

Case study: India's caste system

India is a culturally diverse nation and is also an emerging economic powerhouse. India still struggles to address the great disparities in human wellbeing in the country. As in all societies, cultural factors can either enhance or obstruct efforts to improve people's quality of life.

India's diverse culture

India is a place where several cultures interact. The most significant of these are the Aryan, in the north, and the Dravidian people in the south. Add to this India's religious diversity. The country is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Today, Hinduism and Buddhism are the world's third- and fourth-largest religions respectively, with a combined number of followers of approximately 2 billion.

India's caste system

India's caste system is a form of social stratification. Traditionally, it divided Indian communities into thousands of hereditary groups called Jati. Each Jati was identified with a traditional job function or tribe. The Jati featured four broad caste groupings with hundreds of sub-castes. The main groups were:

- Brahmin: priests, scholars and teachers
- Kshatriyas: warriors, administrators and law enforcers
- Vaishyas: farmers, cattle raisers and traders
- Shudras: service providers and servants
- Panchama: outcasts or untouchables, known as Dalits.

India's untouchables

The Dalits (or untouchables) were the lowest social status group in the Hindu caste system and were actually born below the caste system. The untouchables were assigned, by birth, to spiritually contaminating work that nobody else wanted to do. They lived on the fringes of Indian society and were associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure, such as leather tanning, butchering, and removal of rubbish, animal carcasses and waste. Dalits worked as manual labourers cleaning streets, latrines and sewers. According to Hindu beliefs, such jobs corrupted the workers' souls, making them unfit to mingle with other kinds of people.

Humans were born untouchable as a form of punishment for their conduct in a former life. People born into the untouchable caste, could not ascend to a higher

caste within their lifetime. They had to marry fellow untouchables, and could not eat in the same room or drink from the same well as a caste member.

In the Hindu religion (with its belief in reincarnation), untouchables who followed the restrictions outlined above were rewarded with a promotion to a caste in their next life.

Discrimination against lower castes is illegal under Article 15 of India's constitution. Despite affirmative action laws for lower castes that have been introduced by government, there is still discrimination and violence against people of lower castes.

7.27 Dalit workers cleaning a blocked sewer



7.28 Women from different organisations demanding safety for women on International Women's Day in Lucknow, India, 2013

Role and status of women

While Indian women have held high office, including that of president and prime minister, women continue to face atrocities such as rape, acid throwing, dowry killings and forced prostitution. Traditions such as sati are now illegal, although some instances of the practice are still found in remote parts of the country. **Purdah** is still practised by Indian women in some communities, and child marriage remains prevalent, despite it being illegal under Indian law.

Women are less likely to participate in education and, in most Indian families, women do not hold any property in their own names and do not receive any inheritance. Due to weak law enforcement, women continue to have little access to land and property. In fact, some laws continue to discriminate against women in regard to land and property rights.

Activists in India argue that the way in which women are treated will not improve unless the way boys are brought up changes. It is said that young men grow up as 'little princes'. They are often allowed to misbehave with impunity, told that everything they do is wonderful, and taught that women exist only to serve them and gratify their needs. Such attitudes cannot help but promote a distorted view of women and their role in society.

India's political culture

India is a federation of states with a parliamentary system of government based on the Westminster system inherited from the British. It is also the world's largest democracy. The notion of 'majority rule' is tempered only by the legally prescribed protections enjoyed by minority groups.

For most of the time since independence, India's government has been led by the Indian National Congress (INC), the party of Mahatma Gandhi. In the pre-independence era, the party was at the forefront of the struggle for independence. Today, the party is considered to be the centre-left in Indian politics. India's other major political party is the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP won the 2014 Indian election.

Initially, INC economic policy focused on the promotion of public sector enterprises. In recent times, however, the INC has embraced more economic liberal policies that recognise the importance of free markets. They have favoured economic liberalism while claiming to care for the wellbeing of those in the weaker sectors of the economy. The BJP, on the other hand, promotes the privatisation of infrastructure and services, and the roll-back of labour and environmental protections. The party also favours Indian heritage and culture over all things Western.

The culture of corruption is widespread and extends from the top to the bottom of Indian society. It is said that government ministers cream off tens of millions of dollars and claim to be affronted when their corrupt activities are exposed. A bribe of 100 rupees allows a person to escape a traffic fine and the poor must pay baksheesh (a gratuity, tip, or bribe) in order to be issued a ration card by an official.

India's merging middle class

As a result of the economic growth experienced over the past two decades, India has a rapidly growing urban middle class. Today, it numbers about 300 million people. The vast mass of India's rural population, however, remains impoverished and the people's lives continue to be influenced by the ancient Hindu caste system.

Vikram's experience (see the article below) is typical of those fleeing to India's cities in search of a better life for their families. It does, however, highlight the immense challenges India faces in increasing the level of wellbeing of its people.

While discrimination on the basis of caste is now illegal and various measures have been introduced to empower disadvantaged groups and give them easier access to opportunities such as education and work, some 30 per cent of India's population still lives below the poverty line. For these people, the benefits of economic progress have spread more slowly than promised, too many social ills remain unaddressed, and governance failures and inefficiencies persist.

INDIA: A NATION AT THE CROSSROADS

Ben Doherty is the South Asia correspondent for Fairfax Media. In an article written for Fairfax, publishers of the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age newspapers, Ben tells of his encounter with the Vikram family.

About the same time as I came to Delhi, a family moved in around the corner.

A couple of hundred metres from my neat, whitewashed house in a middle-class south Delhi neighbourhood, a Rajasthani family took up residence on the side of the road.

Their new home was a blue tarpaulin tied to the fence outside a 12th-century Mughal tomb, between a stinking rubbish dump where the rag pickers and the drunks spend their days and a busy road. A narrow strip of dirt, 3 metres at its widest, between the fence, the rotting garbage, and the road, was their existence.

They came in winter, as I did. It was cold in Delhi that year. Whenever I passed, the family—how many members there were was hard to tell—seemed pressed together under as many blankets as they could gather. It rained.

But gradually the weather warmed, and the family took confidence that a couple of weeks without eviction had become a month. Their home became more substantial.

They built a wooden house, with some scavenged tin for a roof, held down with rocks. The hessian sack at the entrance was replaced by a wooden door, with hinges they forged themselves in a pit fire at the front door.

The family, I learnt, consisted of two brothers, their wives and children.

Soon they built a second wooden hut, leaning off the first, then illegally

rigged electricity from a nearby wire to bring power. They got a small TV from somewhere and set it up in a corner, and charpoys (stretchers) for beds. Lately, they've been wrestling with a discarded old washing machine with a broken lid, trying to get it to work.

Their shelter has become a home.

The head of the family, the older brother Vikram, is a gruff, taciturn fellow. Heavy shouldered and bearded, his face, when at rest, seems set in a scowl.

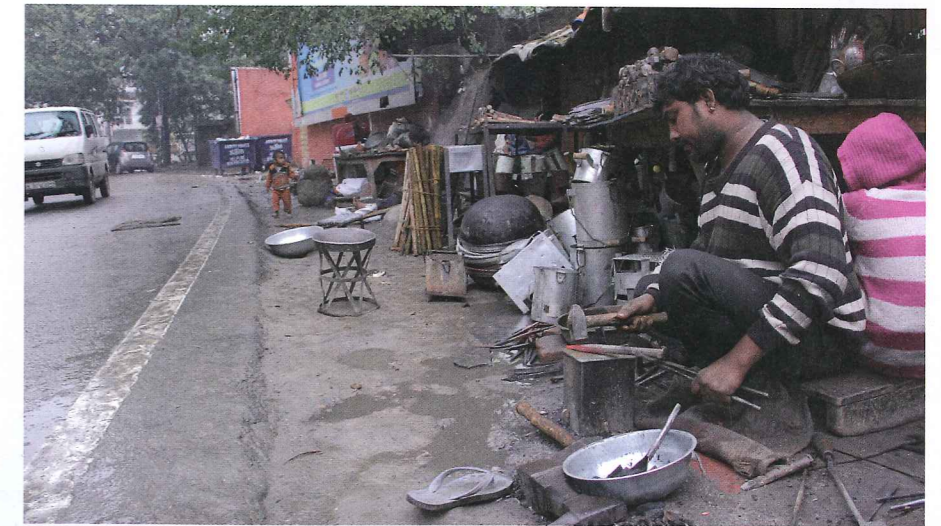
He's not been the easiest man to get to know. But gradually, with my regular passage on foot past his front door, a nod of recognition has become a 'namaste' and, now, the occasional conversation.

We sit, perhaps once a week when I'm in town, over chai and puri, bought from a food cart down the road.

He barely eats himself. He spends our conversation tearing up the warm, fried bread with his fingers and feeding it to whichever of the children is wandering by at the time...

... He and his brother Mani are from Rajasthan. There are 18 people in their combined families: wives, children, mothers and in-laws. They are from a nomadic tribe known as the Gadia Lohars, the literal translation of which is 'blacksmiths on the wheel'. And so it is with them. Like their father and his father before, Vikram and Mani are smiths, spending their days over fire pits outside their front doors, banging at the red-hot metal, forging picks and hammers and skewers for tandoori ovens. Stacked by their homes is their stock, from which they make a modest industry selling to passers-by, tradesmen and local homeowners.

Their family has come to Delhi to seek a better life. Gradually, over three years, they've found it. From their Spartan first shelter, their homes have become liveable, and even, Vikram insists, comfortable. The house has no plumbing or toilet, but their lives are better here than they've been before.



7.29 A better life: Vikram working outside his family's home

Vikram has four children, all of whom attend school, in between helping with work.

The youngest carries around her books and pencil case. She has a white-and-green uniform, which her mother rips from her back every afternoon to start furiously washing for the next day.

'All of my kids are in school. I want to see at least one of them, any

one of them, become something,' Vikram says.

The family tries to make each day a little better than the last. There is something new to save up for, an improvement to the house, shoes or a book for a child, a new tool to make work easier, or more profitable.

Source: Ben Doherty, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February 2014

ACTIVITIES

Knowledge and understanding

- 1 Describe the extent of India's cultural diversity.
- 2 Describe India's caste system and explain how it can hinder efforts to improve people's quality of life.
- 3 Outline the status of Indian women in Indian society. How might it be improved?
- 4 Describe the main policy positions of India's two major political parties.
- 5 Outline the economic divisions in India.
- 6 **a** Who are the Dalits and what status do they hold in Indian society?
b What occupations have they traditionally performed?
c What social limits were imposed in the Dalit people?

Applying and analysing

- 7 As a class, debate the following topic: 'The caste system was a form of social control'.
- 8 Study the newspaper extract 'Ben Doherty's Indian experience' then, as a class, discuss the following questions.
 - a** In what ways is the experience of Vikram and his family typical of people throughout the developing world?
 - b** In what ways does the experience of Vikram reflect India's ingrained cultural traditions?
 - c** In what ways has the wellbeing of Vikram and his family improved?
 - d** How would you cope living in such conditions?