

India's Caste System and American Pluralism: Some Similarities

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A 2009 article in *Newsweek* by Lisa Miller indicated that Americans “are slowly becoming more like Hindus and less like traditional Christians in the ways we think about God, our selves, each other, and eternity.” The author cites the following poll data: 67 percent of Americans believe that many religions, not only Christianity can lead to eternal life, reflecting pluralistic Hindu ethos rather than monotheistic Christian view; 30 percent of Americans call themselves “spiritual, not religious;” 24 percent say they believe in reincarnation; and more than a third choose cremation rather than burial. <http://www.newsweek.com/id/212155>.

To this list may be added the growing caste-like pluralism and multiculturalism of the American populace. This essay describes features of India's caste system, its origin, and its negative and positive features. It concludes with a description of the caste-like pluralistic American social landscape. The United States may perhaps be described as “a country of many countries.”

Introduction

Caste is India's badge. When people think of Hindu India, they think of caste. Caste has become the subject of national shame. All have paid tribute to the caste system: Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar, James Mill, Abbe Dubois, and anthropologists G. S. Ghurye and M. N. Srinivas. Caste is a specter that continues to haunt India. Yet, India's caste based society preserves and values social and cultural diversity.

Dr. Nicholas Dirks of the University of California tells us that caste is not the basic expression of the Indian tradition. Rather, caste is a modern phenomenon. It is “the product of an historical encounter between India and the British colonial rule.” In pre-colonial society, Indians had multiple identities, consisting of temple communities, village neighborhoods, lineage and family groups, occupational guilds and devotional societies. Caste identification was one among the several social groupings. Under the British, caste became “a single term” to categorize and systematize complex Indian reality.

(See Nicholas Dirks: *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, 2001, P. 5.)

European travelers in the 16th and 17th centuries noted caste only in passing. They did not emphasize its importance. Alexander Dow of the East India Company published *The History of Hindustan* in 1768. He devotes only 1 page to caste.

Caste did not strike early European writers as something peculiar to India. They knew it in their own countries and saw it that way. J. S. Mill in his essays on *Political Economy* said that occupational groups in Europe were “almost equivalent to an hereditary distinction of caste”.¹

¹ Ram Swarup, “Logic behind perversion of caste,” *The Indian Express*, 13 September, 1996.

See <http://indianrealist.wordpress.com/2009/11/20/what-caste-actually-was-like/>. A must-read piece.

Abbe Dubois, a very influential French missionary, changed all that. Dubois had difficulty in converting Hindus to Christianity. He attributed this difficulty to the Hindu caste system. Hindus are addicted to their superstitions and to caste-born prejudices. Nobody can change them. His book *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (1816) became the official gospel of the ruling East India Company. Dubois learned Tamil and lived among ordinary people.

Missionaries in general were frustrated in getting Hindus to convert to Christianity. Caste was blamed for this failure. Crafty Brahmins were believed to keep the masses duped. The 1857 Indian rebellion, known also as the Mutiny, almost ended Britain's rule of India. The British were fearful on account of the Indian rebellion. The authorities worried that interference with religious practices would foment rebellion among the masses. They discouraged missionary activity. The rulers preferred political control to spreading Christianity.

The extended 500 year Muslim rule (1201-1707) also negatively impacted India's caste system. A number of the social groups that fought against Muslim tyranny were pushed to the outer edges of the society and became the lower castes. Among the sweeper untouchable castes in India, one finds many Rajput *gotras*, clan names. As is well known to students of Indian history, the Rajputs put up a brave fight against the Islamic conquest of north India. Writes Ram Swarup:

With the advent of Islam the Hindu society came under great pressure; it faced the problem of survival. When the political power failed, castes took over; they became defence shields and provided resistance passive and active. But in the process, the system also acquired undesirable traits like untouchability.

Alberuni who came along with Mahmud Ghaznavi mentions the four castes but no untouchability. He reports that "much, however, as these classes differ from each other, they live together in the same towns and villages, mixed together in the same houses and lodgings." . . . During the Muslim period, many Rajputs were degraded and they became scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Many of them still retain the Rajput gotra.

Ancient India had castes, but not casteism, the politicization of caste. Casteism is rampant in India today. "In its present form, casteism is a construct of colonial period, a product of imperial policies and colonial scholarship. It was strengthened by the breast-beating of our own 'reformers.' Today, it has acquired its own momentum and vested interests."²

The caste system in ancient times was not static. Castes rose and fell within their *Varna*, the four-fold classification of society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Religious teachers rose from different castes, including the lower ones. For example, saint Ravi Das was an untouchable *Chamar*, a leather worker; Saint Kabir was a *Jolaha* or weaver—both members of the lower castes.

VARNA AND JATI

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Ram Swarup, *Ibid.*

There are four *varnas* or caste groups: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Untouchables constitute the fifth group. Each varna is further divided into numerous jatis, or birth-groups (lineages). There are 4 varnas but hundreds of jatis or birth-groups in India. Some jatis are small, numbering a few thousand, others large numbering into millions. Jatis vary by region and state. Chetiars are found in the Southern states and Marwaris in Rajasthan; both are mercantile communities.

ATTRIBUTES OF THE CASTE SYSTEM: The following features are commonly associated with the caste system.

Membership by Birth. One is born into a given caste. One does not voluntarily choose it.

Endogamy. Marriage is restricted to members within one's own caste. This feature continues to hold sway in modern India, although somewhat weakened.

Occupational Specialization. Different castes pursue different occupations. The following rough occupational specialization may be specified.

- Brahmins = priests, philosophers and teachers;
- Kshatriyas = rulers, governors and warriors;
- Vaish or Vaishyas = merchants, traders, business owners and farmers;
- Shudras = service occupations such as carpentry, weaving, tailoring, barbering;
- Untouchables = engaged in work generally considered unclean and polluting, such as skinning and tanning of leather, janitorial work, and scavenging work.

Occupational specialization by caste was not strictly adhered to even in ancient times. Many examples from epic stories can be provided: sage Vishvamitra was born a Kshatriya and was a great teacher; Drona Acharya, a Brahmin, commanded and fought in the Mahabharata War. Sage Valmiki was an untouchable. The 7th century king Harsha was a Vaishya, a merchant caste.

Modernization and urban living have seriously eroded the caste-based occupational division in society. All now enter government service, business, teaching and the professions, without consideration of any caste affiliation.

Commensality. Caste identification restricts eating and drinking among one's own caste members. Orthodox members adhere to this rule. This was not true in rural North India where I grew up. Food was shared among different caste groups; a wedding celebration drew members from different castes (see more below). Modernity has seriously eroded this feature even where it existed.

Hierarchy. There is some rank order among the castes in terms of status and prestige: Brahmins on the top and Untouchables at the bottom. The rank order is not always clear nor is it accepted by all. It varies by region. In some localities, Brahmins may be placed at the top; in another locality Vaishyas or Kshatriyas may occupy the high position.

Important point: status is not co-equal with economic ranking. Brahmins may occupy a higher religious status but many are poor, especially in North India. See more below.

ORIGIN

The caste system has existed in India from very old times. Several factors contributed to it. I describe four such factors.

1. Originally it may have been based on *Gunas*, innate qualities. Krishna's words in the Bhagavad Gita may be quoted: "The four varnas have been created by Me through a division according to *guna-karma*, i.e. personal qualities and type of work." (4.13) The division of society based on *gunas* or innate qualities degenerated over centuries. It became fixed in birth and lineage. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) writes: "There is no doubt that the institution of caste degenerated. It ceased to be determined by spiritual qualifications which, once essential, have now come to be subordinate and even immaterial and is determined by the purely material tests of occupation and birth."³

2. Like other ancient societies, India was once divided into a number of tribes or endogamous ethnic groups. The tribal or ethnic groups became castes. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) writes: "That the people of India were once organized on tribal basis is well-known, and although the tribes have become castes, the tribal organization still remains intact."⁴

Dr. Ambedkar did not subscribe to the racial basis of caste:

The racial theory of Untouchability not only runs counter to the results of anthropometry, but it also finds very little support from such facts as we know about the ethnology of India.

3. Migration of people creates new castes. Jews and Parsees who entered India to evade persecution at their original home were treated as separate jatis or caste groups. Jews and Parsees survived as a distinct communities because India celebrated ethnic diversity. Jews disappeared in China because of intermarriage with locals. Saraswat Brahmins on the Konkan coast in western India migrated from Kashmir to evade Muslim persecution. Tibetan Buddhists who fled to India with Dalai Lama in 1959 are a new jati or a caste group.

4. Religious conversion leads to new castes. When weavers converted to Islam in Punjab in 1800s, a new caste group was born.

CASTE WITHIN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

Christians and Muslims in India do not escape caste divisions. Both communities are divided into a number of subgroups which function like caste groups. Christians include Syrian Christians, Catholics, Protestants, Goan Christians, and Adivasi Christians and are also divided by state and region. A Tamil Christian may have little in common with his compatriot in neighboring Kannada, much less in far off Delhi or Calcutta.

Muslims are even more divided: Sunnis, Shias, Bohras, Khojas, Ismailies, Ahmediyas, Wahabis and so on. Muslim caste groups practice endogamy—Sunnis marry among Sunnis, and Bohra Muslims among Bohras. Admittedly, these practices are being eroded under urban and modern influences. Imtiaz Ahmed writes:

While there can be little doubt that the Koran recommends the egalitarian principle, actual practice among Muslim communities in different parts of the world falls short of

³ Sri Aurobindo, *India's Rebirth*, p 27

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Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, V 1, p 303.

the Koranic ideal. Particularly in India and Pakistan the Muslim society is clearly stratified. First, there is a line which divides the Ashraf from the Ajlaf: the former are high and the latter low. The Ashraf are further divided into four ranked subgroups: Sayyad, Sheikh, Mughal and Pathan. Some would regard Muslim Rajputs as a fifth subgroup of the Ashraf. The Ajlaf are similarly sub-divided into a much larger number of groups. All these groups, the Ashraf and the Ajlaf, are endogamous. Furthermore, they are hierarchically arranged in relation to one another, the Sayyads occupying the highest and the Sweepers the lowest position. –See his *Caste and Social Stratification among Muslims in India*, South Asian Books, 1978, p. 142.

The Ashraf-Ajlaf distinction is not limited to India or Pakistan. One of my Moroccan Muslim students proudly told me once that he was an Ashraf and that other Moroccan students at the campus were not. In Iran only Arab descent qualifies one to hold high Vilayat-e-Faqih religious office. Only Arab descent from the Prophet Muhammad's Hashemite tribe qualifies one to wear the black turban. Other Iranian clergy wear white.

Caste divisions exist in many societies.

Ethnic or caste specialization is not unique to India. It is common around the world. The Lou tribesmen of Kenya, who live next to Lake Victoria, are fish merchants. Because of their reputation and skills, the Lou control the fish trading business in countries of East Africa, as far away as Mombasa. Even in the global business center of New York City, there are ethnic concentrations by occupation. Hasidic Jews control the diamond trade in Manhattan. The Vietnamese immigrants to the US run most of the "nail salons," and Koreans run the convenience stores. Because some occupations are more lucrative than others (diamond business for example), income inequality by ethnicity is inherent.

Even untouchability is not peculiar to Hindu India. It has existed elsewhere. The Packchong in Korea, Eta in Japan, and Ragyappa in Tibet all had in common the fact that these groups performed work that was considered polluting and impure. The work consisted usually of animal slaughter, tanning of animal hides and scavenging. The Eta in Japan lived separately from the rest of society. Their work was associated with "death, dirt and blood," considered impure and unclean.⁵ Gypsies or the Roma people may be considered European untouchables.

Just because untouchability has existed in several countries does not excuse the disability associated with it. Untouchability, and the disability associated with it, must see its sunset.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE: RURAL PUNJAB, NORTH India

I grew up in rural Punjab, Sangrur District, village of Ladda, in 1950s. My village contained some one dozen different Hindu and Sikh jatis or caste groups. Population count was taken by the number of family units, not individuals. Of the approximate total of 300 families in the village in 1950s, the approximate caste breakdown was as follows:

Jat farmers: 180 families

Baniya merchants: 20

⁵ Harold A. Gould, *The Hindu Caste System*, V. 1, Delhi: Chanakya Publishers, 1987, p 82-83.

Brahmins: 20

The service castes of blacksmith, barber, carpenter, oil presser, weaver: 30

Two untouchable groups of Chamars and Churahs (leather workers and sweepers): 25 each

Total: about 300 families.

Some 20 Muslim families of potters and weavers left the village in 1947 to migrate to Pakistan or to majority Muslim towns within India.

Each caste was traditionally associated with a particular occupation. But all did not pursue it. None of the 20 Brahmin families for example pursued the traditional priest-craft; some did farming, others did retailing or manual labor. Many of the untouchables did share-cropping, in addition to leather work. For each jati, the marriage circle consisted of some 40-50 villages spread within a radius of about 50 miles. This was 60 years ago. With the availability of modern transportation and communication, the marriage circle now encompasses a wider area.

The village consisted of four contiguous sections or neighborhoods, called *behras*. The untouchables occupied one of the four neighborhoods. All other castes were mingled in the remaining three sections. Untouchable separateness was not strictly adhered to. Members of the higher castes bought properties adjoining the untouchable quarter. The primary school I attended was located in the untouchable section of the village and nobody thought much about it. With the exception of the untouchables, all other caste groups were intermingled. They shared each other's food and water. They attended each other's weddings and special ceremonies. Even though food and water was not shared with the untouchable, they were an integral part of the village social and economic fabric.

My Vaishya family's three immediate neighbors were a Brahmin, a Tailor and a Jat farmer. No taboo about sharing food held sway. As a child I accepted water and food at the tailor's home and nobody in my family told me otherwise. Nobody in the village identified the tailor as a shudra. Only after reading books on caste did I know that the tailor belonged to the lower shudra caste. The barely literate Brahmin neighbor pursued subsistence farming rather than the traditional priest-craft.

Many descriptions of caste system popular in the West are based on ancient law books. For example, the laws of Manu seriously limited the rights of the untouchable caste groups. But that is not the present-day ground reality. Even sixty years ago in 1950s in Punjab where I grew up, hereditary occupation was not much followed. The principle of pollution and purity did not strictly hold sway. The status difference among different groups was minimal. Only the practice of endogamy remained. And, things have dramatically changed since my childhood.

Village identification was more important than caste or religious identification. When I left India some 50 years ago to travel to the United States for study, the entire village walked two miles to the railway station to send me off with their blessings. Many had teary eyes. When I returned three years later, a similar reception waited for me at the village gate. My emotional tie to the village is stronger than to my caste or religion. Even though I left the village some 50 years ago, I make periodic pilgrimages there.

Mine was a peaceful village, like all other villages in the vicinity that I knew. Inter-caste tensions were rare. Textbook accounts of inter-caste conflict are exaggerated or untrue. There was small scale thievery but little serious or violent crime. There were no accounts of girls being raped in the remembered history of the village. All lived in similar housing, one or two room clay-brick houses with front courtyards where animals might be tethered and cooking and washing were done. Their possessions were few in number. Milk and honey did not flow, contrary to idealized versions of Punjabi rural life. But all managed a healthful organic diet. There was the close-knit family and the larger village community that gave one the sense of belonging. This inculcated confidence and pride. Fairs, festivals and wedding feasts provided entertainment and gaiety. We lived reasonably contented lives.

In post-Independence India, caste has been politicized and arenas of conflict have increased. Political parties now accentuate caste and religious divisions in order to garner votes. During a 2015 visit to the village, it was reported to me that election-based conflict had marred the once peaceful village community.

Economic Disparity in the village: The Untouchables were somewhat poorer than the rest in the village, but not by much. All communities were poor. There was no correlation between upper caste and economic standing. Theoretically, Brahmins were supposed to occupy the top rank; in reality, they received no elevated status economically or in prestige. Jat farmers and Baniya merchants earned better than other caste groups including Brahmins, individual cases excepted. With land values skyrocketing in the recent decades, Jat farmers who own land have become affluent. As 95 percent of the village population was illiterate, educational gaps were minimal. One of my fond memories as a young student was to read and compose letters for the villagers. Letters were exchanged only on special occasions--to announce births, deaths, and marriages. Even though most adults were unlettered, they were not un-smart, unwise or ignorant. With all my education, I would not want to match my wits with theirs.

Although food and water were not shared with the untouchables, they were fully integrated into the economic and social life of the village. All members of the village bought and sold from one another, including the untouchables. The embroidered brocade shoes I wore at my wedding were made by the highly respected village cobbler, an untouchable by caste and a friend of my father. I still own the flat-soled brocade pair. My village was typical of the ground reality in rural Punjab as I saw it. The village had not changed much in several centuries. Major social and economic changes occurred in the subsequent decades. In a 2015 visit to my native village, I was informed that Jat farmers and untouchables not only worked side by side on the farm but also now shared water, tea and food.

Brahmin poverty runs across North India. Swami Vivekananda tells us that his master Ramakrishna Parmahansa was born into a very poor Brahmin family in Bengal. Writing about the Brahmins, Vivekananda observes:

You have heard of the Brahmins and their priest-craft many times. . . They are the poorest of all the classes in the country, and the secret of their power lies in their renunciation. . . . Theirs is the poorest priesthood in the world.⁶

Prakash Tandon gives a similar picture of Brahmin poverty in Punjab (*Punjabi Century: 1857-1947*, published by: Chatto and Winds, 1961). I write about Brahmin poverty to counter the often made claims that Brahmins have exploited India. Note that Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation, was not a Brahmin but a Modh Baniya, a member of the Vaishya group. PM Narendra Modi who won elections in 2014 and 2019 is a Modh Ghanchi, an oil-pressure and trading group, generally considered to be either Vaishya or even a lower caste.

Caste difference is not a national phenomenon; it is regional, even local. I have been told that Brahmins do hold land and property in South India, unlike in North India. Temple entry was denied to the untouchables in the past. Mahatma Gandhi's vigorous anti-discrimination campaigns put an end to these ignoble practices. Tables have turned against the Brahmins in several south Indian states. Brahmins are systematically discriminated against, especially in the state of Tamil Nad. Furthermore, reservation quotas in government employment for the lower castes now discriminate against Brahmins and other upper castes.

The temple exclusion for the untouchables and caste-based discrimination (whether pro or anti-Brahmin), where these exist, must end.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF CASTE

Caste has too long been the bane of Indian society. Negative aspects of the caste based hierarchy in status and economic differences have received much scholarly attention. Where these exist, they must go. Caste based discrimination where it remains must end.

But the positive aspects of the caste system need to be recognized. Caste based society is a tolerant society. It celebrates our cultural differences. Different castes practice their own customs in marriage, worship, food and dress. Minorities, whether religious, racial, language or ethnic, retain their cultural distinctiveness within the larger Hindu society.

Caste system is a model of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society that celebrates diversity. In contrast, egalitarian societies that emphasize universalism (one set of laws and customs for all) often use force and coercion to achieve oneness. Note the following negative consequences of universalism.

- Stalin liquidated 30 to 40 million Russians in order to create a classless egalitarian communist society in the Soviet Union. The same goes for Maoist China.
- The Islamic conquest of the Middle East resulted in the exile and murder of hordes of non-Muslims, called Kafirs. Non-Muslims, when tolerated, were turned into Dhimmis, second-class citizens. Before the advent of Islam, the Middle Eastern countries were religiously and ethnically diverse. Jews, Christians, and Pagans lived side by side in equal status.⁷ Under Islamic hegemony, religious minorities were turned into second-class citizens or pushed out of the border.

"My Master," in *Inspired Talks*, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, NY, 1987, p. 157.

⁷ Bat Ye'or: [*Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide*](#), Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2001

- During the Church sanctioned Inquisition that lasted several hundred years in Europe, especially in Spain and Portugal, many Jews were tortured, liquidated or exiled. Inquisition reached as far as Goa on the Indian coast.⁸

With emphasis on pluralism and cultural diversity, the caste based society escapes such large scale onslaughts on people. Different caste, religious, ethnic and language groups follow their particular modes of living and religious belief.

Hindu Pluralism in History

Hindu India illustrates its commitment to pluralism in history. Christianity entered India with Thomas of Syria in the 4th century A.D. (see the footnote).⁹ Judaism came to India after the Jewish temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. and the Jews were expelled from their homeland. Both Christians and Jews have flourished in a predominant Hindu India for centuries without being persecuted. In a recent book titled *Who Are the Jews of India?* (University of California Press, 2000), author Nathan Katz observes that India is the only country where the Jews were not persecuted: “The Indian chapter is one of the happiest of the Jewish Diaspora.” p. 4. Also search for an article by Emily Wax of the *Washington Post* on Jews of India.

Zoroastrians known as Parsees (or Parsis) entered India in the 7th and 8th centuries. They fled to escape Islamic conquest of Persia and the decimation of its ancient Zoroastrian religion. The Parsees are an affluent community in the city of Bombay without a sense of having been persecuted. Among the richest business families in India are the Parsees; for example, the Tata family controls a huge industrial empire. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the powerful Prime Minister of India, was married to Feroze Gandhi, a Parsee (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi).

Tibetan Buddhists and Bangladeshi refugees are new entrants into India. Like the Jews and the Parsees, they add to the caste diversity in India.

Here is a telling historical fact: Jews also reached China. As in India, Jews were not persecuted in China. But they disappeared in China through intermarriage and assimilation. But Jews survived in India because their distinctiveness received societal approval.¹⁰ India not only

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Richard Zimler reports in his book *Guardian of the Dawn* that the Portuguese Inquisition in Goa was “the most merciless and cruel ever developed. It was a machinery of death.” Over the 250 years (1560 to about 1812), any man, woman or child could be arrested and tortured for simply saying a prayer, wearing a religious symbol or keeping an idol at home. The Portuguese are nostalgic about Goa and think of it as a glorious island, peaceful, multicultural and prosperous. Indians also are not aware of the horrors of the Inquisition in Goa. Visit:

http://www.christianaggression.org/item_display.php?id=1126738163&type=articles.

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There are different accounts as to when Christianity came to Kerala in South India. It is now generally agreed that Christianity was not introduced by St Thomas in the first century but by Syrian merchant Thomas Cananeus in the 4th century. See <http://folks.co.in/2009/11/st-thomas-in-india-myth-or-truth/>

¹⁰ Most Indian Jews have migrated to Israel in the recent decades for economic reasons, not for any reason of persecution or discrimination within India.

welcomed the oppressed groups, it allowed them to maintain their distinct cultural identity. Koenraad Elst observes:

It is one thing to say that Hindu society has received the persecuted Jewish, Syrian Christian and Parsi communities well, but another to devise a system that allowed them to retain their identity and yet integrate into Hindu society.¹¹

CASTE-LIKE AMERICAN ETHNIC PLURALISM

With the increase in immigration of new nationality groups, the United States is becoming ethnically diverse and culturally and religiously pluralistic. It begins to resemble caste-like system in India.

The American “melting-pot” is somewhat of a myth. The melting pot theory combines people of different cultures and religions to yield a final product of uniform consistency and flavor. The new mix is quite different from the original parts; hence the “Melting Pot”. This idea differs from other analogies, particularly the *salad bowl* analogy. In a salad bowl, the ingredients retain their distinct flavor. The salad bowl analogy is more widely accepted as a description of American ethnic landscape. A pecking order in social status also existed historically: White Anglo-Saxon Protestant or the WASP at the top, then Catholics (Irish, Italian, Polish, Spanish, etc.), then Jews and then Blacks at the bottom. President Kennedy broke the Catholic barrier in the election of 1960, as Obama broke the Black barrier in 2008.

I spent six years as a graduate student in Buffalo, NY (1963-69). Buffalo was a multi-ethnic city, similar to other large industrial cities in the North. Different nationality groups concentrated in different parts of the city. Buffalo was first settled primarily by New Englanders, mostly English. Germans were the first wave of European immigrants. Then, starting in the middle of 1800s, came the Irish to escape famine, then the Italians, the Polish, the Greeks and a smaller number of Russian and East European Jews.

Polish Americans occupied the East Side, while Italian Americans concentrated in the West Side. The South Buffalo and the neighborhood called “the First Ward” were inhabited primarily by the Irish, as the Kaisertown was by persons of German descent. The East Side is now a predominantly African American neighborhood. The West Side is now home to the city's new Hispanic community, predominantly of Puerto Rican descent.

The definition of who is “White” has changed over time in America. The book, *How the Irish became White* by Noel Ignatiev, 1995, describes the struggle the Irish had to mount to join “White” labor unions and clubs. It was only towards the end of the 19th century that the Irish became White. A similar struggle defined the experience of Italians, Greeks, Polish and the Slavic people. The Jews did not make into the White club till the middle of the 20th century. See “*How Jews became White Folks and What that says about America*” by Karen Bodkin, 1998. See also Rajiv Malhotra on “Whiteness Studies” at: <http://rajivmalhotra.sulekha.com/blog/post/2007/04/whiteness-studies-and-implications-for-indian-american.htm>

The recent American immigration is fueled by Asians and the Hispanics. The Asian community includes many distinct nationality groups: Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and

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Koenraad Elst, *Who is a Hindu?*, Voice of India, 2001; Ch 1, at: <http://voiceofdharma.org/books/wiah/ch1.htm> .

several others. The Hispanics are also culturally divided by the country of origin, although to a lesser extent than the Asians. The new immigrant communities tend to keep their cultural and religious identity for two to three generations. They overwhelmingly marry within their own kind. It may be added that certain older minority groups such as the Mormons and the Amish are caste-like ethnic groups who also marry predominantly within their own community. All this adds to the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, caste-like American landscape.

Science and technology were supposed to eradicate primordial ties. This did not happen. Instead, finding one's "roots" has become important. Walt Whitman described America as "a nation of nations." Immigrants in the US do not give up their religion, language, customs, food or music. America now is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-racial society. More and more it resembles a caste-like society, not in the sense of hierarchy but in the sense that it values and preserves cultural diversity. This is a good thing.

America is a country that endlessly renews itself. This is also true of India in history: waves upon waves entered India over the centuries. The secret to American genius is that it adds new bloodlines every generation, thus adding to its cultural mix. The energy of new combinations produces something different and better. The faces of immigrants are different now, mostly brown and yellow. They do not arrive at Ellis Island as previous generations did; they come through the Kennedy Airport. The end result is the same – not only a more vigorous and vibrant America, but also more pluralistic and more tolerant America, much like the India through history. This again is a good thing.