

classes or castes in the world hereafter.” (Guru Granth Sahib, p.349).

### THE TRADITION OF LANGAR

Due to the ingrained nature of inequality within the Indian psyche, the teaching of philosophy emphasising the oneness of humanity would not be enough by itself to instigate social equality within society. This is why the Gurus developed the revolutionary institution of *Langar* in which all people regardless of caste or religious identity would be required to sit together at the same level and eat food.

*“Different castes of society develop hatred for one another and finish themselves through squabbles...but Dharma was now established on its four feet and all the four castes recognised each other for their common humanity.” (Bhai Gurdas Vaars, V1).*

### SALVATION AND EDUCATION

Sikhism teaches that liberation from the samsara cycle is available and achievable by anyone from any religious, cultural, or caste background.

*“Whether he is Brahmin, a Vaishya, a Soodra, or a Ksyatriya background; whether he is a poet, an outcaste, or a filthy-minded person, he becomes pure, by meditating on the Lord God. He saves himself, as well the families of both his parents.” (Guru Granth Sahib, p.858)*

The Gurus also employed scholars to translate the ancient spiritual works of India into more common languages so as to break the monopoly on knowledge that high caste spiritualists maintained for their own benefit.

### ARCHITECTURE OF THE GOLDEN TEMPLE

Guru Ram Das whilst designing the Golden Temple built the centre with four entrances symbolising that people from all 4 varnas

would be welcome at the temple.

### INTER CASTE MARRIAGE

It is still common for Sikh people within India to marry within their own specific caste communities. This is not necessarily against the principles of Sikhism, as even the Gurus all married within their own respective Ksyatriyas communities. In olden times this would help to identify suitable families with a similar lifestyle, beliefs and habits. However modern education, globalisation and economic upliftment of people over the last century means that this no longer holds true.

### CONCLUSIONS ON CASTE

A corrupted form of the Varna Dharma tradition led to the development of the modern day caste system. It was because of the inequalities of this system that the Sikh Gurus started the tradition of *langar* and strongly emphasised the oneness of humanity and oneness of creation (*Ek Ong Kar*).

# Caste System

## ORIGINS OF INDIAN SOCIAL HIERARCHY

Human society has existed in the form of tribes and groups since its very origin and has created a multitude of divisions throughout time for various social, political, religious, ethnic and economic reasons.

Ancient Indian society also developed its own unique system of human classification called *Varna Dharma*, which divided human beings according to their innate nature or *Gunas*. The four divisions are similar to Plato's ideal society which included spiritualists (*Brahmins*), warriors (*Kshatriyas*), business people (*Vaishyas*) and common labourers (*Shudras*).

*Varna Dharma* was different to the modern day Indian caste system because it recognised and empowered people to live up to their true potential and gave them the option to join the group that best matched their natural abilities. This is why many of the authors of the ancient Indian spiritual texts were from labourer family backgrounds including Sage Vyasa author of the Mahabharata and Rishi Valmiki author of the Ramayana.

In addition this system emphasised the importance of interdependence and equality of each of the groups. The Rig Vedas uses the metaphor of God in the form of a human body with the different parts of the body representing each of the groups:

*"The Philosopher was His Mouth; the Warrior His Arms became. His Thighs the Business person was; of His Feet the Common Labourer (productive and sustaining force) was born."*

So the origin of Varna Dharma is considered to be divine and created by God, and it was designed as a flexible system to support the innate qualities and skills of an individual.

## ORIGINS OF MODERN DAY CASTE SYSTEM

Over a few thousand years the fourfold *Varna Dharma* groupings became more complex with the introduction of many new sub divisions called castes or *Jatis*. A caste would denote a specific type of vocation such as a farmer, shoe maker, weaver etc and that vocation would be indicative of the vocation associated with a person's ancestors.

In addition the *Jatis* were ladderised against one another in a rigid social hierarchy with spiritualists at the highest point and enjoying the most privileges whilst common labourers sat at the lowest point with the least amount of rights. Furthermore caste was rubber stamped as a hereditary unchangeable identity, similar to race or ethnic grouping.

## POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF CASTE

The caste system was enforced onto the Indian population through the use of cultural traditions, superstition and law books such as the Manusmriti which codified specific rules by which different castes must interact with one another, including the outlaw of intercaste marriage and preferential treatment for higher castes. This has unfortunately created an unfair social system for Indians of lower caste backgrounds for many thousands of years.

Historians like Alain Danielou, however also postulate that caste has enabled Hindu civilization to survive all invasions and to develop without revolutions or important changes, throughout more than four millennia, with a continuity that is unique in history. The author Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan adds to this by saying that, *"In spite of the divisions, there is an inner cohesion among the Hindu society from the Himalayas to the Cape Comorin."*

## INDIA AND CASTE

Caste is still an identity that is carried by Indians from a variety of religious traditions re-

gardless of their religious doctrine including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains and Sikhs.

It is noteworthy to mention that India has worked very hard to undo the many years of injustice to people of lower castes and tribal groups by establishing reservations in schools, colleges and within the job market.

## IDENTITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Sikhism acknowledges that our human existence will naturally have many different layers of identity including gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, language, colour, religion, caste, occupation, education etc. All these different aspects of our individuality can be important and can add a certain useful dimension to our life.

The problem arises when people use their individual identities such as caste to restrict other people from enjoying the same rights and privileges that they have. This has historically been the problem in India where people of lower castes were denied the right to education, offering prayer in temples, employment, socialising with people of higher castes and even union with God.

## SIKHISM AND CASTE

The Gurus recognised that the discrimination associated with caste and religious identities was not conducive to a peaceful society and so they fostered social change through philosophy, architectural design, spiritual music, community service and food.

## SIKH PHILOSOPHY

The Guru Granth Sahib teaches that it is important to recognise that all people and all things have the divine spark within them and so everyone should be treated equally and have access to the same privileges, rights and opportunities. *"Recognize the Lord's Light within all, and do not consider social class or status; there are no*