorbed British-European values and ideas – particularly political ones – and the education started in the nineteenth century had produced an Indian élite (see II.1 Education and Language). The British, in contrast, were not satisfied:

“By bestowing liberty, justice and education in India we have done much to emancipate it from the shackles of caste and prejudice but it will take generations yet to reach the ideals of the philanthropists and philosophers and to satisfy the longings of an awakened India”.²³

What is more, they had emancipated the Indians – in mind – from the “shackles” of foreign rule. After World War I, in which India supported Britain with 500,000 men and £ 100 million, India strove more than ever for *swaraj*, self-rule. The process quickened and Britain, well aware of the Indians’ feelings, announced that it would lead India to “responsible government”²⁴ within the Empire. As a first step and in order to make the administration more flexible, 11 provinces were created, where elected Indian ministers were to manage tasks like public health, education and agriculture. British or Indian ministers chosen by the Viceroy controlled finance and public order.

The British, however, fought on two fronts. In 1919 they passed the so called Rowlatt Acts, a package of laws against subversive movements. “These acts provided for stricter control of the press, arrests without warrant, indefinite detention without trial, and in camera”, that is without the public, “trials of political prisoners, without juries”²⁵. Naturally, there was much resistance against the laws by the public and Congress, the political voice of most of the Indians. This was Gandhi’s chance to apply his form of popular resistance.

Mahatma Gandhi and the Non-violent Resistance

Gandhi’s life and aims

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in the state of Porbandar, western Gujarat, in 1869. His father was Prime Minister there. Both his parents were devoted Hindus. Gandhi was married at the age of 13 and became father at 18, but one year later he left for England to study law. After that he was offered a job in South Africa, where he experienced injustice and humiliation by the white community and the government. Not willing to accept the lower status of the Indian community he started a movement for

²³ Quoted in: Ibid, p. 415

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Vohra: India, p. 126

their rights and became their leader. His movement and his form of resistance were a success – the South African government had to change the unjust laws. In 1915, one year after his arrival in India, he was called “Mahatma”, meaning “great soul” in the exact translation, but “saint” in everyday language.²⁶ Before he took part in Indian politics he travelled around India to experience the life of the common people, built an *ashram* to train other people in his *satyagraha* and led several small strikes. Gandhi was politically active until his assassination in 1948. (For photos of Gandhi see Photo 1 and Photo 2 in Appendix B)

His main aims were:

- *Swaraj*, the complete self-government and independence of a united India from Britain
- The “revival of rural handicrafts and a decentralized economy that favoured small, self-sufficient rural communities”²⁷ to fight the poverty and to find back to India’s “soul”
- The social integration of the Untouchables, whom he called *harijan*, the Children of God

Gandhi’s *satyagraha* and the non-violent resistance

Satyagraha was Gandhi’s instrument, or even weapon, in his concept of resistance. It can be “soul force”, “love force”²⁸ or “truth force”²⁹ in English. *Satyagraha* is described as “a spiritual state achieved by a man or a woman which gave them the inner fortitude, patience and faith in God that were needed for passive resistance against an immoral authority”.³⁰ It is to say that the term “passive” might lead astray because the resistance was very active – for the people marched, wrote articles and held speeches. A better term would be “non-violent resistance” in connection with “civil disobedience”.

On the one hand, Gandhi was inspired by Henry David Thoreau, Lew N. Tolstoy and Jesus Christ, especially his Sermon on the Mount.³¹ On the other hand, the concept of non-violence is deeply rooted in Hindu culture.³² The moral principle or attitude of *ahimsa* can already be found in the Vedas, a very old collection of mostly religious and

²⁶ Vohra: India, p. 129

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ James: Empire, p. 416

²⁹ Vohra: India, p. 126

³⁰ James: Empire, p. 416

³¹ Vohra: India, p. 128

³² DUMONT, Louis (1980): Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and Its Implications. Complete Revised English Edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 148

philosophical texts. It is often translated into “non-violence” or “non-harming”, but most accurate is “absence of desire to kill”.³³

So how did the non-violent civil disobedience look like in real life? Gandhi and his *satyagrahis* “broke the law openly and accepted the penalty for doing so without any show of violence”.³⁴ Their target was the conscience of the British rulers and their instrument therefore ideal, as the following statement shows:

“For generations the British people had assured themselves that they ruled India with the consent of its people, an assumption which meant that they could accept the idea of empire with a good conscience. If, as Gandhi intended, thousands, perhaps millions of Indians signified, in the gentlest possible way, that this was no longer so, then the ethical basis of the raj vanished”.³⁵

Nevertheless, Gandhi’s movement had to suffer under drastic repression. As an answer to the Rowlatt Acts Gandhi announced the *hartal*, a nationwide strike. Although the *hartal* was mostly peaceful, there were some incidents of violence reported.³⁶ Many of them had happened to be in Amritsar, where General Reginald Dyer then took control of the city. In the Jallianwala gardens he ordered his troops to shoot at unarmed people attending a public meeting. The unofficial – and therefore more trustworthy – death toll was put at 1,000, and even more than that wounded. In addition to that, he forbid the removal of the dead bodies as well as help for the injured. He “established a diabolical regime of terror”³⁷, using his power to humiliate the Indian citizens by cutting off water and electricity, for instance.

The massacre started an avalanche of debates and discussion within the whole British administration and Parliament in London. Although those responsible were prosecuted, many British in Britain and India held the view that they had saved India from anarchy.³⁸

This was one of the main arguments against self-government of the Indians: The British claimed that India would fall into chaos. They feared that Hindus and Muslims would devour each other.³⁹ This was a good point the government made, for there was indeed a tension between the two major religious communities. Of course, they felt united in their fight against the British rule. Even so, they did not have exactly the same aims and there were disturbing inequalities. The independence movement was mostly led by Hindus and the majority of Indians were Hindus. In 1930 the clash became apparent, when Muslim shop owners refused to take part in a Hindu-organised *hartal*

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Vohra: India, p. 128

³⁵ James: Empire, p. 416

³⁶ Vohra: India, p. 126

³⁷ Ibid, p. 127

³⁸ James: Empire, p. 418

³⁹ Ibid, p. 419

and the resulting riot killed more than 400 on both sides. The Muslim organisations cooperated with the Hindu leaders most of the time, but the difference became more and more visible. This difference could plainly be seen when Dr Muhammad Jinnah, President of the Muslim League, held a parade through Karachi that was very similar to those of the Mughal emperors.⁴⁰ Additionally, the idea of a Muslim Pakistan was growing steadily and the Muslim League committed itself to the separate state in 1940.⁴¹

Then World War II came, and the Viceroy – legally – declared that India was at war with Germany. Despite being upset about this declaration, the Indians realized that the war could help them to achieve more independence from Britain. However, the Indian people were unwilling to fight and die for Britain, and those who did, did so only with an independent India in mind. When Japanese troops stood almost at the Indian borders, Gandhi acted and started a “Quit India” campaign. He believed that the Japanese would not attack if the British left India. The results of the campaign threw India into complete chaos for a small period of time, and the British reacted hard: mass arrests, harsh punishments and censorship. This reply to the breakdown restored order before long.⁴²

Several hundred people died and it was clear that the *raj* rested on force and force alone. The turn of the tide had begun. “Indian politics no longer revolved around the question of how long the raj would last, but how it was to be dismantled and what would replace it”.⁴³

The End of the British Rule in India

Much had changed: World War II was over, the peril of a Japanese attack no longer existed, Great Britain had a Labour government. Britain was economically ruined by the war and financially dependent on the USA. The latter favoured a free India and a feeling against imperialism was increasing among the British people.⁴⁴

Elections to provincial and federal legislatures were held in the winter of 1945/46 and while the Congress was the strongest party, the Muslim League managed to win all Muslim seats in the provinces. The atmosphere in the following period of time was tense, for “riots, strikes and violence”⁴⁵ shattered the country, a mutiny in the British Indian Army almost brought the country to war with the British. London tried to manage

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 422-423

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 423

⁴² Ibid, pp. 423-426

⁴³ Ibid, p. 427

⁴⁴ Vohra: India, p. 170

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 172

India's passing to independence, but it could not avert the growing number of incidents between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. The "Calcutta killing" was "*the biggest and bloodiest outbreak of communal violence under the British regime so far*"⁴⁶, with 5,000 dead, 15,000 wounded and 150,000 homeless. The violence spread across the country and killed an estimated 12,000 people. A British effort to have the leaders negotiate failed and everybody came to realize that a united India was impossible – only Gandhi still tried to "bring back Hindu-Muslim understanding".⁴⁷ Britain was eager to abandon its power on the subcontinent and set June 1948 as the deadline for the end of rule. The Viceroy did not need so much time and finished a partition plan in May. Pakistan, the Muslim country, should consist of a north-western part and an eastern part (today Bangladesh, see Map 1 in Appendix B). All the rest should be Hindu India.

When the borders were known, "local interest groups began an organized onslaught on the minority groups to get them to flee to the other side, leaving their lands and property behind".⁴⁸ Hundreds of thousands were killed, over ten million became refugees.

On August 14 and August 15 1947 Pakistan and India, respectively, received their bloody independence.

II. The Influence of British Colonialism on the Indian Society

1. Education and Language

Since the first British schools in India – run by missionaries – had been established around 1820, the number of British-educated Indians was growing. In 1880 about 8,000 had graduated from higher schools and 500,000 had secondary education.⁴⁹ In addition to that, Indians had set up Hindu Colleges providing English education as well, e.g. mathematics, natural sciences and Western philosophy.⁵⁰

The aim of attending a British school was often the admission to the Indian civil service. Some even travelled to the far British Isles in order to have an exam; Gandhi, for instance, was one of them.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 175, Italics in original

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 177

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 179

⁴⁹ James: Empire, pp. 221-231

⁵⁰ Vohra: India, p. 94

The British education was financed by the EIC and later the government and they were neither touching nor supporting the institutions teaching Indian education. The British intention was not only to let the Indians enjoy a “better” education, but also to create “interpreters between rulers and the ruled”⁵¹ who should be English people in mind, but with Indian bodies. In every province, the Departments of Public Instruction had control over the education of Indians.

An Indian would first go to a vernacular primary school because there were almost no funds for the low-level education. He then would pass to one of the Anglo-vernacular high schools which provided secondary education for up to half a million Indians each year. After that he would have the possibility to enroll in one of 140 colleges, some state, some privately run, which were attended by only about 17,000 students in 1901.⁵² A few universities were available, for example in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay.

In general, British education produced a highly intellectual élite, but also a “vast class of semieducated, low-paid, English-speaking subordinates”.⁵³

Furthermore, most of the students were Hindus and many of them Brahmins. The Muslims rejected the British educational programs for a long time and tried to revive their own traditions. This attitude and the fact, that the British rulers found the Muslims generally more suspicious – also because considering them more responsible for the *Sepoy Mutiny* in 1857 –, led to an unbalanced distribution of British education.

As a result, it was mostly Hindus who succeeded political careers as education was the key factor to leadership. Although the British government became aware of this and tried to reach the Muslims, and they on their part aspired to make themselves useful for the Crown in later days, the Hindus emerged as the political dominant community. Due to the fact, that many students were Brahmins, the English unwillingly fortified the elitist tradition of Indian education, whose goal had always been to preserve the position of higher castes. Once again education was a way to move socially upward for those who had the opportunity to enjoy it, for the rest it was an additional obstacle that prevented them from climbing up the ladder.⁵⁴

Another important consequence was the influence on religion. Since many of the educated leaders were Brahmins, they personalized both education, and therefore gained additional political power under the British rule, and religion. Consequently they encouraged religious reforms as well as political ones.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 68

⁵² Ibid, p. 94

⁵³ Ibid, p. 68

⁵⁴ *Library of Congress (LOC) / Federal Research Division / Country Studies / Area Handbook Series / India: Education, p.1

⁵⁵ Vohra: India, p. 95

By far the most significant implication was that the British education united Indians from completely different parts of India and thus for the first time created a feeling of belonging together, giving the word “Indian” a new sense. Moreover, they thoroughly understood the meaning of freedom and democracy as well as other Western ideas and values. This newly gained knowledge can be seen as the basis for the later struggle for independence.

The English language naturally correlated with the British education. English was the language of higher education and of administration. Under British rule, English was made the official language of colonial India and replaced Persian, the language of the Mughal emperors. This intensified the seclusion of the Muslims mentioned above for they did not want to learn English and were substituted by Hindus in administrative posts.⁵⁶

English strengthened the feeling of unity between the Indians as well because it gave the people of India the possibility to communicate with each other in a country that had “179 languages, 544 major dialects, and thousands of minor dialects”.⁵⁷

2. Religion

During their colonial presence the Protestant British had much religious influence on Indian society. Christianity, however, came to India even before the Portuguese and the British: legend has it that the Apostle Thomas came to India in order to establish the Christian church there in 50 A.D.⁵⁸

When the British changed their attitude (see I.2 Mission and Burden – The Change of Attitude), they felt it as their need, even as their destiny, to Christianise the Indians:

“Providence has entrusted the extensive empire of Hindustan to England in order that the banner of Christ should wave triumphantly from one end of India to the other. Everyone must exert all his strength that there may be no dilatoriness on any account in continuing the grand work of making all Indians Christians”.⁵⁹

They even made it a condition for independence:

“Till India is leavened with Christianity she will be unfit for freedom”.⁶⁰

Most of the missionaries who were sent out to accomplish what others insisted on in such calls were Evangelical priests. Lawrence James gives a good definition of it:

⁵⁶ Dumont: Homo Hierarchicus, p. 323

⁵⁷ Vohra: India, p. 94

⁵⁸ *PARK, Sarah: Christianity in India, Emory University, English Department: Postcolonial Studies, <http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Chris.html> (09.01.2003, 16:08h), p.1

⁵⁹ Quoted in: Vohra: India, p.71

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 72

“Evangelicism was a form of Protestantism which emphasised personal spiritual regeneration through the acceptance of Providence, and useful service to mankind, undertaken in accordance with Christian humanitarian principles”.⁶¹

Those missionaries became more and more influential on the EIC, which had permitted easier access to its land in 1813.⁶² Later the British government itself encouraged the process, despite of the fears that especially the Muslim community could be heavily disturbed by this project.

From that viewpoint and being aware of the fact, that the Christian missionaries were almost exclusively successful in converting Indians of the lowest castes and the Untouchables⁶³, one can come to a deeper understanding of the *Sepoy* Mutiny in 1857 (see I.2 Mission and Burden – The Change of Attitude). Obviously the soldiers had to fear that the Christian missionaries wanted them to be forced to touch polluted weaponry in order to have them expelled from their caste and to convert them to Christianity!

It is no wonder, by the way, that the missionary effort in India was of little avail. While an early missionary, Roberto de Nobili, was doing well in converting a number of Brahmins to Christianity through adapting to their life-style and tolerating their code of conduct, later missionaries stipulated that they change their social behaviour as well – which resulted in failure.⁶⁴

Generally, the earlier Christian missionaries seem to have been more cautious in matters concerning Hindu religious and caste rules. The seventeenth century missionary and empiricist Abbé Dubois published a text on the people of India and held the view that the Europeans should “leave them their cherished laws and prejudices, since no human effort will persuade them to give up, even in their own interests, and let us [the Europeans] not risk making the gentlest and most submissive people in the world furious and indomitable by thwarting them”.⁶⁵ He had a very high opinion of the caste system and its rules, for he believed that the Hindus had an extraordinary low morality. Dubois saw the caste mores as an obligatory system that preserved peace within the Indian people who otherwise would devour each other, taking the Indian zones to a state of anarchy. In addition, he was very unsure if there even was a possibility to convert a great number of Hindus.

⁶¹ James: Empire, p. 137

⁶² BAYLY, C.A. (1988): The New Cambridge History of India, Part II.1. Indian society and the making of the British Empire. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 162

⁶³ DIRKS, Nicholas B. (2001): Castes of Mind. Colonialism and the Making of Modern India. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, p. 24

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 25

⁶⁵ Quoted in: Dirks: Castes of Mind, p. 25

In contrast to Dubois's point of view concerning caste, naturally most of the Christian missionaries were critics of the caste system being the social pillar of Hinduism.⁶⁶ It was the largest obstacle to conversion to Christianity. Furthermore, it created a barrier between the Indian Christians and the rest of society and thus blocked further expansion of the European religion.

As a result, some missionaries demanded that the government destroy the caste system. The latter refused to undertake such a step, seeing disregard of the caste system as the major cause for the *Sepoy* rebellion. The argument that "Christianity should be imposed on India as a treatment, if not a punishment, for the revolt"⁶⁷ was eventually discarded.

The missionaries and their theorists came to understand that the caste system was both a social distinction and a religious institution that should not be viewed separately. Eventually they considered such an "exterminating crusade"⁶⁸ wrong and realized that government could not erase caste, but should cut all bonds to it.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the British felt that the absolute ethnic and "racial" differences – race theory was held high in Europe – were too many to convert the Indians. As a consequence, they increased capitalist and technological expansion and "Missionary rhetoric was used to celebrate the accomplishments of empire rather than the message of Christ".⁶⁹

The attitude of non-interference was caused by another problem the missionaries became aware of: some Hindus kept their faith but played the game of Christianity with them. In 1824 a bishop called Heber was very disturbed after a pupil at his mission school had shown him his shrine and told him several Hindu legends. The bishop "afterwards wondered whether Indian boys might become 'accomplished hypocrites, playing the part of Christian with us, and with their own people of zealous followers of Brahma'".⁷⁰

Notwithstanding this, the Christian missionaries had – of course – some success in converting Indians to the Christian belief during British colonialism. Currently, "Christians constitute the second largest religious minority in India next to Islam".⁷¹

⁶⁶ BANDYOPADHYAY, Sekhar (1990): *Caste, Politics and the Raj. Bengal 1872-1937*. Department of History, University of Calcutta. Calcutta, New Delhi: K P Bagchi & Company, p. 22

⁶⁷ Dirks: *Castes of Mind*, p. 131

⁶⁸ Quoted in: *Ibid*, p. 132

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 133

⁷⁰ James: *Empire*, p. 221

⁷¹ *Park: *Christianity in India*, p. 1

3. Social Structure

a) The Traditional Caste System and the Concept of Purity

The origin of the caste system is extremely complex and not fully explainable nowadays, although there might be European and Asian influences.⁷²

The Portuguese were one of the first Europeans to enter India and so the word “caste” derived from the Portuguese word “casta”, which can be translated into “race”⁷³, “breed” or “lineage”.⁷⁴

In the Indian social structure there are four *varnas* or “colours” which are broad class categories in the Indian society. The so called *jatis* are subgroups within each *varna*, and each *jati* embraces a large number of *gotras* or “common lineages”.

Some describe *varnas* as caste⁷⁵, some claim that *jatis* are the “true” castes and the *varnas* are classes.⁷⁶ In what follows *varnas* will be named classes and *jatis* castes.

The four *varnas* are – in hierarchical order – Brahmins or Brahmins (priests and teachers), Ksatriyas (aristocrats, warriors and rulers), Vaisyas (farmers and merchants) and Sudras (labourers and servants) (see Illustration 3 in Appendix B). Brahmins, Ksatriyas and Vaisyas are called “twice born” since they undergo a ritual to come religiously to life, allowing them to learn Sanskrit and study religious and philosophical texts of old. This has nothing to do with reincarnation, the belief that the soul of a human being is born again! Almost half of the Indian population are twice born.⁷⁷

Sometimes described as the “fifth varna”, the Untouchables, called *pariahs* or *dalit* (the latter meaning “oppressed”), are at the bottom of the class system. They work as low servants, doing jobs a Hindu is usually forbidden to do, e.g. burying bodies of animals and “unclaimed” dead humans. They are considered “polluted” by caste Hindus and these may not have contact with them, some are even called “Unseeables” because they are so polluted that they have to work at night. Hindus can be expelled from their *jati* and therefore their *varna* and become *pariahs*. Approximately 20% of India’s population are Untouchables.⁷⁸

⁷² *ROSS, Kelley L.: The Caste System and the Stages of Life in Hinduism, <http://www.friesian.com/caste.htm> (22.11.2002, 12:34h), p. 2

⁷³ Vohra: India, p. 17

⁷⁴ *HOBSON, Kevin: The Indian Caste System and the British, <http://www.btinternet.com/~britishempire/empire/article/castesystem.htm> (22.11.2002, 12:33), p.4

⁷⁵ *Ross: Caste and Stages, p. 2

⁷⁶ Vohra: India, p. 17 footnote

⁷⁷ *Ross: Caste and Stages, p. 2

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 3

Purity and Pollution

The concept of purity is a religious division of society. It creates a hierarchy from the Brahmins at the top to the Untouchables at the bottom. This concept permits the “exchange of services”, but prohibits “social interaction at the personal level”.⁷⁹

The level of purity is defined by the category of occupation and therefore by the *varna*. In Hindu belief, a Hindu of one of the four varnas becomes temporarily impure when he comes in contact with polluted beings or things; if he specialises in a polluted task, he is permanently impure and must be ejected from his varna.⁸⁰

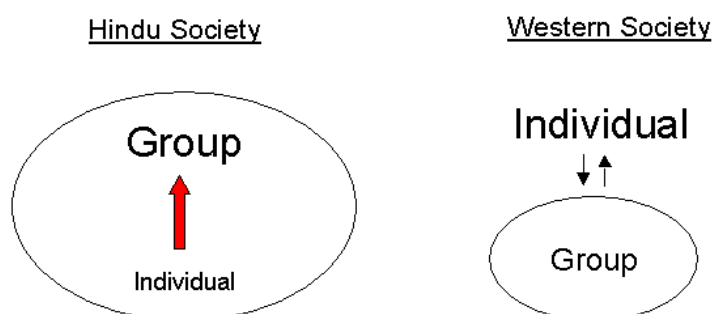
Thus, orthodox Hindus have to follow many rules to preserve their purity. As an example, Brahmins may not eat food touched by an Untouchable since it is polluted for them and has to go to the waste.

The main difference between the British and the Indian social values and a central point of influence concerning social structure was the opposition of individualism and group behaviour and of hierarchy and equality that will be treated in the following.

b) Individual and Group

When the British came to India, the “old Hindu conception of the group being the basic unit of organisation”⁸¹ was confronted with the “excessive individualism of the west, emphasising the individual above the group”.⁸² (See Illustration 1)

Illustration 1: Individual - Group



⁷⁹ Vohra: India, p. 18

⁸⁰ Dumont: Homo Hierarchicus, p. 47

⁸¹ Dirks: Castes of Mind, p. 3

⁸² Quoted in: Dirks: Castes of Mind, pp. 3-4

As can be seen in Illustration 2, the Hindu society is a structure of bigger groups consisting of smaller ones. During colonialism, on the Indian side, the groups mattered and the individual was less important, almost unimportant. There was little to no personal identity, but rather a group identity. On the British side, individualism was held as one of the best products of European history and the individual was almost always placed above a social group.

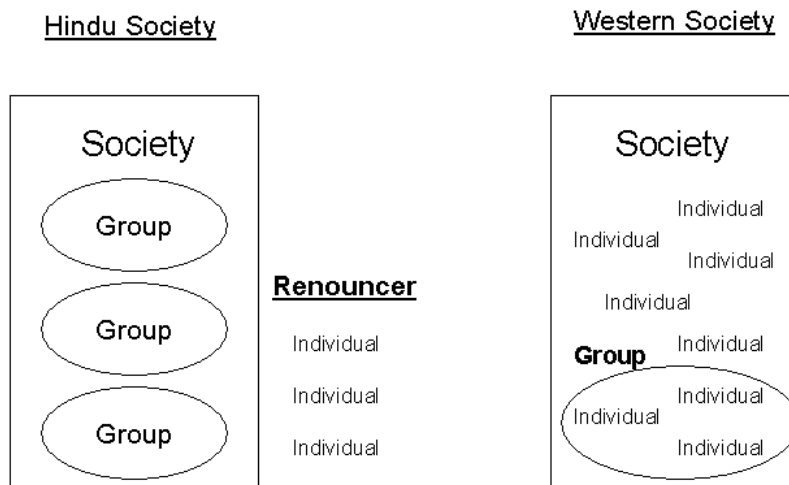


Illustration 2: Groups in society

Since a system of measurement for the grade of individualism in a society does not exist, it is hard to say how strong the individualistic influence actually was, though it seems to be very likely that it came indirectly to the people of India through the British education. Today's India and its definitely more individualistic society is a result of British influence concerning values and attitude.

c) Hierarchy and Equality

India's traditional society was and the modern society is totally hierarchical. All groups, people and even things have a rank according to essential characteristics. The categories that are hierarchy-creating include caste and purity, profession, power and wealth, religion, age and gender.

Concerning social groups, the hierarchy in the class and caste system can plainly be seen. Defined by birth, the varna of Ksatriyas always outranks the Sudras, for example, a *jati* of high status outranks one of low status. Connected to this is the hierarchy of profession, or more precisely, the division of labour. A latrine cleaner is naturally at the bottom of the hierarchy, whereas a priest is at its top. Up to this point the qualities that

determine the hierarchical status are based on the opposition of pure and impure; the following are less or not at all based on it.

As in every society, the social hierarchy in India rests on the interdependent areas of political power and wealth as well. In India, however, political power and economic success are less important than in the western societies for there are many other factors that create hierarchies. Power and fortune play a secondary role in India; they are needed to back up social status or to move upward in the group hierarchy (see II.3 d) Social Mobility).

Religion has a special role when talking about hierarchy. In theory, the hierarchical order in India is connected to the Hindu belief concerning purity and consequently the members of another religious community must be viewed as outcasts.

In reality, this is not so, for other religious communities seem to be outside of these ranking, not at the bottom.⁸³

Looking at India's history, a reason can be found. The Indian society was governed by foreign rulers – or more precisely, rulers of foreign religion – for a long time. Starting in the beginning of the sixteenth century⁸⁴, the Muslim Mughal empire had control over India until the Christian British rule was established. As a consequence, “the Hindus had to adjust themselves for long periods and over huge regions to political masters who did not recognize Brahmanic values, and they did not treat even the most humble Muslim villagers as Untouchables”.⁸⁵

Therefore, religion is part of the criteria of hierarchy, but not as rigorously as one might suspect.

Hierarchy can even be found at the level of family, especially in connection with age and gender. Men require more respect than women of similar age, older relatives or siblings outrank younger ones and “a daughter-in-law of a household shows deference to a daughter of a household”, for instance.⁸⁶

In general, hierarchy is a core value of India's society, and when trying to judge it on the basis of knowledge, one comes across different opinions of sociologists.

Louis Dumont, who contributed the fundamental work “Homo Hierarchicus” to the social studies of India, states that hierarchy is natural and equality is artificial. On the background of his critique of individualism, claiming a “Necessity of hierarchy”⁸⁷, he is an admirer of the hierarchical society in the eyes of his critics who think that he supports the Brahmanical view of India's society and thus the inequality within it.⁸⁸

⁸³ *LOC: Caste and Class, p. 3

⁸⁴ Vohra: India, p. 31

⁸⁵ Dumont: Homo Hierarchicus, p. 206

⁸⁶ *LOC: Hierarchy, p. 1

⁸⁷ Dumont: Homo Hierarchicus, p. 19

⁸⁸ BERREMAN, Gerald D. (1979): Caste and Other Inequities. Published by Ved Prakash Vatuk, Folklore Institute, Meerut. Sole Distributors: Manohar Book Service, New Delhi, p. 163

Sociologists such as Nicholas B. Dirks feel that “it is hard not to read Dumont’s scholarship as a peculiar form of modern Western nostalgia”.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the reader has to decide if he wants to view the Indian hierarchy as a functional and stable social construction or as an obstacle to equality.

The British-European value of equality is the direct opposite of the hierarchy described above. Equality and the connected cardinal virtue of liberty are products of the period of Enlightenment that took place in Europe – and America – mostly during the eighteenth century.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the great thinkers of that time, proclaimed that man was free and naturally unequal by birth, but then exploited on the basis of this natural inequality and made unfree and morally unequal.⁹⁰ He and other philosophers strongly influenced the French Revolution and deeply changed the minds of Europe’s population. Over decades and centuries people came to realize that all human beings should be equal in chances: rich and poor, men and women, noble and simple and so on.

One can imagine how strange and primitive the Indian society must have looked like for the British when they came there. India was a completely hierarchical society, and most of this hierarchy was based on religious beliefs. Bizarre indeed for an “enlightened” Englishman coming from a widely secular country!

In spite of the fact that even in Britain equality was only an ideal, the British felt uncomfortable with the Indian hierarchy – the missionaries in particular.⁹¹

However, the British did not do anything against it. Queen Victoria announced a declaration of non-interference, constituting that Indian religions and customs would be left alone.⁹² This statement had a fundamental flaw: the British knowledge concerning Indian religion and customs was very limited. Although they made the Indian people subject to anthropology in order to understand their ways, they had no other choice than – as some Orientalists demanded⁹³ – to ignore the status of an Indian when dealing with him – in matters of employment, military or civil service and all public institutions.

Linked with their educational programs, the British thus influenced the Indian society possibly the best way there is: without force. The Indians had the chance to experience a more equal treatment and learned in British schools theoretically about it.

⁸⁹ Dirks: *Castes of Mind*, p. 5

⁹⁰ Dumont: *Homo Hierarchicus*, pp. 12-13

⁹¹ Dirks: *Castes of Mind*, p. 147

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 149

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 133

Today, India's constitution disallows public discrimination at least on the basis of caste⁹⁴, having made an important step away from a hierarchical society.

d) Social Mobility

Social mobility describes the actions of moving upward in the hierarchical society and of gaining higher status, a fairly natural process on the subcontinent.⁹⁵ As an example, people want to be regarded as Ksatriyas rather than Sudras, as Buddhists rather than Untouchables, as plains people rather than mountain people or – during British colonialism – as Englishmen rather than Indians. Status behaviour and power were and are essential criteria for the recognition as belonging to a higher ranked group.

Emulation and “Sanskritization”

The ties between rank and the symbols of rank are very strong in India and therefore people of lower castes try to emulate the behaviour of higher caste-people.⁹⁶ Connected with this is “Sanskritization”, widely used as a synonym for upward social mobility, although this is not fully correct. The term means that people of low status adopt the behaviour and attributes of castes of Brahmanical status mentioned in religious texts written in Sanskrit. These are, for instance, vegetarianism, special rituals, *ahimsa*, increased attention to purity and pollution concerning social contacts and the division of labour and the celibacy of widows.⁹⁷

As mentioned above, the expression “Sanskritization” is not precise since “the status attributes of the highly ranked warrior-ruler category ... serves [sic!] as a model for at least as many upwardly mobile groups in India as does the priestly (Brahman) model”⁹⁸ without the Sanskritic part. Consequently, vegetarianism and *ahimsa*, for example, have no relevance here.

In summary, people display the behaviour of high status groups hoping that they would through this also gain high status. In practice, these efforts alone are not successful for power plays an important role as well.

⁹⁴ *LOC: Caste and Class, p. 1

⁹⁵ Dirks: Castes of Mind, p. 170

⁹⁶ Berreman: Caste and Inequities, p. 227

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ Ibid

Social Mobility and Power

One of the key attributes of high status is the “controll [sic!] and exercise of economic and political power”.⁹⁹

In history, most of the claims to be recognized as of higher status were denied by suppressing any opportunity to express it. If those making a claim had power and were persistent, it was accepted, otherwise, if they did not have power, they were punished.

The reason for this is simple: If a claim is denied, without quick punishment, the group that made the claim imperils the system and thus the rulers. If a claim cannot be denied, a powerful group of low status is also a threat to the stability of the system since it challenges its “legitimacy and inevitability”.¹⁰⁰

When a claim is permitted, the group does not move in status – for status is defined by birth –, but “it is said that a deserved but hitherto unrecognized status will henceforth be recognized”.¹⁰¹

The British Rule and Social Immobility

British colonialism had much influence on the social mobility and the interaction between classes and castes. Similar to the “Sanskritization” the British presence provided for a “Westernization”. As mentioned previously, sometimes Indians strove to imitate the prestigious Englishmen in order to move upward in the social hierarchy. Dumont sees a tendency in our times that the “upper strata become modern, the lower ... become ‘Sanskritized’”¹⁰², which is a consequence of “Westernization”.

Besides that, the British heavily influenced social mobility by the census. They had been fascinated by the Indian society since their arrival on the subcontinent, but they failed to explain it. As an attempt to understand its social complexity, they introduced a planned and precise country-wide census in the nineteenth century.¹⁰³ Its primary political goal was to make it possible to better handle incidents or disasters, but one might add that some British wanted to gather evidence for their existing concept of races as well.¹⁰⁴

The census officials went far beyond counting the population; and the number of questions they asked the Indian people was high. They included gender, living conditions, nationality, race, tribe, religion and caste.

Apparently, the British were unaware of what they had done as well: for the first time in history there was an official and complete record of castes and their status!

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 228

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 229

¹⁰² Dumont: *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 192

¹⁰³ *Hobson: *Caste and British*, p. 3

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

As a natural consequence, this “gave an unparalleled opportunity for asserting and legitimizing status claims”¹⁰⁵ without the need of public opinion. In the following decades, the British officials received large numbers of appeals which they had to process and either reject or allow. Moreover, the census and the status claims supported the already existing social inequality since only wealthy, influential and educated caste members could prepare such a petition. Although the British decided not to include caste status in the census reports anymore in 1911, the appeals did not cease.¹⁰⁶ The British had contributed a large part to the social immobility of the castes that already suffered from the social inequality.

Another important factor that amplified the changes in India’s social mobility is to be found in the relation between the British and the Brahmins. Considering Brahmins “carriers of high culture”¹⁰⁷, the British gained much of their information on India’s society from members of the highest class. As a result, the Brahmins had much indirect influence on British legislation through the British knowledge of society. They often made use of their power, having one main aim: to decrease the social mobility and thus protect and preserve their status and power.

The festival of Hookswinging, a ritual performed at a village called Sholavandan, started great debates and made it possible for the Brahmins to use their influence.

During this ritual, hooks were pierced through the muscles below the shoulder blades of a member of the religious community, he was hung at a certain height and carried along with a procession through the streets. It is said that there was almost no bleeding and the man attested that he had no pain.¹⁰⁸

The British’s dislike of such happenings was great, but only with Brahmanic pressure were they defined as “low ritual practice that should be prohibited if possible”¹⁰⁹ by authorities. Any upward move of this community was so undermined. In addition to this, the British took control over temples in southern India where widow remarriage was encouraged – a thorn in the Brahmanic side – and prohibited it.

All in all, the British supported social immobility by their census and their reliance on the Brahmins as informants stabilised the latter’s hegemonic status within society.

¹⁰⁵ Berreman: Caste and Inequities, p. 229

¹⁰⁶ Dirks: Castes of Mind, p. 223

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 170

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 155

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 170

C Conclusion: Old New Problems

It seems to be logical in our scientific eyes that every action has to evoke a reaction. The Muslim Mughal emperors that had the political power over most of India were not overthrown, the British rulers substituted them and therefore the consequent reaction was delayed. The Muslim influence under their rulers had been too strong to be absorbed; the Indian society had cut itself off and left the Muslim community to be an alien element under the *angrezi raj*. The oppression, however, had not been forgotten and the reaction came almost instantaneously when the peace-keeping British army had stood down from their task. The British's assumption or even fear that the Indian subcontinent would be covered with violence if they left India and their influence ceased came finally true. The killings in the wake of independence were just the beginning. They were followed by 50 years of belligerence, aggression and war that took the nations of India and Pakistan to the edge of a nuclear catastrophe.

The time is right to concentrate on what the people of those two countries have in common – their past and their co-operation in their later resistance against the British – instead of what divides them and to keep cultural legacy alive by creating a lasting peace.

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The search results in the LOC website are stored in temporary files for display purposes only. It is therefore impossible to give exact addresses here. Please look for the topics below.

Base URL: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/intoc.html>

- Education (09.01.2003, 15:53h)
- Caste and Class (09.01.2003, 15:57h)
- Hierarchy (09.01.2003, 15:58h)

E Appendices

Appendix A – Small Glossary of Indian Expressions

ahimsa

Old Hindu moral principle meaning “absence of desire to kill” or “non-violence” (Gandhi)

angrezi raj

“English rule”

ashram

“stage of life” (see *Ross: Caste and Stages, p. 2: ashramas)

Here: small community living together, usually for religious purposes

dalit

“oppressed”. Synonym for the Untouchables

gotra

“common lineage”. Social group and part of a *jati*, often called subcaste

harijan

“Children of God”. Gandhi’s name for the Untouchables

hartal

= strike

jati

Subgroup of a *varna*. Often described as caste

Mahatma

“Great Soul”, “Saint”. M. K. Gandhi’s epithet

pariahs

= Untouchables

raj

“rule”. *angrezi raj*, *swaraj*

Sanskrit

Old Hindu dead language used in religious texts of old

satyagraha

“soul force”, “love force” or “truth force”. Often used as synonym for “passive resistance”, Gandhi’s instrument of popular resistance

satyagrahi

person trained in and using *satyagraha*

sepoy

Indian soldier in the Indian British Army

swaraj

“self-rule”. Self-government and independence of India, Gandhi’s aim

varna

“color”. Broad class division in society, e.g. Brahmins, Ksatriyas etc.

Appendix B – Illustrations, Photos and Maps



Picture on Frontpage:

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/Religi ons/Avatars/Ravana.html>

Web site created by: Vinay Lal

Associate Professor of History, UCLA

Photo 1 (left): Gandhi at Wardha. (1939)

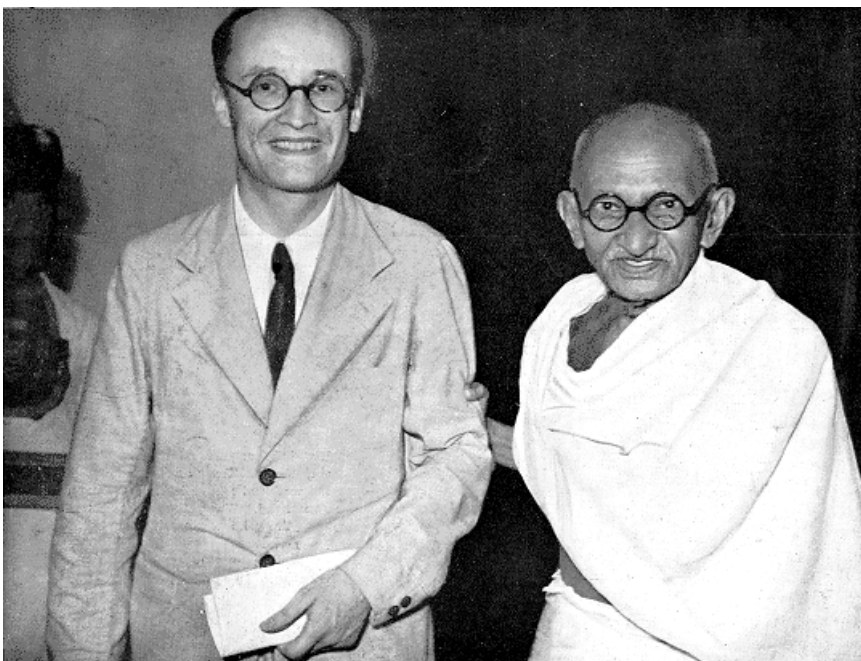
Photo 2: Gandhi with Lord Listowel, Under-Secretary of State for India

Source: Gandhi Virtual Ashram: Photo Gallery, Page 1

<http://www.nuvs.com/ashram/gallery/>

Last updated 02 Jun 98

Used by permission.





Map 1: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh
 Source: Microsoft Encarta Weltatlas 2000, © Microsoft Corporation

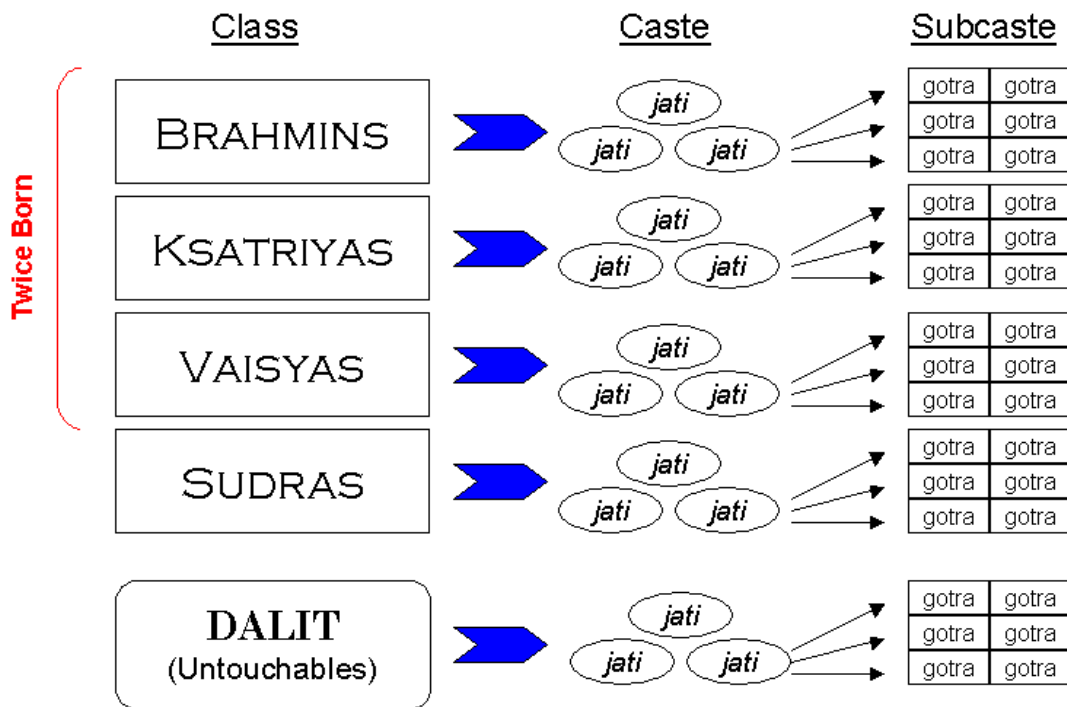


Illustration 3: Caste System