

Castes in the Old World and in the New.

by

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Theoretically, or in its primary sense, the term caste was applied to certain fixed divisions of society. By fixed divisions, I mean such divisions of society that if a man enters comes within a certain class, neither he nor his posterity is able to pass into another. In short, the son must follow in the footsteps of his father. If the father is a priest, the son will be a priest; if a merchant, he will be a merchant; if the father is a servant, so will be the son.

Practically, and especially in modern times, its meaning has varied with the fancy of the writer or speaker, and the term caste has been applied to almost every artificial division of a people, or even of a town; to a labor union, through all the stages, up to the gentry of England.

History reveals to us that no country, except India, ever adhered to the original meaning of caste. Here, whether by divine

inspiration or through the scheming forethought of some great legislator, the caste system has flourished for centuries, and is still flourishing, only in a more modified form.

According to the laws of Manu, the people of India were divided into four great classes. All were considered the posterity of the great Brahma, their all-powerful divinity; but their social position, power or lack of power, was determined by the region of the being from which they had their origin.

Their condition was hereditary, and depended not on acquired position. Those of the highest caste, the priests or lawgivers, emanated from the head of the great god; hence their power of invention, their superiority over those that sprang from other parts; their control, not only in this world, but also in the next, over the blessings or the curses of those in the lower castes.

The arms and shoulders of the great Brahma are represented by the military class. The officer of this class is also considered somewhat sacred, and the dependence of priests and the military class is mutual; one cannot exist

without the other, either in the present or in the future world.

Next come the men of business, the mercantile class, who claim common descent from the breast and thigh of Brahma. Their duty is to buy and sell, to raise cattle and cultivate the soil, to subdue the beasts of the forest and to conquer the waves of the deep.

As the foot is the lowest region of the great Brahma, so are the servants, its offspring, the lowest caste of Indian society. While they are not considered as slaves, yet improvement is impossible. They dare not to acquire knowledge nor accumulate property. They are servants, servants through eternity.

Although mixture of castes was not absolutely forbidden, yet in every case where there was a mixture, the guilty individual was an offender, was considered an outcast, often tortured for years, and at last compelled to pay a large ransom in order to regain caste. Stealing, manslaughter, or crime of any kind will not cause a man to lose caste, but the poorest

Brahman would be forsaken by wife and child, by friend and relative, would consider himself an outcast forever, should he mix with Europeans, or eat, say, with the emperor of Russia or of Germany, or with any other great potentate.

Caste, though still existing in India, is no longer based on its original foundation. The two intermediate classes have disappeared altogether, and in their place we have eighteen other principal and at least a hundred minor classes according to trade or profession. But the caste barrier still exists: that is, the son must follow the occupation of the father or else become an outcast; but the outcasts have become so numerous that there are now castes of the outcasts.

Never has there been an institution, except Christianity, so powerful, so lasting, so unconquerable, as the caste system of India. To the people of India it is no hardship, but rather a matter of conscience. A good sudra would consider himself just as much degraded should he eat with a Brahman as a Brahman would to eat

with a sudra.

The structure, founded on religious principles, has been found indestructible by the advancement of civilization; has endured all the battering and cannonading of the intervening ages. Slowly the nineteenth century sees the foundation give way, its walls are beginning to totter, and the institution cannot withstand much longer the hammering process of the missionary, the European philosopher, and the nineteenth century philanthropist.

Although no other nations of the Old World have, at any time, held rigidly to the caste system, yet there was an approach to it when the society of Europe was bound by the laws of the Feudal system. But an institution so artificial, so tyrannical, was soon trodden underfoot by the advancing strides of the civilized world. Since then there has always been, and still is, a class distinction more natural, based either on birth, wealth, position, trade, or profession. But, as a rule, the right of commanding in the Old World has descended from generation

to generation, except as occasionally there has been a provicer strong enough to break away from the iron hand of custom, or an individual ambitious enough to override the barrier of class distinction. Although these instances have been few, yet they have been enough to prove to the world that the time, when neither ability, wealth, ambition nor influence could be accepted as an adequate title to promotion to the highest rank, is passed.

In a variety of instances, rank was supposed to be the indispensable quality to officer, but Disraeli, a despised Jew, without rank and without titled friends to introduce him, declared to the hissing members of the English Parliament, "Although you may make me to sit down now, the time will come when you shall hear me." Perhaps the means employed to reach the desired end have not always been strictly honest, but the time did come when the Queen and all the stiff-necked gentry bowed in submission to the will of the then despised but now honored Disraeli.

Even in the Old World it is no longer a question of mere rank, of who were your ancestors. But it is beginning to be not "Who is your grandfather?" but "Who are you?" "What do you have a year?" & "What can you do?" If the reply is "nothing," then the condition is fixed and the individual remains with the majority, submissive to the ambitious, to the gentry, and to the royalty.

The existence of high and low classes is not necessarily the criterion of a dissatisfied and unhappy lower class; but rather a sign that the majority are satisfied and ready to recognize the superiority of the nobles and royalty. They pride themselves on the splendors of the royalty and the good manners of the nobles; to be the favored servant of one of them is the ambition of many. As a rule, the classes are happy within themselves. They have each others' sympathy. In time of plenty they have their feasts and merry-making; in time of scarcity they share each others' surplus.

Equality in the Old World is enjoyed only by members of the same class. There is no claim of equality between the members of different classes; they stand to each other as inferiors and superiors.

But now let us turn to the society of the New World, the United States, where all labor is honored, and all men are created equal; the nation that is founded on equality; the nation that in all speeches, periodicals and popular literature upholds equality; the nation that condemns the Old World's class distinctions, nobility, and royalty; the nation that denounces all titles and proclaims to the world that all men are rulers with equal voice in the government.

This is the proclamation that comes to the Old World. But the ruling class of the Old World do not care to emigrate, while their loyal and intelligent supporters think for themselves that there surely cannot be a nation of kings unless the kings too go to work to dig for themselves. But the remaining ones, the adventurous and ambitious few,

the paupers, too lazy to work, the degraded anarchists who find themselves too weak, through lack of support from the industrious and intelligent working class, to overthrow the machinery of the Old World's government, to these it is tidings of great joy. To be kings is all they wanted, and now they have the promise, if only they will go to the land beyond the Atlantic. Their only conception of a ruler is a being in gilt-buttoned and gem-set garments, riding at his ease in his coach with four, and with a brass-buttoned coachman. Blinded by the show and glitter, they have applauded the royalty while in sight, but out of sight they have threatened the very foundation of the Old World's government. Unable to usurp the throne in the Old World, we soon find them in the New World, disappointed and dissatisfied "rulers," crowded into damp basements and dingy garrets. This does not at all correspond to their idea of a ruler, so they are now in a good condition to be the easy prey of the

demagogue.

This is the natural result of the egotistical writings of Americans about equality. If equality is the base on which the American nation is founded, then the cry of equality is likely to be its final ruin. What is the use of this cry of equality? It is true America has no lords, barons, counts, or dukes, but does that prove that there is no class distinction? No. For class distinction in the New World is causing greater unhappiness than it ever did in the Old, and this is true especially among women. Mr. Gladstone once told a great company of working-men that though they were very fond of crying aloud about equality, yet they had a sneaking liking for a lord. This certainly applies to the typical American, the being who shouts equality till his throat is sore, and yet is ever ready to climb above the masses to show them his superiority.

In the Old World, women who toil have each other's sympathy; not so in

the New; here every vocation has its niche in society. The woman of business cannot hide her who labors; the officer employer looks down with condescending superiority on the shop girl; the shop girl on the sewing girl; the sewing girl on the domestic servant. The servant on the shorewoman; and so on down to the bring who gets her daily living at the back door of a hotel, who would feel degraded to associate with the bring who begs from door to door.

Then what means this cry of equality? Simply this, that every man, whether intelligent or ignorant, whether good, bad, or indifferent, has an equal chance to make or to ruin the government of the United States; that every man, if he is smart enough to get there, no matter how, may become the administrator of the people's welfare.

Concerning the cry that "all labor is honored in the United States," I would say, it is honored to this extent, that the sooner you cease to toil with

the hand, the sooner you will find that you are honored. If you have plenty of money, and are able to trace your ancestry back to Queen Elizabeth, it is all the better for you, if you want to be honored. No English lord is more proud of his ancestry than the American who can trace his descent to that theoretically despised English nobility.

Unhappiness due to class distinction is greater in the United States than in the Old World. There the classes are fixed; very few expect to rise above the position of the parent. There, indeed, the father's ambition is to instruct the son in his art, while the mother's prayer is that he may remain loyal to his superiors. Not so in America. Here the parents sacrifice everything that the child may occupy a more honored position than did the father or mother; and the result in many cases is a shameful neglect of the parent on part of the child.

Custom, at the sacrifice of personal gain, compels the English landlord to treat his old tenants with respect and consideration. For even an English lord can lose his social position by inconsiderate treatments of his dependents. But in America it is often theascal who gets to the front. Here every man is so intent on number one and the rights of number one, that there is no time for number two, much less for number three.

If a man comes to sudden prominence in the state, the neighbors don't quite see how he did it, but then he got there and that is all that is necessary. A man may become a state legislator and at the same time be too poor or too busy to bury his mother. While he is unfolding his large-hearted views in the state-house, the attendants of a state institution are chanting the requiem of the mother who spent her life for the well-being of her son.

The American is ever ready to condemn the Old World's nobility for

swalling their beautiful promises and robbing the lower classes of a means to give them higher ideals of life, but at the same time will applaud the American who is level-headed enough to get the most possible, in dollars and cents, out of his landed possessions, after at the detriment of the beauty of the landscape, thus robbing a whole community of enjoyment.

When the American ceases his cry of equality, and recognizes that class distinction there must be and always will be so long as human nature remains the same and there is difference of ability and opportunity, when he indeed honors labor as a means of physical, mental, and moral improvement to the individual, then will he actually realize that happiness and that equality which he now fancies to exist in America.