

The Caste System: A Means of Eternal Segregation Amidst The Fight For Equality

by Nivedha Kumar

On a sultry afternoon in Chennai, India, I lounge on my grandparents' couch, forced to stay inside by the blistering sun whose unbearable heat tries to force its way into the house, only to be stopped by drawn curtains, high ceiling fans, and centralized air conditioning. Flipping through channels on television, I munch on Kurkure, a spicy Indian snack. With every bite, crumbs fall onto my lap but almost immediately land on the floor with the swift brush of my hand. Just as the clock strikes three, Priya, the house servant, enters, ready to begin her afternoon duties. She grabs a broom and turns off the fan in the living room, so as not to disrupt the dust she is about to accumulate in a pile. When she sweeps the crumbs near the couch, I lift my feet up to give her room. Within minutes she is done sweeping, and about 15 minutes later, a cup of cold Nestle chocolate milk is placed in front of me. My now empty bag of Kurkure is thrown away, the pillows on the couch are fluffed, and Priya is in the kitchen doing dishes. Later in the evening, my grandmother packs her some Jalebis, an Indian sweet, and new clothes that were bought for Priya and her kids. She reminds Priya of the family wedding taking place next weekend, telling her to be here promptly at 6 p.m. Saturday evening so the car can take her to the venue. With that last notice, Priya packs up and heads home to her children, who are sitting on the concrete floor of a one-bedroom apartment with a barely working rickety ceiling fan, eager to see the goodies their mother will bring home from work that day.

The paradoxical nature of the aforementioned scenario is perplexing. The same woman who cleans the bathrooms and hand-washes our clothes is given the food off our table. She is urged to stay out of sight from house guests, forced to prepare coffee or tea for them in the kitchen, but is to be chauffeured to a family wedding for which she has been given new clothes. The servants are regarded as inferiors, yet they are provided some luxuries, demonstrating the humanity that exists within the caste system that has dictated Priya's life. She is a member of the lowest caste, the Untouchables, and is confined to a lifetime of servitude. But in a country whose government is seemingly fighting for equality, why does the caste system still exist, and who is to blame for its continuation into the modern day?

Priya's type of servitude is just one of the many facets of India's caste system, the pre-feudalistic division of labor that one is born into and that has persisted into the 21st century in defiance of modernized views of justice and equality. The caste system is an order in society, consisting of five different levels (ranging from highest to lowest): Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, and the Untouchables. Each level is dictated by the work of its members. For example, the Brahmins are considered priests and the Kshatriyas are warriors. The next two levels are various craftsmen, farmers, laborers, and the like. The members of the last group, the Untouchables, are seen as the lowest of the low, often working as street or latrine cleaners. Now, the work associated with each of these castes may not be strictly followed by their members today, but the overall system is still highly adhered to. Families often associate themselves and create friend groups with other families of the same caste. Similarly, when marriages are arranged, the potential spouse must be of the same caste. Obviously, the lower castes are looked down upon.

The fact that this system has continued to exist without any legal backing is puzzling. Every household, including those with only middle-class incomes, has at least one servant who does tasks such as laundry, cleaning, and cooking on a daily basis. It is the norm. In my grandparents' house in India, there are separate workers for each of those tasks, something which I have gotten used to but which still bothers me to the core. To date, there is no ordinance or decree outlining the parameters of the caste system. A servant could refuse to report to work if they wanted, so why do they show up? The blame is often placed on one of two groups: the government and those of higher castes or the lower castes.

In December of 2012, a young woman was brutally raped on a bus in New Delhi, India, and thrown out onto the street. She was found and brought to a hospital where she died two weeks later due to severe internal injuries. In response to her death and the thousands of daily protests regarding the safety of women, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh released statements claiming that it was the government's first priority to amend laws to make the country safer for women while bringing harsh punishment to those responsible for the heinous crime. His voice was heard and actions such as setting up a distress hotline for women were put into effect, yet there were opposing views within the government. Another politician, instead of assuring the public that justice would be attained, claimed that rape could be prevented if women did not wear skirts or go out with men in public after a certain hour. This statement was simply ridiculous in nature. In an era where women in most other countries have the same rights as men, how can they be told to refrain from mundane daily activities such as going to the movies at night? Thus, the labels that the government and society place upon individuals leads to this segregation.

This pressure enforced by the government and higher classes can be seen as a key player in the caste system. Starting from preschool all the way up to high school, children of lower castes are segregated. Most kids, regardless of family income, will go to public schools that all have the same cost of attendance. However, throughout the years, certain schools have been tacitly ruled as schools for those of lower castes. This has nothing to do with cost or location; it is simply society's way of grouping together those who are considered inferior. Thus, these schools, whose populations constitute the majority of servant children, are looked down upon. This in turn affects the chances of these servant children getting into good colleges, even if they excel in school, which consequently leads to their suffering in the job market. Most CEOs and higher-ranking officials within companies are often part of the top two castes while members of the lower castes often fill positions such as receptionists and general staff, even if they have the same credentials as those in higher positions. It is in this way that society is sustaining the caste system, by indirectly grouping those seen as minorities. From this perspective, the blame can be put on the government and those of higher castes for indirectly creating boundaries that enforce segregation.

It is an early Saturday morning back home in Boston, and my parents are on their daily phone call to India. Thankfully the phone is on speaker, making my eavesdropping in hopes of catching snippets of gossip a bit easier. On the other end, my aunt's voice seems shaky and my parents are trying to console her. She keeps saying things like "it is not supposed to happen this way" and "this is not right." I hear my cousin's voice on the phone. There is arguing and crying and the call is ended. I come to learn that my cousin has fallen in love with a girl of a lower caste and wishes to marry her. Apparently this is an absolute sin. 'Love marriages' are frowned upon in

India. The norm is to have an arranged marriage, which allows the families of both sides time to cross-check each other and ensure that the potential spouse comes from a good family. To worsen the issue, the girl my cousin loves is of the lower caste. But is this really a problem? Is the government saying “no,” this boy and girl may not be married because they are of different castes? Absolutely not. My aunt and uncle could very well go ahead and give their blessings to their son for a prosperous marriage. So why aren’t they?



Arranged marriages help to propel the strength of the caste system into future generations.

There are many reasons why people may not want to get rid of this system of ranking people in society. For one, it establishes superiority for those who are at the top. A sense of exclusivity and eliteness is created from this transcendence above all, and the power that upper castes have above, say, servants strengthens this sense of domination. Furthermore, when those of upper castes are kind towards those of lower castes (e.g. providing servants with material goods), their superiority seems justified. They think it is fine to have servants because they treat them relatively well. Moreover, the caste system maintains peace because everyone has specific levels in society. Not everyone will compete for the same jobs, not everyone will compete for admissions into the same colleges, and not everyone will compete for certain societal roles. This further supports the notion that the upper-caste society members want to propagate the caste system to maintain their dominance.

We are at Logan International Airport, standing to the side and unzipping one of our rather large suitcases because it exceeded the 50 pound limit. We know exactly what is causing the excessive weight, so when the suitcase is opened up, we are not surprised to find bags upon bags of Lindt truffles and Ghirardelli chocolate squares inside. They are covered by various items of my old clothes, ranging from khaki cargo pants to frilly pink dresses. These items are for the servants’ children in India. We know they will be anxiously waiting for these treasures, aware of the fact that we are coming from a foreign land, and as always, will be bringing such goods with us. As we transfer some of these items to another suitcase to be checked in, I can picture the excitement

on the children's faces as they run around popping truffles into their mouths and trying on the dress I wore to my first piano recital or the floral jumper I wore on my first day of kindergarten.

They seem happy. Is it possible that the servants and their families are content with their lives of subjugation? Perhaps they have come to peace with working as servants, knowing that they will reap the benefits of working in an affluent household. They will receive luxuries that they would not get otherwise because they are stuck in their way of life.

But are they really stuck? This is what the government and upper class members argue about when they are blamed for the existence of the caste system. They say that servants and those of lower castes have the potential to escape their drab lives and work hard to achieve more. However, this is so contradictory of the government to say seeing as they are the ones who are influencing the caste system. Say a servant were to refuse to work as a servant. What could they do? At this point, their history of being a laborer would prevent them from getting an education and then getting a job. Their children would be demoted to servant status because of their parents' previous profession. Thus, they are stuck in an endless cycle because the effect of the caste system is so permanent. It is nearly impossible to escape one's caste due to its longstanding establishment, yet in contradiction, there also exists the goal of equality.



Works Cited

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