

ISSN: 2278-9529



**GALAXY**

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

November 2015 Vol. 4. Issue VI

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

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## Class Systems, Religion, and Economic Progress

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The class system of Medieval Europe was justified on grounds of social order and religion. The caste system of India has been, and continues to be, argued on grounds of social order and religion [8]. In Medieval Europe, the class system impeded the economic progress via capitalism that was necessary to lift the bulk of the population out of poverty and ignorance. In India, the caste system continues to impede the economic progress via capitalism that is necessary to lift the bulk of the population out of poverty and ignorance. Modification or reformation of Christian beliefs in Medieval Europe removed the impeding factor. Modification or reformation of Hindu beliefs may be necessary to remove the impeding factor in India.

The class systems of Medieval Europe and India were created as a means of providing the people of those cultures with social structure and order. Over time, the people of each culture came to perceive their system with its underlying religious beliefs as an integral part of their “rich cultural heritage,” one that if lost would deny them not only God’s good graces but of more immediate concern the good graces of their clergy and rulers. Although the underlying religious beliefs of the two cultures were different, both impeded the economic progress necessary to lift large numbers of their populations out of poverty. In today’s India, the caste system and its underlying religious beliefs continue to impede economic progress.

The class system was created by the Roman Catholic clergy in collusion with each of the kings (and queens) who ruled the emerging countries of Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire in the 4th Century up through the middle of the 15th Century. Four classes in descending order of superiority can loosely characterize the system. The highest class was the clergy—no big surprise. The next highest class, although not by much, was the rulers, who ruled by divine right; the landowning nobles; and the military. Third was the merchants, farmers, and traders, and fourth was the laborers, including artisans, servants, and a large numbers of serfs or peasants, whose task it was to serve the three higher classes, especially the clergy and rulers. There was an underclass as well, including beggars and drifters, but little distinction was made between them and people in the fourth and lowest class.

The underlying religious belief of the class system was that the natural state of life on earth was poverty, and the reward for enduring it, namely heaven, was not possible until after death. Moreover, the reward was possible only for those who were virtuous, that is, those who remained in the class into which they were born and performed the task that the class system required of them. True, the belief helped alleviate psychologically the pain and suffering of poverty, but it provided little motivation or incentive to work and save, two prerequisites of economic progress.

As the sixteenth century got underway, the men who laid the foundation for the Protestant Reformation, especially John Calvin, developed a religious belief, which is commonly referred to as the Calvinist or Protestant Ethic [1]. Addressing the cause of poverty rather than the

symptom, Calvin argued that hard work and saving could provide the economic progress necessary to lift people out of poverty and reduce, if not eliminate, the pain and suffering caused by poverty. Further, he argued that hard work and saving were virtues that God rewarded in life on earth (improved living conditions) as well as in the hereafter (eternal life of bliss).

During the 16th and 17th Centuries, the political authorities, especially those in England, the Netherlands, and Germany, came to view the new religion as a means of breaking away from the power of the Papacy, and more importantly, a means of expanding their tax base. So they permitted it to flourish at the hands of a growing Protestant clergy. The timing could not have been better. The Protestant Ethic and a new basis of producing goods and service, namely capitalism, came together and determined a direction of cultural change that permitted England, the Netherlands, and Germany to lead western civilization into a phenomenal period of economic progress during the 18th and 19th centuries [9] [10].

Remnants of the class system linger in much of Western Europe to this day. For example, the queen of England and the Pope in Rome remain in the upper classes with all the pomp and ceremony that goes with it. However, the class system is so watered down that it has become mostly form without substance. And clearly, it no longer impedes economic progress. Many Catholics now think much like Protestants with regard to economic progress. Suffering is out; work and saving are in.

In India, however, the class system, or caste system as it is more commonly referred to, continues to impede economic progress. Based on divine revelation, priests of the Aryan culture, who thrived in northern India thousands of years ago, created the system [7]. It consisted of four castes with thousands of subcastes plus an undercaste. The four castes in descending order of cultural superiority can be characterized by the contributions people made to the culture, namely occupation.

Originally, the highest caste was the intelligentsia, made up primarily of the priests who created the system—no big surprise. Their contributions were to study and impart divine revelation as well as perform religious (Hindu) rituals and celebrations. They claimed the caste issued from the mouth of God as creator (Brahma) at the moment of creation. The second caste was the rulers and the warriors or military. The third was the merchants, farmers, and traders, and the fourth and lowest was the laborers, including artisans, servants, and serfs, whose task was to serve the three upper castes, especially the intelligentsia of priests and the rulers.

There was a large undercaste as well, formerly called untouchables. It was made up of people who performed menial and unsanitary or polluting labor such as slaughtering animals, leatherworking, and disposing of animal and human waste. It also included the outcasts of the culture, namely people expelled from their castes for religious or social sins.

Caste superiority based on occupation has become blurred over time. For example, although the highest caste—the Brahmin—remains the caste of the relatively well educated, it now includes not only an intelligentsia of priests but people in a variety of other professions and occupations. The caste even includes people with college degrees in Business Administration, which clearly falls short of qualifying them for intelligentsia status.

That said, however, attributes that occupation originally implied remain important. For example, in addition to a superior education, Brahmins are still considered superior because they were born of Brahmin parents with lighter skin color and what used to be called Caucasian (white European) features. The lighter skin color and Caucasian features indicate a person is a descendent of the Aryans, whose ancestors came from Southern Europe and Northern Asia.

The caste system has been perpetuated by the Hindu ideas of reincarnation and karma (quality of thought and action). People are reincarnated on earth, at which time they have a chance to be born into a higher caste, but only if they have created the required karma (virtuous or good thoughts and actions) in their previous life. And that is accomplished by remaining in the caste into which they are born and following all of its rules. Efforts to meet the karma requirements discourage people from attempting to move up into a higher caste or cross caste lines in their relationships within the culture, especially in marriages, which remains the primary way of preserving cultural purity.

In the class system of Medieval Europe, God paid off in the hereafter, but in the Indian caste system God pays off in the next life on earth. Regardless of the difference in the timing of the payoff, the results are the same. If the payoff, or at least part of it, is not possible in the current life, people have little incentive to acquire the education and skills necessary to improve their productive capabilities beyond the class or caste into which they were born. As a result, overall economic progress is less than otherwise, and just as it was insufficient to lift a large segment of the medieval population of Europe out of poverty, it has been, and continues to be, insufficient to lift a large segment of the Indian population out of poverty.

The caste system remains a powerful force in Indian culture. But in spite of religious beliefs, there are indications that the caste system is giving way to a cultural order more conducive to economic progress, albeit at a snail's pace [2, 3, 4,5,6,7]. Although many, probably most, of the Indian people would deny it, an important contributing factor has been greater openness to the influences of western culture during the British occupation and after independence in 1947. Openness has been enhanced further by the more recent influences of television, the Internet, and outsourcing of services and manufacturing to India by business firms in the United States and other western countries.

As a result of greater openness, many Indians have been influenced by the ideological commitment to the equality of men and women, and people in the lower castes have increasingly used the power of their numbers and their power at the ballot box to gain cultural status independent of their caste designations.

Another important result has been India's adoption of universal education plus the imposition of caste-based quotas. The quotas are designed to help narrow differences in the quantity and quality of education between the castes, especially the difference between the Brahmin caste with their elitist notions of education and both the lowest caste and the undercaste, which have been denied equal opportunity in education for centuries. Caste-based quotas were established under the leadership of the Nationalist Congress Party or NCP (India's Democrats) and resisted by the leadership of the Brahmin dominated Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP (India's Republicans).

The Indian caste system and the class system of Medieval Europe are but two examples in the history of humankind of how the religious beliefs that underlie basic aspects or elements of culture have impeded the economic progress necessary to lift people out of poverty and its debilitating and dehumanizing effects. The people of Medieval Europe finally resolved the problem with a modification of their religious beliefs, which when combined with capitalism, eventually brought about the economic progress necessary to lift large segments of their population out of poverty. Capitalism provided the means, and the modified or reformed religious beliefs removed a critical impediment.

In spite of people in India today who defend retention of the caste system, mostly on religious grounds [8], the fact remains that it persists as an impediment to economic progress. That said, however, only time will tell how the people of India will finally resolve the conflict between the caste system, which at present is an integral part of their predominate religion, and economic progress.

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