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## UNIT 4    CASTE AND SOCIAL ORDER

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The main objective of the unit is to give a history of caste system. The history of caste system is dealt in brief and traced to the caste system in Indian society. The place of it in the social order of India is also given in this unit. Finally the views of Mahatma Gandhi on caste system and untouchability are paid due attention. Thus by the end to this unit you will be able to have a brief idea of the history of caste system; to know about its origins in the Indian history; to have a basic understanding about its role in Indian social order; and to understand about the views of Gandhiji on caste system and untouchability.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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The word 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese and Spanish word '*casta*' meaning 'race', breed or lineage. According to the Britannica Encyclopedia, it means a group of people having a specific social rank, defined generally by descent, marriage and occupation. Each caste has its own customs that restrict the occupations and dietary habits of its members and their social contact with members of other castes. Anthropologists use the term more generally, to a social group that is endogamous and occupationally specialized. Caste systems are traditional hereditary systems of social stratification enforced by common practice and based on classification such as occupation, race, ethnicity etc. In its broadest sense, examples of caste based societies were found in Latin America under Spanish and Portuguese rule apart from India. Systems similar to caste are said to exist in other parts of the world such as Japan, Indo-China, Indonesia and in countries situated to the north of India like Afghanistan and Baluchistan. They do not completely resemble caste but they have some resemblance of the caste system. A caste system is one whereby a society is divided into a number of self-contained and completely segregated units or castes, and the mutual relationship between them are determined ritually in a graded scale. The caste system in its most developed form is found in India. In this unit we are dealing mainly with the place of caste system in the social order of India and Gandhiji's views on it.

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## 4.2 CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

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Caste is a fundamental institution of Indian society. It pervades the entire gamut of Indian social organization and there is hardly any aspect of Indian society which is not influenced by caste. India has to contend with a vast array and variety of problems inherent in the social fabric. The caste system has had profound and far reaching effects on the very ethos, culture, and character of the society at large in the country. Caste, in one form or the other, in a rudimentary or highly developed form, has always been associated with Indian society. The relation between caste and Indian society has been so long and so intimate that many have viewed caste and Indian society as coeval. The features of caste prevailing through the past centuries may be described under nine heads: hierarchy, endogamy and hypergamy; occupational association; restriction on food; drink and smoking; distinction in custom, dress and speech; pollution; ritual and other privileges and disabilities; caste organization and caste mobility.

A number of theories about the origin of caste have been given by Indologists and other social scientists. But no one has so far succeeded in giving a satisfactory theory of the origin of caste. The very dynamic nature of caste seems to elude all efforts to theories or generalize about the system. Some researchers believe that the caste system began with the Indo-Aryan migration to India. However, the theory of Indo-Aryan migration itself is a highly disputed topic.

Although many Hindu scriptures contain passages that can be interpreted to sanction the caste system, they also contain indications that the caste system is not an essential part of Hindu religion. The Vedas place very little importance on the caste system. Later scriptures such as *Bhagavad Gita* and *Manu Smriti* state that the four *varnas* are created by God. The traditional theory believes that the caste system has been established by divine ordinance or at least with divine approval. This theory views caste system as a normal and natural system. On the other hand, the sociological theory regards caste system as a man-made or artificially created and an ascriptive system of stratification in which status and role are determined by birth.

The traditional view has two versions: Mythical and metaphysical. The metaphysical version explains the fixed function, hierarchy and other characteristics of caste. Each caste has a separate function and this function is determined by the nature and qualities of the caste members. The mythical version regards four castes have emerged from different parts of *Brahman's* body, *Brahma*, the lord of creation, created human beings from different limbs; the *Brahmanas* from his mouth, and so they were to be the intellectuals. Hence they were assigned the highest position in society and their occupation was priesthood. The *Kshatriyas* sprung from the arm of *Brahma* and were given the second position in society, that of warriors signified by the use of arms. The *Vaishyas* were given the third position and they were believed to be created from the thigh of *Brahma*. They became traders by occupation. *Shudras* who sprung from *Brhama's* feet were manual workers and they occupied the fourth position in society.

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## 4.3 VARNA SYSTEM

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The Sanskrit term *varna* is derived from the root 'vri' which means choice or to choose. This is contrary to the assumption that 'varna' denotes color and hence

signifies qualities of some one. In the context of social hierarchies, it means social arrangement. At later stages the word '*varna*' came to be used for the four social classes i.e. *Brahmana* (scholarly community), *Kshatriya* (warriors or political community), *Vaishya* (mercantile community) and *Shudra* (service providing community). There was nothing like higher or lower *varna* in the Vedic period. The divisions of society into four varnas or four orders were based on the division of labour. *Brahman* acted as priest, *Kshatriyas* as rulers and fighters, *Vaishyas* as traders and *shudras* as service class. Each *varna* worshipped different deities and followed different rituals. This difference was because each group had to achieve different object according to its occupational role. Brahmins wanted maximum holy luster for which they worshipped *agni* (fire) and recited *gayatri* mantras. *Kshatriyas* wanted physical strength for which they worshipped *Indra* and recited *Trishubh* mantras. *Vaishyas* wanted cattle wealth for which they worshipped *Visvedevas* and recited *Jagati* mantras. But there were no restrictions on the matrimonial alliances or social relations or even on the change of membership from one *varna* to another.

The aim of the four fold *varna* system in India was division of labour. The theory of division of labour is one of the fundamental theories of social organization. It propounds that for an orderly progress of work in society, it is necessary that it be divided into classes according to natural tendencies. Thus the responsibility of *Brahmanas* was to see the proper execution of works like study of knowledge and teaching and other religious activities. The government, defense and direction of the state were left to the *Kshatriyas* while the *Vaishyas* carried on the agriculture, dairy farming and business. The *Shudras* served the other three *varnas*.

The *varna* system is a developed social system. Social stratification is found in all societies but it is difficult to find one as systematic as the Indian *varna* system. The object of this system was to put the different powers of man to proper and productive uses in order to maintain the solid, organized and balanced state of society. Another major advantage of the *varna* system was the decentralization of power. Concentration of all power in the hands of one class may lead to exploitation and despotism. In the *varna* system, the power of knowledge, power of arms, power of wealth and power of labour were evenly distributed among the *Brahmanas*, the *Kshatriyas*, the *Vaishyas* and the *Shudras* respectively. By keeping respect, authority and wealth separate, the *varna* system saved the society from the defects of concentration or localization of power.

In this way the *varna* system shows a fine synthesis of the fundamentals of social organization, division of labour and decentralization. This convention was not severe and was based on inherent qualities and tendencies. Here we see the technical skill of the occupation was passed on hereditarily from generation to generation and because of practicing the same occupation over a long period of time 'occupational guilds' came into existence which later on came to be known as castes. But at a later stage, when it became the caste system we see a rigid form which lost all its good qualities. The caste system which is said to be originated from the *varna* system, is very different from it. It lost the advantages of the *varna* system and became detrimental to the society. Thus we see that though the caste system was originally evolved for the necessary classification of human duty in order to preserve the organic stability of society, its original meaning and intention were forgotten through the passage of time. It is necessary for every one to have consideration for the facts of world unity and goodwill.

Humanity demands love for all, justice; fair treatment and help to the needy and this should form the basis of society. Here we see the relevance of Gandhian social thought which India needs today because he aimed not only the uplift of this or that particular class or caste but the welfare of all or *sarvodaya*, as he called it.

## 4.4    GANDHIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

With the message of love, tolerance and service of mankind, Mahatma Gandhi successfully infused a new hope in man, both in India and abroad. As one of the builders of modern India, his contribution is second to none in the spiritual and political regeneration of India. His broad and humanistic outlook towards the problems of life will always remain an ideal to be followed not only by Indians, but humanity in general.

Before making an attempt to outline the social thought of Gandhi, we should bear in our mind that Gandhiji was a ‘Practical Idealist’. He did not want to find out the basis of social organization or wanted to evolve a theory of state. Instead, he wanted to find out a way through which such a system of social organization could become a healthier system. According to him, the origin of society lies in man’s realization that complete selfishness has no place in life. The formation of society was also to avoid violence. Thus Gandhiji was able to prove that the basis of society consists in Non-violence and Self-sacrifice. If the very origin of society lies in self-sacrifice, then there has to be a harmony between personal consideration and the good of the society. In the society he has to care for his food and shelter and for that he has to work in co-operation with others. This ‘work’ relates every man with every other man of society. Work thus becomes the basis of social organization.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your Answers.

1)    What are the two versions of the traditional view of the origin of caste system in India?

2)    How did Gandhiji define *varna* system?

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3) How is caste system different from *varna vyavastha* according to Gandhi?

4.5 GANDHI’S CONCEPT OF VARNA SYSTEM

Gandhi believed that there should be an inner arrangement in a society for enabling every member to do his share of work for the betterment of the society. He held that the ancient classification of Hindu society into four *varnas* has been made in that spirit. Thus Gandhian concept of the relation between the society and the individual is based upon the ancient Indian *varna* system. In the *varna* system different individuals were classified according to their innate tendencies and were given social roles corresponding to them. This according to Gandhi created conditions both for individual development and social system. He believed that every man was born with some definite limitations which he cannot overcome. The law of *varna* system according to Gandhi was deduced from a careful observation of these limitations. It established certain sphere of action for certain people with certain tendencies. This will help to avoid all unworthy and unnecessary competition. Gandhi finds this system to be advantageous in many ways. It is advantageous economically because it involves division of labour. It ensures hereditary skills. It has all advantages of trade unions and above all it reduces the possibility of individual poverty or pauperism to the minimum. Gandhiji’s appreciation of *varna* system was based on his faith in *Bhagavad Gita* because Lord Krishna said in it that the ‘four-fold system (*Chathurvarnya*) was created by me according to the division of qualities (*gunas*) and functions (*Karmas*). Here it is clear that *varna* does not mean that somebody is born high and some low, *varna* does not give superiority to any body simply by birth. The original *varna*-distinctions were based not on the distinctions of high and low, but on the capacities, skill and power inherent in an individual, and also on the principle of ‘division of work’.

In the opinion of Gandhi according to *varna* system, an individual was a *brahmin* not because he was born a *brahmin*, but because he was brought up in an atmosphere that enabled him to perform the duties of a *brahmin*. Similarly, *Kshatriyas* or *Vaisyas* or *Sudras* were known by their respective names on account of the specific duties that they used to prefer. It was quite possible for a *sudra* to change his *varna* by successfully performing the duties of a different *varna*. More over, only because one *varna* performs a kind of duty, which, from a superficial point of view, appears to be a better kind of duty than the duties of another *varna*, the former does not become superior to the latter. All kinds of work are important and equally essential for the society, and therefore, all kinds of work are equal.

According to Gandhi *varna* means pre-determination of the choice of man’s profession. The law of *varna* is that a man shall follow the profession of his



ancestors for earning is livelihood. Every child naturally chooses his father’s profession. *Varna* therefore is in a way that law of heredity. It is not a human invention but an immutable law of nature - the statement of a tendency that is ever present and at work. Gandhi made it clear that *varna* prescribes duties and obligations only. The performance of hereditary functions merely means that the kind of duty that he has to perform in the society has already been settled. This factor of heredity avoids the possibility of rift and strife ensuing from making fresh distribution of work everyday. Here Gandhi was asserting that in order to become a Brahmin it is necessary for a person to reveal the attributes of *brahmin*. Otherwise he ceases to be so. Because of this, Gandhi always related the doctrine of *varna* to that of *ashrama dharma*. The four fold divisions of class are added to the four fold divisions of the life of an individual. The four *ashramas* are *Brahmacarya*, *Grhastha*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa*. The ashram system is a means of systematic development for the better life. Thus *ashrama dharma* was the basis of *vedic* social organization. The notion of *dharma* was emphasized very much. *Dharma* here stands for duties. According to Gandhi every *varna* had specific and definite duties or *dharma*s attached to it. He believed that if these divisions are understood properly and their implications are fully realized, then a strong and moral society can be built on their basis.

As the champion of *varnashramadharma* Gandhi fought against the arrogant assumption of superiority of one *varna* over another. The very question of superiority or inferiority demonstrates the weakness of human nature. *Varnashrama*, on the other hand, is based on the rocky foundation of the recognition of the essential identity and oneness of all that lives. It excludes the very idea of superiority and it stands for the ideal of service to all in the society. It is through service, according to Gandhi, persons occupy their positions in their respective *varnas*. To him, no *varna* stands for inequality. He views all *varnas* as equal because the community depends on all of them in one way or another.

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## 4.6 GANDHI’S VIEWS ON CASTE SYSTEM AND UNTOUCHABILITY

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Gandhi did not think that caste system is a necessary corollary of *varna* system. He believed that caste system has been a blot on Hinduism and it has robbed the Hindu religion of its vitality and brilliance. He held that caste system is a degraded form of the original *varna* system as it has distorted the very spirit of *varna*. He said “*varnas* and *ashramas* are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of *varna* teaches us that each one of us have to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties”. Gandhi felt that the caste system with the existing innumerable divisions and with the artificial divisions imposed upon it is the very antithesis of *varnashrama*. Gandhi made a distinction between *varna* and caste. Caste is determined at birth whereas *varna* is acquired by a person according to his nature. Thus caste is based upon birth while *varna* is in action. The idea of *varna* mainly lays emphasis on the ethical and intellectual capabilities of man. In the caste system special importance is given to birth rights and respect enjoyed on this account. Again, whereas the *varna* system was flexible the caste system is a rigid one and while the number of *varnas* were only four, the number of castes are many. Caste is an excrescence upon *varna*. It is a weedy growth fit only to be weeded out. He held that there is

nothing in common between caste and *varna*, because while *varna* gives life, caste kills it. He also added that caste is a man-made institution and it has to go. It has no religious basis also. He was of opinion that Hindu society was full of chaos and confusion because of the wrong interpretation of *varna*. The *varna* of today means the gradations of high and low and it is a hideous travesty of the original. *Varna* has nothing to do with caste. Caste is an excrescence, just like untouchability upon Hinduism. It is this travesty of *varna* that has degraded Hinduism and India. Our failure to follow the law of *varna* is largely responsible for both our economic and spiritual ruin. It is one cause of unemployment and it is responsible for untouchability and defection from our faith. While defending *varnashrama* as a rational scientific fact, Gandhi criticizes untouchability as an immitigable evil.

*Varna*, according to Gandhi, does not admit the superiority or the inferiority of any *varna* over any other. So Gandhi held that *varna* system was against untouchability. Equality demanded that we should not distinguish among human beings on the basis of social occupation. Therefore, Gandhi through out his life waged a war against the evil of untouchability. By attacking untouchability, he was attacking both untouchability and the caste system. This was Jawaharlal Nehru's understanding of Gandhi's strategy. Elimination of untouchability was an important aspect of his programme. As equality of all men was the fundamental principle of Gandhian thought, he considered it his duty to uplift the untouchables and eradicate untouchability from the society. According to him, treating some as untouchables or inferiors is nothing but the abuse of *varnashrama*, which never entertains the feeling of superiority or inferiority. Viewing one as high or low is the weakness of human nature, and it reveals a person's unmanly nature. *Varnashrama* compels everyone to bow down his head in all humility before knowledge, before purity, before every person where God is seen face to face. The difference between *varna* system and untouchability is not of degree, but of kind. The basis of Gandhiji's religion was love and truth and he wanted to create a social order free from class and caste distinction. He considered untouchability as a crime on the basis of these principles and so he wanted to eradicate it.

Mahatma Gandhi held that by enforcing laws, one cannot remove untouchability. This can be removed only through the purification of one's own heart. He wanted every individual to be inwardly transformed in order to bring about a true equality. Untouchability could be removed only if the people responsible for perpetrating it wanted to do away with it. Because Gandhi views that every fight against untouchability is a religious fight, it can be gradually removed when the majority of Hindus realize that it is a heinous crime against God and man. Inter dining or an inter-caste marriage does not help the removal of untouchability. That is why he appealed to the hearts of every social reformer to take bold steps to allow the untouchables to enter temples. Side by side, he induced government of the state to legalize temple entry. He even suggested to the highly placed Hindus to adopt children of the untouchables as their own.

In order to tackle the problem of untouchability properly, Gandhiji went to the root of it. The root lies in the holy books like the Vedas and the *shastras*. He could not rewrite them and not improve them. So he interpreted the holy books in his way and made it his life's mission for the upliftment of untouchables. The Gandhian approach to the problem was simple and optimistic. He wanted truthful and non-violent means to be followed in this case also as in the pursuit of other ends of life.

Again, no *swaraj* is possible without the removal of untouchability. True democracy lies in the revival of *svadharma*, which means fulfillment of the duties that naturally come one’s way. The members of the *ashrama* carried out their various responsibilities from a sense of duty, regardless of their original caste backgrounds. We are all born to only fulfill that dharma. It brings material well being to society and spiritual freedom to individual. Thus fulfilling *svadharma* alone is conducive to bring *sarvodaya* or welfare of all.

Gandhi’s concept of *Ramarajya* stands for an egalitarian and non-violent democratic social order wherein moral values pervade all spheres of human life. Politically, it is a form of stateless society. Socially, it is a form of classless society where all persons are equally treated irrespective of caste, color, religion, sex and so on. Economically, it is a form of socialist society in which inequalities based on possession and non-possession vanish because all wealth belongs to the society as a whole. Thus, Gandhi suggested a one caste society as the solution to the caste system. He held that civic nationalism should replace casteism.

**Check Your Progress II**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your Answers.

1) What are the reasons that made Gandhiji to fight against untouchability?

2) Describe in detail the features of *varna ashrama dharma*.

4.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we are giving a brief idea of the caste system in India in the introduction. Caste system in India with emphasis on *varna* system is dealt in detail as it forms the origin of the system in Hindu society. This is followed by an analysis of Gandhian social thought and his views on *varna* system. We see that he defended *varna* system very much but was against the then existing caste system of India which is a perverted form of *varna* system. This also made him to fight against untouchability which was prevalent in Indian society during that time. It is concluded by giving a brief idea of Gandhi’s idea of one caste society which he suggested as a solution to the evils of caste system system and how he incorporated this idea in his concepts of *Ramarajya*, *Sarvodaya* etc.



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## 4.8 KEY WORDS

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<b>Excrecence</b>	:	an unnecessary or unattractive addition
<b>Mythical</b>	:	that which is legendary
<b>Metaphysical</b>	:	of or relating to metaphysics/supernatural
<b>Anthropologist</b>	:	a scientist who studies about the origin, and development- Of human race
<b>Ethnic</b>	:	a group sharing a common origin, culture or language
<b>Hierarchy</b>	:	a system in which grades or classes of status or authority are ranked one above the other.

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## 4.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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