



## Medieval India's caste transformations: A historical and socio-political analysis

Mohd Salik Wasi

Researcher, Department of History and Culture, Jamia Millia Islamiya, New Delhi, India

### Abstract

This study explores the transformation of caste structures in medieval India through a historical and socio-political lens, drawing primarily on secondary data and existing historiography. Traditional interpretations have often represented caste as a rigid and immutable system; however, recent scholarship points toward significant change shaped by political processes, economic developments, and religious interactions. The present research analyses how regional state formation, patterns of land control, and the incorporation of diverse social groups contributed to the redefinition of hierarchy and status. By engaging critically with the works of prominent historians and sociologists, the study highlights mechanisms of social mobility, the emergence of new jatis, and the negotiation of rank within local contexts. It also evaluates the influence of Bhakti and Sufi traditions in creating alternative spaces of identity while often operating within broader structural limits. The findings suggest that caste in medieval India functioned as a flexible yet enduring framework that adapted to shifts in power, patronage, and material life. This reinterpretation contributes to a more dynamic understanding of pre-modern South Asian society and challenges overly static models of social organisation.

**Keywords:** Caste, historical, socio-political, medieval period, India

### Introduction

The caste order has been one of the most potent forces structuring social, economic, and cultural relations in the Indian subcontinent. While its intellectual roots are commonly associated with the ancient fourfold Varna scheme, such as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, the reality on the ground has always been far more complex. In practice, society was organised into a vast number of jatis, shaped by occupation, region, kin networks, and ties to political authority and instead of remaining static, caste proved capable of adjusting to new historical situations and pressures. The medieval centuries, from roughly the beginning of the second millennium to the eighteenth century, mark a particularly significant stage in this process of change. The expansion of agriculture, the rise of towns, the growth of trade, and the consolidation of regimes such as the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire altered structures of governance and everyday interaction <sup>[1]</sup>. Meanwhile, devotional currents, especially the Bhakti and Sufi movements, promoted ethical and spiritual ideas that sometimes challenged established inequalities even as they operated within existing social frameworks <sup>[2]</sup>. Together, these forces prompted renewed negotiations over rank and community and contributed to the proliferation of caste identities. Scholars, however, remain divided over whether these shifts weakened hierarchy or merely reshaped it in new forms. This study examines how caste groups were created, legitimised, and disputed within medieval socio-political settings, highlighting the interplay between persistence and transformation. Spanning the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries, it seeks to trace broader patterns while remaining sensitive to regional variations. This study uses secondary sources, especially academic books and scholarly articles, to examine how caste operated in social practice and was represented in ideological traditions.

### Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to examine transformations in caste during medieval India. It

relies primarily on secondary literature produced by historians and sociologists who have interpreted inscriptions, textual materials, and regional traditions. Instead of emphasising quantitative data, the research focuses on meanings, social representations, and historical processes through a close engagement with existing scholarship. The analysis compares how different historians explain the relationship between hierarchy and broader political and economic change. By bringing these perspectives into conversation, the paper identifies both continuity and adaptation within caste arrangements. Particular attention is given to developments such as claims to Kshatriya status, the effects of agrarian expansion, the significance of mercantile patronage, and the influence of Bhakti and Sufi teachings. Examining these cases helps us evaluate how communities sought legitimacy as they adjusted to shifting structures of authority. Since the work is grounded in published interpretations, it does not involve direct archival investigation. Even so, this method enables a broad and critical engagement with historiographical debates and highlights the argument that caste evolved in response to specific historical contexts rather than remaining unchanged.

### The Formation and Development of the Caste System in Early Indian Society

Vedic literature provides some of the earliest statements about social differentiation in the Indian subcontinent. The Purusha Sukta of the Rig Veda presents society as divided into four Varnas, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, and links this hierarchy to a divine act of creation. In this scheme, Brahmins claimed ritual authority and learning, Kshatriyas exercised warfare and governance, Vaishyas engaged in agriculture and trade, and Shudras performed service functions. Historians warn that this formulation should not be treated as a direct description of everyday life. However, it supplied a durable ideological language that influenced later ideas of duty and rank. Over

time, Brahmanical authors of texts such as the Dharmashastras expanded these principles by prescribing rules of purity, occupation, and marriage, thereby strengthening hereditary status and endogamy. As society moved from the later Vedic to the early historic period, agricultural growth, urbanisation, and new political formations increased social complexity [3]. Communities organised many occupational and regional groupings into jatis that operated alongside, and at times outside, the Varna framework. Migration, state expansion, and interaction with non-Vedic populations drew diverse peoples into graded status orders. Although Brahmanical norms carried prestige, lived realities required continual adjustment [4]. Inscriptions and literary materials reveal that groups debated and reinterpreted their positions, suggesting that caste identities allowed greater movement than prescriptive texts implied. By the early medieval era, communities had tied caste more firmly to control over land, claims to revenue, and access to patronage. The multiplication of jatis, the strengthening of regional authority and the incorporation of tribal and pastoral populations into agrarian networks reshaped older visions of hierarchy. Ritual rank still mattered, but material resources and political influence increasingly affected status. These trends created the setting in which later medieval changes unfolded, preserving inherited structures while opening them to modification, reinforcement, and challenge [5].

#### **Political Context of Caste in Medieval India**

Medieval India witnessed major transformations in political authority, territorial management, and administrative practice. Power shifted from numerous regional kingdoms to larger imperial structures such as the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. Although these regimes pursued greater centralisation, they continued to depend heavily on local elites and intermediaries. This evolving political environment shaped patterns of social organisation and influenced the ways caste identities were defined and negotiated. Rather than standing apart from society, political institutions engaged directly with existing hierarchies and frequently altered them [6]. The extension of cultivation into new areas provided an essential foundation for state strength. Kings and imperial authorities distributed land to soldiers, officials, temples, and religious specialists in exchange for loyalty and service [7]. Through these transactions, they established new centres of influence and strengthened the link between ritual esteem and material control. Beneficiary groups often used these advantages to press for greater recognition, thereby transforming local ranking systems. In this setting, caste aligned closely with employment in administration, military responsibility, and rights to revenue. Access to patronage could enhance prestige, while its absence might deepen exclusion. Administrative developments under the Sultanate and Mughal governments further shaped stratification. Revenue arrangements, cultivator classifications, and the incorporation of regional chiefs into imperial service opened specific routes to advancement but also created new distinctions [8]. Even without formal laws on caste, state practices affected how honour and authority circulated. Expanding political integration across distant areas encouraged new forms of cultural contact and contributed to the reformulation of identity among both Hindu and Muslim populations. The medieval state, therefore, became a crucial

arena in which caste was maintained, adjusted, and sometimes contested. Control of land and participation in governance emerged as decisive factors in determining status, binding hierarchy to wider economic and political processes.

#### **Impact of Religion: Bhakti and Sufi Movements**

Religious developments in the medieval centuries provided a crucial setting for people to reconsider hierarchy and community identity. The Bhakti and Sufi traditions promoted personal devotion, ethical living, and a direct relationship with the divine. Because these movements arose in many regions, they attracted followers from varied social backgrounds and created spaces where people could question, reshape, or sometimes reaffirm established ideas of rank. Bhakti teachers and poet-saints, often communicating in vernacular languages, criticised the control of ritual specialists and rejected the belief that birth alone determined spiritual value [9]. By placing devotion above lineage, they enabled marginalised groups to express claims to dignity and moral worth. The use of regional languages widened participation and reduced dependence on elite Sanskrit learning. However, devotional inclusion rarely overturned social realities. Many Bhakti communities continued to observe prevailing caste practices, and spiritual equality did not consistently bring structural change. Sufi leaders advanced similar principles of fellowship, generosity, and disciplined piety. Their hospices and shrines welcomed people from diverse origins and sometimes softened older divisions [10]. However, communities did not abandon hierarchy altogether; they often reproduced difference in altered forms within Muslim society. Instead of eliminating stratification, Sufi networks frequently adapted it to new cultural contexts. Bhakti and Sufi traditions together stimulated debate about authority, purity, and belonging. Communities used these religious resources to claim honour, seek patronage, and voice protest. Religion thus operated as an active arena of negotiation in which continuity and transformation unfolded side by side, shaping the development of caste in medieval India [11].

#### **Occupational Change and the Emergence of New Jatis**

Economic growth during the medieval period played a crucial role in transforming social identities. As agriculture expanded into new areas, towns and market centres developed, and crafts became increasingly specialised, people organised labour in new ways. This diversification of occupations led many communities to consolidate into distinct jatis, connecting professional roles with hereditary status. In this context, economic activity became a key factor in the formation and stabilisation of caste structures. The rise of artisanal production and long-distance trade encouraged the growth of influential merchant and craft groups. Weavers, metalworkers, traders, scribes, and service providers built collective identities, often reinforced through guild-like associations, patronage networks, and religious endowments [12]. Success in commerce or administrative work enabled some communities to gain prestige, claim higher ritual status, or adopt customs associated with social elites. At the same time, the hereditary aspect of occupations sometimes kept groups in subordinate positions within local hierarchies. State demand also shaped occupational organisation. Expanding kingdoms needed soldiers, revenue collectors, intermediaries, and suppliers, which created

opportunities for advancement. Communities that aligned themselves with rulers often used these opportunities to assert claims to a higher social rank. These processes demonstrate that caste was not rigid or immune to change; it adapted to economic shifts and political developments. However, social mobility had its limits. While new jatis emerged and some communities prospered, the larger hierarchical framework remained intact. Achieving a higher status often required approval through ritual sanction or political recognition, which not all groups could secure [13]. Occupational change, therefore, contributed both to innovation and to the maintenance of inequality. Overall, these developments illustrate how work, wealth, and social standing interacted in medieval society, showing that economic transformation played a decisive role in shaping the evolving structure of caste.

### **Caste and Land Relations**

Control over land formed a central basis of status and authority in medieval India. As agriculture expanded into new regions, rights over revenue and produce became critical in structuring social hierarchies. Communities' caste positions increasingly depended on patterns of landholding, which distinguished dominant groups from dependent populations. Rulers in different regions granted land to warriors, officials, temples, and religious leaders in exchange for service and loyalty. These grants often elevated recipients to positions of local authority, allowing them to command labour, collect taxes, and assert ritual prestige. Over time, such privileges helped consolidate landed elites whose influence rested on both political recognition and social standing. In many villages, these groups acted as intermediaries between peasants and the state, further strengthening their control. For cultivating communities, access to land offered opportunities for collective organisation and upward mobility [14]. Prosperous peasants sometimes attempted to improve their social standing by creating new origin myths, compiling genealogies, or adopting elite customs. Nevertheless, inequalities persisted. Landless labourers and service groups remained tied to patrons through customary obligations, limiting their mobility. The connection between caste and land thus remained dynamic. Economic advancement could support claims for higher status, but recognition depended on broader power relations. Agrarian structures did not simply reflect hierarchy; they actively shaped its evolution by opening new possibilities while preserving existing advantages [15]. By linking ritual authority with material control, landholding in medieval India played a vital role in sustaining and reshaping caste arrangements, embedding social hierarchy deeply within everyday rural life.

### **Social Mobility and Sanskritization**

Although the caste hierarchy in medieval India appeared rigid, communities found meaningful opportunities for social mobility. People did not simply accept the positions assigned to them; they actively negotiated their status through strategies such as adaptation, forming alliances, and shaping their public image. These practices show that caste, while deeply embedded, could be reinterpreted within specific political and economic contexts; a key avenue for advancement involved adopting the customs and practices of higher-status groups. Sociologists later called this process Sanskritization. Communities emulated upper-caste habits,

such as vegetarian diets, revised marriage rules, support for Brahmins, and the creation of genealogies that connected them to prestigious lineages [16]. By altering their public identity, these groups sought recognition and acceptance within local hierarchies. Economic and material factors often supported these claims. Access to land, success in trade, or service to rulers provided resources that strengthened status aspirations. When coupled with political patronage, these achievements sometimes allowed communities to move up the social ladder. However, upward mobility was not guaranteed. Established elites often resisted these efforts, and acceptance frequently required negotiation within broader power structures. Moreover, individual or group mobility did not dismantle the hierarchy itself. Instead, it reshaped positions, with some communities entering privileged ranks while others remained subordinate [17]. In this way, caste demonstrated resilience, accommodating change without losing its basic logic of graded inequality. Studying social mobility highlights the flexibility and dynamism of medieval caste society. It reveals how ambition, economic opportunity, and ritual practice interacted to allow transformation while preserving the overarching system of social differentiation.

### **Socio-Political Consequences**

Changes in caste during medieval India had wide-ranging effects on power distribution, access to resources, and the organisation of community life. As rulers expanded their authority and economic opportunities shifted, communities used caste to define rights, obligations, and social roles. Hierarchy shaped relationships between rulers and subjects, landlords and cultivators, and patrons and dependents, influencing everyday governance. One key outcome of these processes was the consolidation of dominant groups at local and regional levels. Communities that controlled land, military service, or administrative offices often transformed these advantages into claims of higher ritual status. Their authority extended beyond economic influence to include leadership in religious institutions, arbitration of disputes, and cultural patronage [18]. In this way, caste reinforced political power, while recognition from political authorities further strengthened caste rank. At the same time, stratification created tensions. Subordinate groups negotiated burdens such as taxation, labour obligations, and social exclusion, and they sometimes sought protection through religious affiliation, migration, or new occupational identities. Devotional movements and alternative networks provided symbolic avenues for expressing critique, even when they could not overturn the established hierarchy [19]. Caste thus functioned both as a tool for social stability and as a site of contestation. Together, these socio-political dynamics embedded caste deeply within institutional and everyday life. They influenced recruitment to service, patterns of alliance, and access to patronage, ensuring that social difference remained central to governance. By the end of the medieval period, caste had become closely intertwined with political practice, laying foundations that would continue to shape early modern and colonial society.

### **Gender Dimensions within Caste System**

Caste hierarchy in medieval India was closely connected to ideas about gender, family, and reproduction. The regulation of marriage, sexuality, and inheritance played a crucial role in maintaining boundaries between communities. Through

these controls, caste identity was reproduced across generations, making women central to the preservation of social order. Endogamy, or marriage within the group, remained one of the most important principles of caste organisation. Rules governing unions, kinship, and honour sought to prevent the mixing of status categories and to secure claims to purity. Families, therefore, invested heavily in supervising women's behaviour, since their conformity symbolised collective prestige <sup>[20]</sup>. Violations could invite social sanctions not only for individuals but for entire communities. At the same time, gender norms varied across regions and social strata. Elite groups often imposed stricter seclusion and inheritance regulations, while labouring and artisanal communities sometimes allowed women greater economic visibility <sup>[21]</sup>. However, even when women actively participated in production, authority remained male-dominated. Access to property and decision-making was usually mediated through patriarchal structures. Religious movements offered alternative spaces that occasionally softened these boundaries. Women saints and devotees in Bhakti traditions, for example, expressed spiritual agency and criticised social discrimination. However, such expressions are rarely translated into broad institutional change. The everyday realities of caste continued to shape opportunities and constraints. Examining gender thus reveals how hierarchy operated not only in public institutions but also within domestic life <sup>[22]</sup>. By controlling marriage alliances and family honour, caste reproduced itself in intimate settings, ensuring both continuity and adaptation within medieval society.

### Conclusion

The study of caste in medieval India reveals a complex interaction between inherited social structures and evolving historical circumstances. While earlier ideological models provided a framework for hierarchy, the actual practice of caste proved far more flexible. Political centralisation, agrarian expansion, commercial growth, and religious movements created new spaces where communities asserted, defended, and renegotiated their status. Rather than remaining static, caste adapted to these pressures and transformed in response to material conditions and institutional developments. During the medieval period, access to land, service to rulers, and participation in networks of patronage played a decisive role in determining social rank. Occupational specialisation contributed to the emergence of numerous jatis, and strategies such as adopting elite customs or constructing prestigious genealogies offered pathways for limited upward mobility. At the same time, the Bhakti and Sufi movements offered moral and spiritual critiques of exclusion, though they rarely dismantled social hierarchies. Gender norms reinforced boundaries by regulating marriage and inheritance, ensuring that hierarchy persisted within domestic and community life. Historiographical debates highlight the complexity of caste, showing that no single explanation captures its full diversity. Scholars have emphasised both rigidity and negotiation, and the evidence examined in this study supports the view that continuity and change operated together. Caste remained a robust framework, yet its forms and meanings shifted repeatedly over time. Understanding these medieval developments is crucial because they shaped social patterns that extended into the early modern and

colonial periods. By intertwining hierarchy with political authority, economic relations, and cultural practices, medieval processes ensured the persistence of caste while allowing adaptation. Caste, therefore, should be understood as a historical formation, enduring, but continuously responsive to change.

### References

1. Alam M, Subrahmanyam S. *The Mughal State, 1526–1750*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, 1-30.
2. Ernst CW. *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, 55-90.
3. Thapar R. *From Lineage to State: Social Formations in the Mid-First Millennium BCE in the Ganga Valley*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984, 72-110.
4. Bayly S. *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 25-57.
5. Chattopadhyaya BD. *The Making of Early Medieval India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, 108-40.
6. Stein B. *State Formation and Economy Reconsidered*. *Modern Asian Studies*, 1985;19(3):387-413.
7. Sharma RS. *Indian Feudalism, c. 300–1200*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 1980:45-86.
8. Chandra S. *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals*. vol. 2. New Delhi: Har-Anand, 2005, 229-67.
9. Hawley JS. *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, 24-60.
10. Digby S. *The Sufi Shaikh as a Source of Authority in Mediaeval India*. *Purushartha*, 1986;9:57-77.
11. Guha S. *Beyond Caste: Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present*. Leiden: Brill, 2013, 62-101.
12. Chakravarti R. *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society*. New Delhi: Manohar, 2002, 87-131.
13. Srinivas MN. *Social Change in Modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966, 1-45.
14. Karashima N. *South Indian History and Society: Studies from Inscriptions, AD 850–1800*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984, 37-68.
15. Chattopadhyaya BD. *The Making of Early Medieval India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, 167-204.
16. Srinivas MN. *Social Change in Modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966, 6-42.
17. Peabody N. *Cents, Sense, Census: Human Inventories in Late Pre-colonial and Early Colonial India*. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2001;43(4):819-50.
18. Karashima N. *The Village Community and the State in South India*. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 1982;19(3):257-84.
19. Hawley JS. *Author and Authority in the Bhakti Poetry of North India*. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1988;47(2):269-90.
20. Sangari K, Vaid S, editors. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, 1-26.
21. Chakravarti U. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Calcutta: Stree, 2003, 68-102.
22. Pechilis K. *The Embodiment of Bhakti*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 83-118.