

AS' SAARTHI IAS

CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

Caste is a system in which the determination of position, rights and duties of an individual is done on the basis of the birth of such an individual in a particular group. In other words, we can say that the status of an individual is determined by birth.

Theories of Caste

- **Traditional Theory:** This has its origins in Vedic literature, wherein it is said that castes were created by Brahma, the supreme creator. He created different castes for the harmonious performance of various social functions for the maintenance of society.
- **Occupational Theory:** Castes were identified on the basis of fixed occupation. Persons in noble occupations, such as teachers, priests, soldiers and traders etc., were considered members of superior castes.
- **Political Theory:** Some thinkers are of the opinion that not race but political convenience and manipulation by those wanting to retain authority resulted in the origin of the caste system.
- **Evolution Theory:** According to this theory, the caste system did not come into existence all of a sudden or at a particular date. It is the result of a long process of social evolution.
- **Racial Theory:** This has its origins in the Aryan Invasion theory, where because of their better complexion, physical appearance and built-up body, in comparison with the non-Aryans, the Aryans placed themselves as a superior race over the non-Aryans.

Features of a Caste Based Society

1. **Division of Society:** The society is divided into various small social groups called castes. Each of these castes is a well-developed social group, the membership of which is determined by the consideration of birth.
2. **Hierarchy:** Castes form a hierarchy, being arranged in an order of superiority and inferiority. At the top of this hierarchy is the Brahmin caste and at the bottom is the untouchable caste. In between are the intermediate castes, the relative positions of which are not always clear.
 - o **Example:** Lower caste members were not allowed to access temples and public places used by the higher castes.
3. **Endogamy:** Endogamy is the chief characteristic of caste, the members of a caste or subcaste should marry within their own caste or sub-caste. The violation of the rule of endogamy would mean ostracism and loss of caste.
 - o **Example:** In 2011, the rate of inter-caste marriages in India was as low as 5.8%.
4. **Hereditary:** The membership of a caste is determined by birth and the man acquires the status of a caste in which he is born.

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5. **Dietary Discrimination:** There are rules for the acceptability of food by a person and from what caste.
 - o **Example:** Usually, a caste would not accept cooked food from any other caste that stands lower than itself on the social scale.
6. **Social Segregation:** It means the division of social places and residential places based on caste, upper castes occupied lands around the centre of the village or around temples, while the “lower castes” lived on the outskirts.
7. **Beyond Hinduism:** In India, the caste system persists in other religions like amongst Christians and Muslims of India and the subcontinent as well.
 - o **Example:** Approximately 70% of the Christian population in India are from Scheduled Caste backgrounds.
8. **Purity:** The concept of pollution plays a crucial part in maintaining the required distance between different castes. “A high caste man may not touch a low caste man, let alone accept cooked food and water from him.”
 - o **Example:** Inter-faith marriages are prohibited as it changes the distorted notions of caste purity.
9. **Occupation:** Multiple occupations have been divided to be for only members of a particular caste, the "lower castes" have been made to do menial and undignified work.
 - o **Example:** Manual Scavenging is the most dehumanised profession which is unique to a single caste in India and the profession is hereditary in nature.

Merits of the Varna System

- **Division of Labour:** It ensured a harmonious organisation of the labour force based on individual suitability.
- **Cooperation:** It has fostered the spirit of co-operation and fellow-feeling among members of the same caste.
- **Economic Determinism:** It defines the economic pursuits of the individual. There is an occupation pertaining to every caste so that the child's future is not only carved out already but also a proper place of apprenticeship is provided.
- **Social Integrity:** It develops class consciousness without breeding class struggle. It has created an efficient organization of Hindu society without giving any chance to class frictions and factions. It was the best device to organize within one society people of different cultural levels.
- **Diverse Culture:** The caste customs, beliefs, skill, behaviour, the trade secrets are passed on from generation to generation. Culture is thus carried from one age to another.

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Issues/Impact of Caste System

- Prohibits Growth:** The caste system is a check on economic and intellectual advancement and a great stumbling block in the way of social reforms because it keeps economic and intellectual opportunities confined to a certain section of the population only.
 - Example:** Caste system prevents merit to supercede caste norms and as a result true talent vital for growth is replaced with qualified talent.
- Discrimination in Access:** They often do not have the facility to electricity, sanitation facilities or water pumps in lower caste neighbourhoods. Access to better education, housing and medical facilities than that of the higher castes is denied.
- Untouchability:** Many villages are separated by caste and they may not cross the line dividing them from the higher castes. They also may not use the same wells or drink in the same tea stalls as higher castes.
- Against Dignity of human Beings:** By compelling generations of a section of society to perform a particular work, it is demeaning and robs them of a dignified living.
- Inequality:** By denying the equality of opportunity to certain sections on the basis of caste is an infringement of constitutional provisions.
- Exploitative:** It is also exploitative when groups are ill-treated by society as well as by institutions.
- Poverty:** When a section of society is deprived of economic opportunities, they are compelled to live in poverty and alleviation never does take place.
 - Data:** Global multidimensional poverty index (MPI), 2018 reported 33% of SC are multi-dimensionally poor.
- Against National Integration:** It has stood in the way of national and collective consciousness and proved to be a disintegrating rather than an integrating factor.
 - Example:** It creates divisions amongst people and fails to uphold common national and social values.

Differences between Varna System and Caste System

	Varna System	Caste System
Definition	It means colour and originates from word meaning choice of one's occupation. Hence concerned with one's colour or occupation.	Caste or 'Jati' originates from the root 'Jana' which implies taking birth. Thus, caste is concerned with birth.
Purpose	Division of Labour - Economic	Creation of Hierarchy – Political and Social

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	Varna System	Caste System
Expanse	Varna's are only four in number i.e. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra based on historical occupations.	Castes are very large in number. Castes also have many subdivisions known as sub-castes. Regional variations are mostly based on linguistic differences.
Flexibility	It was flexible and a changing system. There are many examples of change in Varna and the Varna marriages during & even after Veda period.	Rigid Structure, there is no scope of changing or upgrading one's status.
Social Position	Varna system is free from socio-economic political disabilities.	Imposes many restrictions on the members.

Differences between Varna and Jati

	Varna	Jati
Meaning	'Varna' is a division of society based on occupation.	'Jati' is a division that was not restricted to only 'varna' system. It is a division based on birth of Hindu society.
Expanse	There are only four varnas.	There are thousands of jatis.
Purpose	Varna helped identify one's profession.	Jati helped in identification with one's own Varna.
Flexibility	Flexible – can be changed during ancient times.	Rigid – can only be obtained through birth.

Differences between Caste and Class

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	Caste	Class
Nature	Acquired by birth and no amount of wealth, power, knowledge, or educational struggle can change it.	A person is placed in class by virtue of his acquisition of education, money, wealth, power, status or achievement.
Mobility	In general, there is no vertical social mobility, but in practice, there can be social mobility for Group Only. e.g Sanskritization.	Both horizontal and vertical social mobility is possible, i.e. it is possible to improve social status by acquiring wealth, money, education, power etc.
Customs	Caste system expects members to follow certain customs, folkways, rituals, etc.	Social class has no prescribed customs, rituals and folkways.
Institutional Marriage	It is impossible for a person to marry outside the caste without social annoyance.	Marriage outside class is allowed without being thrown outside the society.

Ambedkar's Views

- **Prevents Intigration:** The caste system has made Hindu society stagnant which creates hurdels in integration with outsiders.
- **Moral Degrading:** The caste system does not allow lower castes to prosper which leads to moral degradation.
- **Foundation of Social System:** He understood that the whole Indian social system was founded on the caste and the beliefs, customs, knowledge all are centred around the caste system.
- **On Varna:** Ambedkar refuted the chaturvarna system and argued that it not only divided the society but also divided the labourers. Further, this chaturvarna is opposed to natural law and the spirit of human development.
- **Origins of Shudras:** Ambedkar argued that initially there were only three varnas in Indo-Aryan society. The shudras were not a separate varna but were part of kshatriya varna. Brahmins' hatred towards shudras culminated into a situation where Brahmins refused to invest the shudras with the sacred thread.
- **On Religion:** Religion must be mainly a matter of principle only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules, it ceases to be a religion.
- **Scriptures:** Sovereignty of scriptures of all religions must come to an end if we want to have a united integrated India.

Differences with Gandhi

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	Ambedkar	Gandhi
Nature	He Challenged the System Below	He wanted to reform the system from a higher caste position
Views	He considered Varna as the product of Brahmanical distortions	He considered Varna integral to Hindu society organization though it needed reforms.
Solution	Envisaged a politico-economic solution to change the structure	Gandhi saw the solution to untouchability in the gradual change of the hearts of the Hindus.
Method	He rejected Gandhian notion of "Harijan", as it disguised the reality	Gandhi gave the name harijan to the untouchables to denote children of God.
Purpose	He wanted annihilation of Caste	He wanted reform of caste and Hindu society.

Caste System Today

- Poor Reforms:** Post Independent India was both unable and unwilling to push through radical reforms which would have undermined the economic basis for caste inequality.
- Affirmative Action:** The state assumed that if it operated in a caste-blind manner, this would automatically lead to the undermining of caste-based privileges and the eventual abolition of the institution.
 - Example:** Appointments to Govt Jobs with special reservation for the scheduled castes.
- Caste Bias:** Many industries and small businesses still continue to recruit persons from the same or related castes, leaving many castes and sub-castes disadvantaged.
- Caste Violence:** There are still instances of caste-based violence in many parts of India which are often a result of distorted notions of privileges.
 - Example:** In September 2020, a dalit girl in Hathras district of Uttar Pradesh was allegedly murdered by 4 men from Thakur caste.
- Intercaste Marriages:** Though data differs from region to region, there has been an increase in the number of inter-caste marriages compared to a decade earlier.
 - Example:** Inter-caste marriages within the upper castes (e.g., brahmin, bania, rajput) may be more likely now than before; but marriages between an upper caste and backward or scheduled caste person remain rare even today.
- Educational Inequalities:** Caste still affects educational outcomes of children in India.

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- o **Data:** Only about 50% dalit and adivasi children can read a simple paragraph compared to 61% forward class children and 69% brahmin children.
- 7. **Different Financial Access:** This access to capital is reflected in fact that 39% of the upper castes borrowed from a bank or credit society, while only 18% of the dalit households did so.
- 8. **Decline in the supremacy of Brahmins:** In the traditional caste system, the Brahmins were at the apex of the social and religious sphere and thus they enjoyed supremacy over others. But due to the processes of secularization and westernization, the authority of the Brahmins gradually declined and they ceased to enjoy the traditional respect and honour in society.
- 9. **Change in occupational hierarchy:** In a caste-ridden society, occupations were hereditary and an individual's birth into a particular caste determined his occupation forever. But when the rigidity of the caste system broke down, occupational changes were also marked.

Changing Nature of Caste System

The contexts of caste have changed a lot in the last 75 years, transforming its meanings, whether as a system regulating life chances, a mode of political mobilisation, or a form of socio-cultural identity.

Caste today is active in three main ways:

1. **Source of inequality:** It is a system that regulates the distribution of material opportunity or life chances, and hence it is a source of enduring inequalities.
2. **Source of political mobilization:** It remains one of the primary modes of political mobilization, even though caste politics is now far more disaggregated, complex, and uncertain than it used to be.
3. **Source of Kinship and identity:** For everyone except a small upper-class, upper-caste elite, caste continues to be a form of the community offering a sense of kinship, belonging, and identity.

Change in Context

1. Caste as a mechanism for regulating material opportunities:

- **Pre-Independence:**
 - o *Reservation* was a pre-Independence idea emerging from the Poona Pact of 1932 and codified in the Government of India Act of 1935.
 - o Intended to be an antidote for caste discrimination rather than a remedy for backwardness.
- **Post-Independence:**
 - o The new Constitution abolished caste in principle but did not interfere with its practice.
 - o Reservation was now positioned as the exception to the general principle of castelessness and seen as a kind of unearned 'benefit' provided by the state to certain castes.

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- **Advancement of Weaker section:** Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Scheduled Tribes (ST) OR any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens (Eg: OBC) OR economically weaker sections (EWS) — Article 15 (4), Article 15 (5), and Article 15 (6).
 - **For example:** SC are given 15% quota in jobs/higher educational institutions while ST are given 7.5% quota in jobs/higher educational institutions and for OBCs it is 27% in government jobs and higher educational institutions.

Is reservation still relevant?

- **Yes**
 - **Discrimination in access to public services:** A sample survey of Dalits, conducted over several months in Madhya Pradesh, found that health field workers did not visit 65% of Dalit settlements. 47% of Dalits were not allowed entry into ration shops; and 64% were given fewer grains than non-Dalits.
 - **Health and malnutrition:** In Haryana state, 49% of Dalit children under five years were underweight and malnourished while 80% of those in the 6–59 months age group were anaemic in 2015.
 - **Discrimination in education:** A sample survey in 2014, conducted by Dalit Adhikar Abhiyan and funded by ActionAid, found that among state schools in Madhya Pradesh, 88% discriminated against Dalit children. In 79% of the schools studied, Dalit children are forbidden from touching mid-day meals.
 - **Output of reservation:** Reservation has resulted in betterment of marginalised classes but the journey is far from over. Policy measures accelerated the affirmative actions but a lot needs to be done for the upliftment.
- **No**
 - **Collapse of merit system:** The reservation merit system has now collapsed which is evident by the quota for Economically Weaker Sections.

Caste as a form of political mobilization

Pre-independence:

- **Confined around untouchability:** Caste politics was first confined to the campaign around untouchability and then strangled by the Poona Pact, which effectively ensured that only Dalit representatives acceptable to the upper castes would be elected.

Post-independence:

1. **Universal suffrage:** Backed by the irresistible force of numbers, backward caste politicians began mobilising their caste constituencies in the 1960s.

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2. **Power struggle:** Today, there is a stark difference that can be seen — between upper caste politics in power and the struggle of lower caste politics to fight for their rights.

Role of Caste group in Indian politics

Positive:

1. **Expand Democracy:** They provide a vital link between the government and the governed.
 - o **For example:** Harijan Sevak sangh started by Mahatma Gandhi served to provide government services to the backward caste people.
2. **Political empowerment:** Caste-based assertions and political bargaining power have increased for many backward castes.
 - o **For example:** Justice party in Tamil Nadu and the Scheduled caste federation in Maharashtra have been at the forefront to assert the political rights of Dalits and backward castes which resulted in reservations in assemblies and education.
3. **Influence policy making:** Pre-independence PG's aim to secure equality and justice for the downtrodden. Towards this pursuit, the state came out with affirmative measures like reservation in education and employment. The decision to amend the atrocities act was due to pressure from scheduled caste groups.
4. **Achieve constitutional morals:** Voice is given to the marginalized sections as they cannot be ignored in the first-past-the-post electoral system.
 - o **For example:** The Bahujan samaj party has evolved from a pressure group to a political party and has focused on uplifting of the backward castes through various social and financial support.
5. **Strengthen democracy:** As these Political Groups encourage people's political participation. Help educate groups on their rights and form public opinion on important issues.
 - o **For example:** Patidar association with its agitation has led to invoking participation in the political process which has increased the overall voting percentage in elections.
6. **Regional politics:** Regional politics origin is also traced to caste-based PG's which entered into political domain.
 - o **For example:** AIDMK, BSP. This has made the national political landscape more accommodative of regional aspirations and increased the decentralization of power.

Negative:

1. **Identity politics:** Caste-based pressure groups limit the identity of citizens to a particular caste which limits full participation of citizens in the governance system. Further identity politics gives rise to hatred between communities.
 - o **For example:** The mobilisation of upper caste groups in Hathras against the family of the victim of rape belonging to a 'lower caste' family.
2. **Crack in society:** It may lead to divisions within the society which might be harmful to the overall unity of society and nation altogether.

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- o **For example:** The demands of lingayats to create a separate religious sect as a minority.
- 3. **Increased social strife and social animosity:** Identity politics and caste consciousness has led to physical violence as seen in Bhima Koregaon issue, discrimination against Dalits such as obstruction of their entries in temples, and violence against intercaste marriages.
- 4. **Violence:** Law and order issue with their agitation turning violent.
 - o **For example:** Jats for reservation, Karni Sena protest against Padmavat. These incidences highlight how caste groups can affect the fundamental rights of other citizens and create a law and order situation which might be detrimental to the public interest.
- 5. **Casteism:** This leads to caste groups favoring their own kith and kin rather than supporting people on merit.
- 6. **Demand pressure:** Political class agreeing to demands under pressure.
 - o **For example:** Reservation for Marathas when they do not meet the criteria of socially-educationally backward class.
- 7. **Identity-based mobilisation: Caste as a cultural identity** - the story of caste as a form of cultural identity has been overtaken recently by the phenomenal rise of Hindutva as a passionate, aggressive and almost pan-Indian form of identity-based mobilisation.
 - o **For example:** A phase of Hindutva which emphasises a shared adversarial identity. This weaponised form of Hindutva would be expected to be the natural enemy of lower-caste politics because of the inevitable tension between horizontal Hindu unity and vertical caste hierarchy.

Government Initiatives

1. Constitutional

- o **Article 14:** It ensures that every citizen shall be likewise protected by the laws of the country. It means that the State will not distinguish any of the Indian citizens on the basis of their gender, caste, creed, religion or even the place of birth.
- o **Article 15:** The right of Social Equality and Equal Access to Public Areas is clearly mentioned under Article 15 of the Constitution of India stating that no person shall be shown favouritism on the basis of colour, caste, creed, language, etc.
- o **Article 16:** Article 16 of the Constitution of India clearly mentions that the State shall treat everyone equally in matters of employment. No citizen shall be discriminated on the basis of race, caste, religion, creed, descent or place of birth in respect of any employment or office under the State.
- o **Article 17:** Article 17 of the Constitution of India abolishes the practice of untouchability in India. The practice of untouchability is declared as a crime and anyone doing so is punishable by law.
- o **Article 18:** Article 18 of the Constitution of India prohibits the State from granting any titles.

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- o **Article 330:** Article 330, Reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the House of the People.
- o **Article 338:** Article 338 states the formation of National Commission for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and there shall be a Special Officer for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to be appointed by the President.
- o **Reservation:** Due to historical injustices and neglect, the Indian constitution has ensured reservation in education and employment opportunities for the discriminated sections.

2. Legal

- o **Social Empowerment:** Education is the most effective instrument for the socio-economic empowerment of disadvantaged groups.
- o **Manual Scavenging Act, 2013:** It reinforced the ban on manual scavenging and also discharged employees who are engaged in this practice on a contractual or regular basis.
- o **Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955:** In pursuance of Article 17 of the Constitution of India, the Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955 was enacted. Subsequently, it was amended and renamed in 1976. The Act extends to the whole of India and provides punishment for the practice of untouchability.
- o **Dr. Ambedkar Scheme for Inter-Caste Marriages:** The main objective of the scheme is to appreciate the socially bold step of an inter-caste marriage.

3. Educational

- o **Pre-Matric Scholarships:** The objective of the pre-matric scheme is to support the parents of SC children in educating their wards so that the incidence of dropouts at this stage is minimized.
- o **Scholarships for obtaining Higher Education and Coaching Scheme:** The scheme aims to promote qualitative education among students belonging to Scheduled Castes, by providing full financial support for pursuing studies beyond 12th class, in notified institutes of excellence like IITs, NITs, IIMs, reputed Medical/Law and other institutions.
- o **Free Coaching for SC and OBC Students:** The scheme provides coaching of good quality for economically disadvantaged SC and OBC candidates.

4. Economic

- o **National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation (NSFDC):** NSFDC assists the target group by way of refinancing loans, skill training, entrepreneurship development programs, and providing marketing support through State Channelizing Agencies, RRBs, Public Sector Banks, and other institutions.
- o **Credit Guarantee Fund for SCs:** This scheme promotes entrepreneurship among the Scheduled Castes by providing Credit Enhancement Guarantees to Banks and Financial Institutions (FIs) that provide financial assistance to these entrepreneurs.
- o **National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC):** Another corporation under the Ministry that provides credit facilities to beneficiaries among

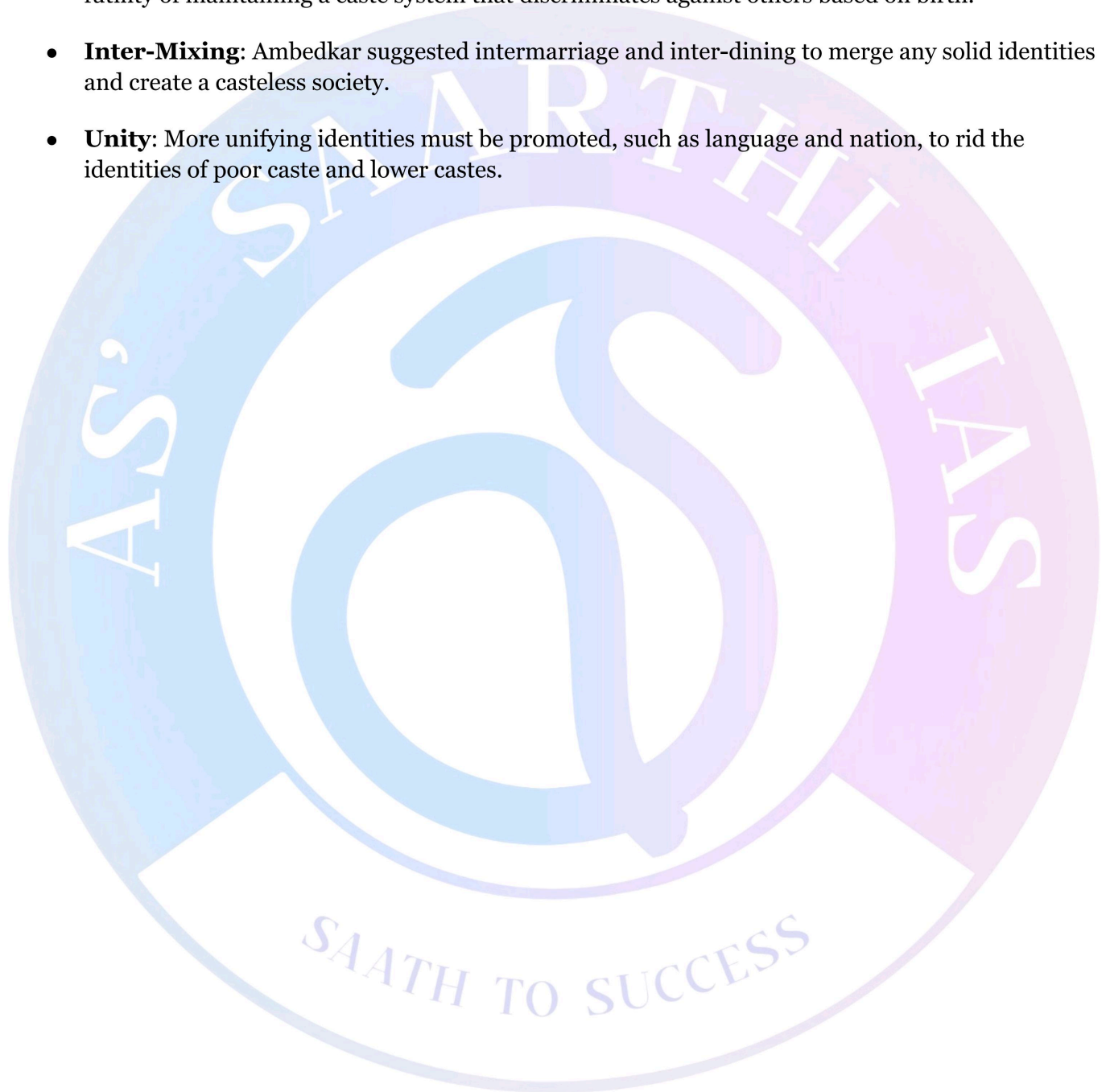
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Safai Karamcharis, manual scavengers, and their dependents for income-generating activities for socio-economic development.

Way Forward

- **Social Awareness:** There is a need to cultivate social awareness and educate people over the futility of maintaining a caste system that discriminates against others based on birth.
- **Inter-Mixing:** Ambedkar suggested intermarriage and inter-dining to merge any solid identities and create a casteless society.
- **Unity:** More unifying identities must be promoted, such as language and nation, to rid the identities of poor caste and lower castes.



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