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## Echoes of Stratification: A Comparative Study of Caste Structures in India and Korea

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### ABSTRACT

The study of caste systems of India and Korea, focusing on their untouchable groups—Dalits and Paekchong, respectively—through a comparative analysis of their origins, occupations, social restrictions, and subsequent social changes. The Indian caste system, rooted in divine, karma, and Indo-Aryan theories, contrasts with Korea's Bone Rank System, which has varied origin hypotheses, including descent from specific historical groups or immigrants. Both systems assigned polluting occupations like butchering and leatherwork to their lowest strata and enforced residential, cultural, and occupational segregation. Social change in India emerged through constitutional reforms, industrialization, and movements led by figures like B.R. Ambedkar, while in Korea, it was driven by Yi Dynasty policies, the Tonghak Rebellion, Kabo Reforms, and the influence of Christianity. Despite differences—India's religiously rigid system versus Korea's state-driven, less persistent one—both share hierarchical stratification and occupational linkage. The comparison highlights their functional similarities, historical evolution, and ongoing challenges in achieving egalitarian societies.

**Keywords:** Indian, Korean, Caste system, Paekchong, Bone rank system, Durumagi.

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## Introduction

Caste is a form of social stratification which is not distinctive to India. Social stratification of society on the basis of caste can be observed in many Asian countries. One such example is the Korean caste system. Caste system is a closed system of hierarchical division which has been in practice for thousands of years in India as well as Korea. Caste is a structural and cultural feature. Structurally it is the inter relations and interactions among different castes. Culturally it is embedded in values, practices and beliefs. Shudras and Dalits were considered as untouchables in the Indian caste system, similarly "The Paekchong" were considered as the untouchables in the Korean peninsula under the "Bone Rank System". This article draws the comparative mean between Indian & the Korean Untouchables on the basis of their origin, occupation, restrictions and social change.

## ORIGIN

### The Origin of Indian Caste System:

*Divine origin:* According to Rig veda, *Purushasukta* the primal man created human society and from different parts of his body the four varnas were made. The Brahmins from head, Kshatrias from arms, Vaishyas from thighs, Shudras and untouchables from feet.

*Karma theory:* This theory states that the caste status in present life is determined by the Karma in past life. It states that if someone performs the roles and duties of its caste in present life he/she will be born in a higher caste in the next life. The ones who do not perform their duties are born as Shudras or Untouchables.

*IndoAryan theory:* When Aryans migrated from the steppes of Central Asia into Indian sub continent they came in contact with the Dravidians. Culturally Aryans and Dravidians were Different. To maintain their supremacy Aryans started practicing endogamous marriages which led to the origin of the caste system.

### The Origin of Korean Caste System

Various theories are existing regarding the origin of Korean caste system:

1. When Prince Han of Tan'gun, who reputedly set up Korea's first kingdom in 233 B. C., attended the assembly of all nations, he assigned a temporary duty to each attendant. The descendants of those who were appointed to slaughter cattle became the Paekchong.
2. There is another belief that at the fall of the Koryo Dynasty in 1392,

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seventy-two high officials of the nobility shifted into the mountains and strongly resisted the new Yi Dynasty. Eventually, because of starvation, these resisters had to surrender. They were then confined to a restricted area known as Tu-mun-dong in Songdo or Kaesong. It is said that their posterity became the Paekchong.

3. There is another theory that the Paekchong were Tibetan immigrants. In still another theory the Paekchong were the descendants of immigrants who were the low castes of India. Another possibility is that they had migrated from Tartar. (The term 'Tartar' seems to have been a general term for-all northern peoples, Mongolians, Manchurians, and so on.) Still another possibility is that the Paekchong were the descendants of the offspring of captives taken during the Japanese invasions of 1592-1598.

### Occupation

Caste system in india classified people into four castes:

*Brahmins*: Priest and scholars

*Kshatriays*: Ruler and warriors

*Vaishyas*: Traders and merchants

*Shudras/Dalits*: Servants, labourers, artisans, peasants and Untouchables who performed occupations considered to be unhygienic or polluting. The main occupation of Dalits were manual scavenging, butchering of animals and were also kept as slaves.

### Occupation of Paekchong

- (1) Basketry, which was the main occupation of their ancestors including making baskets, wickerwork, sieves, hoops, etc.
- (2) Butchering, which included the slaughter of animals, selling meat, and processing the meat.
- (3) Leatherwork, including tanning, shoemaking, armor-making etc.
- (4) Straw-sandal making.

The similarities between Shurda/Dalits and Paekchongs of Korea can be seen. Shoe making/*Mochi*, Butchering of animals/*Kasai*, Leather work/*Chamar* etc.

### Social Restrictions

Both Dalits and Paekchong were imposed social restriction:

### **Residential Segregation:**

Dalits in India lived on the outskirts of villages. These places had poor sanitation and drinking facilities. Dalits were not allowed to enter the village of the caste higher in hierarchy.

Paekchong were also forced to live in separate communities. They were limited to certain areas to maintain the public morals because they were considered uncivilized.

### **Cultural Segregation:**

Dalits in India were restricted from celebrating festivals and fairs. They were forbidden from entering temples. Inter-caste marriages were not allowed. During the marriage ceremony the groom from lower caste was not allowed to sit on the horse or a mare. There were clothing restrictions in which dalits were not allowed to wear bright clothes, women were not allowed to wear jewelry. To dispose of the dead bodies there were separate cremation grounds for dalits.

Paekchong on other hand had similar cultural restrictions, they were not allowed to marry people from higher hierarchy. The Korean wedding custom is similar to Indian custom where the groom rides to the bride's house on a horse but the Paekchong groom was not allowed to sit on a horse. But as an expression of revolt Paekchong groom rode on a bull. In clothing restrictions Paekchongs were not allowed to wear the ordinary hat worn by common people, instead they were forced to wear the hat made of bamboo. They were debarred from wearing an overcoat known as *Durumagi*. They were not allowed to wear leather sandals, they could only wear straw sandals. There were separate burial grounds for Paekchong to bury dead bodies.

"A heartening story as documented by *Soon Man Rhim (1974)* describes, when a Japanese scholar visited a Paekchong house in the early 1910s, he observed the strange ancestral altar. He saw the common man's hat and the *Durumagi* laid before the wooden spirit tablet of the departed father. Having been asked what these were meant for, the head of the family explained that his father had died before the new law was passed in and was, therefore, unable to enjoy wearing the hat and the *Durumagi*. Therefore, he offered them to his father's spirit as a token of consolation."

### **Occupational Segregation**

Dalits were forced to perform occupations considered to be unhygienic or polluting such as manual scavenging, they were kept as servants, slaves labourers, artisan work, pottery, leather goods and butchering.

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Paekchong were involved with occupation of basketry, leather works, shoe making, and removal of carcasses. Paekchong were also assigned to punish and torture the prisoners. They also performed the occupation of butchering and selling of animal meat.

Restrictions on Dalits and Paekchong were similar in nature.

### **Social Change**

Social change has two dimensions i.e structural and cultural. According to W. Moore social change is *a significant alteration in structure over time in behaviour patterns and culture including norms and values.*

### **Social Change in India**

Caste system in India has changed in many ways. Concerted efforts of society and constitutional measures have changed the dynamics of caste in India, especially *Dalits*. The prominent personalities like Jyotiba Phule, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar fought against the caste system.

### **Political and Constitutional Measures**

B.R. Ambedkar prominently advocated for the rights of *Dalits*. Being a chairman of constituent assembly in 1947. He made the special provisions in the constitution of India to ensure equality for the scheduled caste. Article 15 and 17 of the Indian constitution address discrimination and abolition of untouchability.

### **Industrialization and Modernization**

Impact of industrialization and modernization can be seen on the dynamics of caste in India. The expansion of factories had an impact on the traditional division of labour. Members of different castes work together in factory lines which has diminished the aspect of separation of contact. But still the discrimination on the basis of caste can still be seen in Indian society.

### **Revolts and Movements**

Pre independence era saw social reform movements led by the figures like Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who campaigned against untouchability and caste discrimination. Ambedkar, a dalit himself led a crucial dalit movement i.e Mahar Satyagraha in 1927. This satyagraha aimed to secure equal rights for dalits to access public water sources igniting a series of protests and movements nationwide.

Namdev Dhasal, along with J.V. Pawar founded the Dalit Panthers in 1972. Dalit Panthers movement was radical and revolutionary in nature.

Ambedkar played an important role in uplifting the status of dalits in India. He is the father of dalit consciousness in India.

## **Social Change in Korea**

### **The Assimilation Policy of the Early Yi Dynasty**

Yi dynasty laid the foundation for the absorption of Paekchong into the common people. They were asked to settle down in permanent settlements and start farming. They were also allowed to marry common people. But all these efforts did not work, common people did not accept Paekchong and remained segregated from society.

### **The Tonghak Rebellion 1894**

This was the revolt against foreign rule and against the rule of land owning class. The program that Tonghak leader Chon Pongjun (1854–1895) presented contained the most important information regarding the peasant revolution in relation to the Paekchong issue. He had presented the government with a 12-point plan as the foundation for an agreement. Two of the program's twelve points were: (1) to abolish slavery by setting the servitude contracts on fire; and (2) to enhance the well-being of "the seven socially degraded groups" and eliminate the Paekchong's traditional p'aeli-angi, a rudimentary bamboo hat which was seen as symbol of dishonor and forced on Paekchong by higher caste people.

### **Kabo Reforms 1894**

A pro-Japanese government was established in Korea by Japan. It forced the several reforms aimed at modernizing the nation. A number of reformist groups influenced by Japan also backed these reforms. There was a reform program in place, which was dubbed the Kabo Reform of 1894. It covered every aspect of politics, society, culture, and economic activity. According to Kabo reforms The Paekchong were no longer subject to any legal discrimination. But old prejudices endure, particularly in conservative cultures. The Paekchong's status improved despite the relatively slow assimilation, particularly in the cities.

### **Impact of Christianity**

Christianity significantly influenced education in South Korea by establishing the first modern schools and promoting literacy and democratic ideals. Politically, it contributed to the development of a functioning democracy and shaped the Korean Constitution through the involvement of Christian leaders. Economically, the principles of entrepreneurship and individualism

introduced by Christian missionaries have played a crucial role in transforming Korean society and in abolishment of untouchability from Korean society.

### Key Differences and Similarities

- **Differences:** India's system is religiously embedded, decentralized, and persistent, while Korea's was state-driven, meritocratic to a degree, and transient. India's caste system is more rigid and ritualistic as compared to Korean caste system.
- **Similarities:** Both systems stratified society hierarchically, linked status to occupation, and marginalized lower groups (Dalits vs. Paekchong). They reinforced social order through cultural ideologies (Hinduism vs. Confucianism).

### Conclusion

Birth-ascription, caste-endogamy, traditional occupation, and pollution are structural characteristics shared by several societies like Japan, Africa, Korea, and India. The cross-cultural comparisons of caste-like social systems of India & Korea have similarities on a functional basis. Both the Indian and Korean caste systems have experienced radical changes throughout history. The bone rank system in Korea was eliminated during the late nineteenth century in a bid to promote a more equal society. Elimination has not achieved total success since this form of social organization still persists in Korea. To this day, India continues to practice discrimination based on forms of caste. The comparison of the caste systems in Korea and India demonstrates the intricacy and complexity of these social structures. Both systems have evolved differently over time, reflecting distinct cultural and historical contexts, even though their roots are in societal norms and traditions. These systems have been challenged and reshaped by individuals and social movements, opening the door for social change and transformation. The intricacies of caste-based disparities must be further examined and addressed in order to create a society that is more inclusive and egalitarian going forward.

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