

Varna in contemporary Hindu society

The social order of varna or caste (varna krama) is still a very sensitive subject in Hinduism and the Hindu community. Certain castes still enjoy better social and political privileges in practice, while in theory the constitution guarantees equal treatment. They play a very powerful role in present-day, Indian society. Their influence can be seen in every aspect of India's social, political, economic and cultural milieu, from films to politics. The laws are clearly against discrimination of any kind, but they are not uniformly or consistently promulgated due to lack of oversight and the fact that the enforcers are often from higher castes.

One may rewrite the history of ancient India's caste system and caste rules, glossing over facts and silencing the voices of dissent with political clout, just as some have been trying to do in recent times. However, one cannot hide from the glaring truth that the caste system is still a predominant source of discontent, dissonance and disunion in the present-day Hindu society. It had been so then, as it is now.

The idea of high (uccha) and low (nicha) births due to one's karma or divine justice is an integral aspect of Hindu social system and religious beliefs. One can find references to it even in the Bhagavadgita. When scriptures themselves seem to justify a rather unjust system or practice, it is difficult for many to assimilate the incongruity and hold on to their faith, without suffering from skepticism or even indignation.

There must still be many places in India where low caste people are subject to discrimination and social injustice, as the continuation of the ancient Varna system despite the fact

that it has outlived its purpose. From school and college campuses to legislative bodies and government institutions, caste consciousness dominates India's collective psyche. Until it is swept away by the currents of modernity and the egalitarian values of equality and fraternity or universal brotherhood, Hinduism will remain vulnerable to the problem of conversions and desertions by the lower castes.