The Caste System in India

What is the caste system?

According to Hindu tradition, Indian society is divided into hierarchical groups known as castes (jatis). Caste not only dictates one’s occupation, but also dietary habits, dress codes, and interaction with members of other castes. Members of a high caste enjoy more wealth and opportunities while members of a low caste perform menial jobs. Upward mobility is very rare in the caste system. Most people remain in one caste their entire life and marry within their caste.

Castes fall into four basic groups known as varnas:

- **Brahmins**—priests, scholars
- **Kshatryas**—warriors, kings
- **Vaishyas**—traders, merchants, bankers
- **Shudras**—laborers, servants, peasants

A fifth, large group of people known as Asprishya or “untouchables” exists in addition to these caste-groups. Untouchable jobs, such as toilet cleaning and garbage removal, bring them into contact with filth, bodily fluids, and trash. They are therefore considered “polluted” and not to be touched. As a result, they experience frequent social discrimination. In *The God of Small Things*, Velutha comes from a family of Paravans, a category of untouchables associated with fishing and boatbuilding.

Reform of the Caste System

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), a prominent figure in the early 20th-century movement for Indian Independence from British rule, campaigned to improve the rights of the untouchables, whom he called Harijans meaning “Children of God.” He made symbolic gestures, such as eating with them.

The Indian Constitution of 1950 outlawed discrimination against untouchables. This enabled them to obtain previously forbidden jobs and education.

Untouchables have also contested their “outcast” status by forming their own social and political groups, referring to themselves as “Dalits” (the “oppressed”). Many have converted from Hinduism to Buddhism.

Caste in Contemporary India

Although it is illegal to discriminate against “low” and “untouchable” castes in modern-day India, prejudice still continues. We see this in *The God of Small Things*, much of which is set in 1969, nearly two decades after the passing of this law. The growth of cities has created new forms of contact between different castes, which did not exist before, but it is still possible to see advertisements for housing and jobs specifying “Brahmins Only.” Much discrimination is unspoken, however, with “untouchables” regularly receiving lower pay and more menial jobs.