

**Born into Hierarchy: Understanding
Psychological Architecture of Caste
Introducing Hierarchical Imprint Model of
Caste Psychology (HIM-CP)**

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Abstract

The Indian caste system is among the most psychologically complex social hierarchies in human history. Despite its scale and longevity, systematic psychological analysis of how caste is perceived, why it persists, and what it does to the mind remains underdeveloped. This paper addresses that gap in three stages: first, examining caste perception through social dominance and system justification frameworks, second, analyzing its structural and psychological causes, including socialization, cognitive essentialism, identity binding practices such as caste prescribed marriages, and institutional entrenchment, and surveying its consequences for stigmatized groups, dominant groups, and society at large. The paper's central theoretical contribution is the Hierarchical Imprint Model of Caste Psychology (HIM-CP), a five-level integrative framework that maps how caste leaves enduring psychological marks across macro ideological, institutional, intergroup, interpersonal, and intrapsychic dimensions. Implications for research, clinical practice, and social policy are discussed.

Keywords

Caste system, System justification, Hierarchical Imprint Model of Caste Psychology (HIM-CP), Social identity Theory, Indian psychology.

**Research Foundation International, New Delhi
(Affiliated to UNO)**

Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)

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Introducing Hierarchical Imprint Model of Caste Psychology (HIM-CP)

1. Introduction

The caste system in India is not a relic of the past. It is a living psychological structure shaping the cognitive worlds, emotional lives, and life chances of countless individuals across the entire subcontinent. Caste determines who may eat with whom, who may marry whom, and who may aspire to which lifestyle, enforced not only through law and social sanction but, more durably, through its internalization into the self concept itself.

The psychological literature on caste, while growing, remains lean relative to the phenomenon's scale and depth. Indian social psychology has engaged with caste, but often by importing Western frameworks without adequate cultural adaptation (Misra & Gergen, 1993). This paper offers a systematic psychological analysis organized around three questions: How is caste perceived? What causes it to persist? And what are its psychological consequences?

Beyond systematizing existing literature, this paper introduces the Hierarchical Imprint Model of Caste Psychology (HIM-CP), a five-level framework integrating macro-ideological, institutional, intergroup, interpersonal, and intrapsychic dimensions of caste psychology. The name reflects the model's core insight which is that caste does not merely constrain from outside but imprints itself at every level of psychological life, leaving marks that persist even when structural conditions demand change. The model is designed as a heuristic for empirical research and a conceptual basis for clinical and policy intervention.

2. Perception of the Caste System

2.1 Dominant-Caste Perception

Two theoretical traditions anchor the psychology of how dominant groups perceive hierarchy. Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) identifies Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), the degree to which individuals endorse group-based hierarchy as a key predictor of prejudice. Research in India has found elevated SDO among upper-caste respondents, associated with active endorsement of legitimizing myths that frame the social order as meritocratic or divinely ordained (Mahalingam, 2003).

System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994) similarly demonstrates that dominant groups tend to perceive existing hierarchies as natural and fair rather than arbitrary or unjust.

In the Indian context, the primary legitimizing myth is the dharmic framework encoded in texts such as Manu Smriti, which assigns ritual duty according to birth-caste and frames hierarchy as cosmic order (Dumont, 1970). Importantly, while explicit endorsement of caste has declined in urban populations, implicit bias persists. Deshpande (2011) documented that identical CVs were evaluated more favorably when assigned upper-caste names, paralleling findings on race-based discrimination in Western contexts (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Caste perception, in other words, operates partly through automatic cognitive processes that are resistant to conscious override.

2.2 Lower-Caste and Stigmatized Group Perception

System Justification Theory makes a counterintuitive prediction. Members of low-status groups often endorse the very system that disadvantages them, because doing so reduces the distress of perceiving oneself as a victim of injustice (Jost *et al.*, 2003). Mahalingam (2003) found that lower-caste individuals frequently endorsed the belief that caste differences are natural and unchangeable, more strongly than their social position might suggest. When inequality is seen as natural, it stops feeling like injustice, which is the psychological shift that reduces the pressure to resist it.

Yet powerful counterforces exist. The Dalit social movement, Ambedkar's intellectual legacy, and caste based political mobilization have created conditions for the development of critical consciousness which recognizes systemic inequality as structurally produced rather than naturally given (Watts *et al.*, 2011). This tension between system justification and critical consciousness is not resolved at once but continuously navigated, and its outcome shapes whether caste identity becomes a source of shame or collective pride (Omvedt, 2006).

2.3 Institutional and Cross Cultural Perception

Caste perception is also embedded in institutional frameworks. The Indian state's relationship to caste is structurally ambivalent: it prohibits caste discrimination while simultaneously requiring caste identification for the implementation of reservation policies. This ambivalence shapes perception at every level of institutional life. Comparatively, Wilkerson (2020) has drawn parallels between Indian caste and racial stratification in the United States, identifying both as instances of birth-assigned, immutable hierarchical ranking. Though the cultural specificity of each

system must be preserved (Gupta, 2000), such comparisons open productive lines of cross-cultural inquiry into the shared psychological mechanisms through which birth-based hierarchy is maintained.

3. Causes of Caste Persistence

3.1 Historical and Structural Foundations

Caste is not a purely psychological phenomenon. It is the layered outcome of millennia of social, legal, religious, and economic organization. The varna system, described in the Rigveda as originating from the body of the primordial being Purusha, assigned the four varnas to cosmically ordered functions. Those who came to be known as Dalits were excluded from this fourfold framework altogether and consigned to occupations considered ritually impure, a positioning that encoded social exclusion as sacred law (Dumont, 1970). Colonial administration paradoxically deepened this structure as the British census making hardened previously more fluid caste boundaries into fixed administrative categories that outlasted colonial rule and continue to organize state resource distribution today (Dirks, 2001).

3.2 Psychological Pathways of Caste Transmission

3.2.1 Socialization and Early Identity Formation

Children acquire caste identity before they can critically examine it through surnames, dietary customs, ritual observances, and the hierarchies of domestic space. Developmental research suggests social categorization begins as early as ages three to five (Aboud, 1988), meaning caste is encoded as natural social knowledge in the pre-reflective period. Lower-caste parents engage in what Thorat and Newman (2010) call protective socialization, teaching children to navigate dominant caste spaces through deference and concealment. While this is a survival strategy, it quietly communicates to the child that their identity must be hidden to stay safe, a message that can chip away at self esteem and makes it harder to develop a secure, integrated sense of who they are.

3.2.2 Cognitive Anchoring and Essentialist Belief

Psychological essentialism, the tendency to perceive social categories as reflecting underlying natural essences (Medin & Ortony, 1989) functions as a cognitive anchor that makes caste hierarchy feel fixed and unalterable. Mahalingam (2003) demonstrated that essentialist caste beliefs make hierarchy appear inevitable. If caste differences are rooted in nature, no social policy or political effort can undo them. These beliefs are reinforced through ritual practice. The purity and pollution framework gives caste ideology a bodily reality where people physically experience certain bodies, spaces, and objects as contaminating. Haidt's (2012) research on

disgust based moral cognition helps explain why beliefs rooted in bodily feeling are especially resistant to rational challenge.

3.2.3 Institutional Entrenchment

Caste is reproduced through the everyday practices of institutions like schools, workplaces, temples, families without requiring any conscious belief in caste ideology. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus is useful here. Caste habitus describes the set of social habits, perceptions, and responses that people absorb simply by growing up and living within caste ordered environments, and which they then enact without reflection. When a child is treated differently at school based on caste, no one needs to teach that child a lesson about hierarchy because it is already written into the experience itself. This is how caste reproduces itself quietly, beneath the threshold of deliberate action.

3.3 Identity-Binding through Caste-Prescribed Marriage

B. R. Ambedkar (1936) argued that restricting marriage within one's caste is the key way caste boundaries are preserved across generations. By linking close relationships to caste, it turns caste into both a social and biological group, strengthening ingroup loyalty and dividing groups further (Moon, 2016). Psychologically, this increases caste identity and pressure against inter-caste relationships. Enforced through family control, social monitoring, and sometimes honor-based violence, it limits personal freedom and harms individual wellbeing (Guru, 2009; Rao, 2009).

4. Psychological Consequences of Caste

4.1 Consequences for Stigmatized Groups

4.1.1 Chronic Stress and Allostatic Load

Sustained caste based discrimination accumulates into measurable physical and psychological harm. McEwen and Stellar's (1993) concept of allostatic load, the cumulative biological cost of chronic stress provides a useful lens for understanding caste's somatic consequences, including elevated stress hormones, weakened immunity, and increased cardiovascular risk. While direct psychobiological research on caste based stress in India is still emerging, studies from analogous discrimination contexts document links between chronic discrimination experiences and physiological deterioration (Brondolo *et al.*, 2009). Within India, Thorat and Kumar (2008) documented that Dalit communities report disproportionately high rates of psychological distress, including anxiety and depressive symptoms, directly linked to experiences of discrimination and social exclusion. Additionally, the labour of concealing one's caste identity in professional and social settings constitutes its own invisible burden. Research demonstrates that actively hiding a stigmatized identity is cognitively draining and emotionally costly over time (Slepian *et al.*, 2017).

4.1.2 Stereotype Threat and Impaired Aspiration

Steele and Aronson's (1995) concept of stereotype threat, the performance impairment that arises when individuals fear confirming a negative stereotype about their group, which operates directly in the caste context. Hoff and Pandey (2006) provided experimental evidence specific to India that when caste was made salient, Dalit students performed significantly worse on cognitive tasks than in caste neutral conditions, while upper-caste students showed no effect. Appadurai (2004) described the capacity to aspire as a cultural resource, the ability to envision possible futures and move toward them and argued that chronic deprivation and exclusion systematically weaken this capacity among marginalized communities. Thorat and Newman (2010) further documented how caste based barriers in education and employment lead many lower-caste individuals to internalize restricted expectations for themselves, treating ceilings imposed from outside as limits that come from within.

4.1.3 Identity Threat and Collective Response

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) identifies three responses to identity threat, which are: 1) individual mobility, which involves trying to leave or distance oneself from the stigmatized group, 2) social creativity, which means finding new ways to value one's identity and 3) social competition, which involves directly confronting the hierarchy. All three are visible in caste contexts. Dalit pride movements like the Dalit Panthers, Ambedkarite political organizations, and Dalit literature and art represent collective efforts to redefine what it means to be Dalit, turning a historically stigmatized identity into a source of dignity, solidarity, and resistance (Rawat & Satyanarayana, 2013).

4.2 Consequences for Dominant-Caste Groups

Hierarchy also shapes the psychology of those who benefit from it, though differently. Bandura's (1999) moral disengagement describes the cognitive strategies people use to detach themselves from the ethical weight of benefitting from unjust systems, strategies such as moral justification, displacing responsibility onto fate or karma, or gradually reducing the perceived humanity of those at the bottom of the hierarchy. All three are observable in dominant caste psychology. Furthermore, dominant caste individuals who hold formally egalitarian values while continuing to benefit from structural privilege are caught in a state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Rather than resolving this tension by questioning their privilege, many instead manage it through denial which may help explain the intensity of resistance that often characterizes dominant caste responses to anti caste political movements.

4.3 Societal-Level Consequences

At the macro level, caste produces measurable costs to human development and democratic life. Thorat and Madheswaran (2018) documented the economic costs of birth-based occupational sorting, where talent and opportunity are systematically mismatched, constituting a drag on national productivity. At the level of social cohesion, the strong ingroup trust and deep out group suspicion that caste enforces undermine the conditions necessary for collective civic life. Banerjee and Somanathan (2007) found that caste fragmentation in Indian villages was associated with lower provision of public goods, linking the psychological architecture of caste identity to concrete deficits in democratic governance.

5. Theoretical Contribution: The Hierarchical Imprint Model of Caste Psychology (HIM-CP)

Existing frameworks like Social Identity Theory, minority stress models, system justification theory, each illuminate important dimensions of caste psychology. None, however, provides a unified framework integrating the multiple levels at which caste operates psychologically, from macro ideological formations down to the inner life of the individual. The HIM-CP fills this gap. The name captures the model's central premise: caste does not merely operate as an external constraint but imprints itself hierarchically across every layer of psychological experience, and these imprints are mutually reinforcing.

► Level 1: Sacred-Ideological

At the broadest level, caste is sustained by sacred ideology, a system of beliefs about divine and natural order that assigns every person a birth determined place in a hierarchy of ritual purity. This ideology is encoded in religious texts, ritual practices, and cultural narratives that have been reproduced over centuries. Caste is framed not as social convention but as cosmic necessity. Terror management theory (Greenberg *et al.*, 1986) offers an account of why this is so effective because beliefs that locate individuals within a meaningful, ordered cosmos buffer the anxiety that comes with awareness of one's own vulnerability and mortality. This explains why even those disadvantaged by caste ideology may resist its dismantling, the framework, however oppressive, provides existential security. Intervention at this level requires what Freire (1970) called conscientization, developing the critical awareness that ideology is historically made, not divinely given. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 represents the most historically significant example of this kind of ideological substitution in the Indian context, deliberately replacing a hierarchy-grounded worldview with one organized around equality and human dignity.

► Level 2: Institutional-Normative

At the institutional level, caste is transmitted through the routine practices of schools, workplaces, legal systems, religious organizations, and families often without any explicit statement of caste ideology. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of institutional habitus captures this mechanism. Institutions enact caste not because their members consciously endorse it but because their practices have been shaped by it over time. When a child experiences caste differentiated treatment at school, no formal lesson is given but the lesson arrives through the experience itself, absorbed quietly into the child's understanding of how the world works and where they belong within it. Intervention at this level requires deliberate institutional redesign: enforcing anti discrimination norms, mandating diverse representation, and building institutional cultures that name and actively challenge caste differentiated treatment.

► Level 3: Intergroup-Relational

At the intergroup level, caste operates through the in group and out group dynamics described by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) where in group favoritism, out group derogation, and status based social comparison are all structured by the asymmetries of caste hierarchy. A feature not adequately captured by standard SIT is what the HIM-CP model terms as graded deference where lower ranking groups are expected not merely to avoid higher ranking groups but to actively perform submission and deference in everyday interactional contexts. The psychological cost of repeatedly enacting one's own subordination across a lifetime of encounters is a significant, undertheorized dimension of caste psychology that warrants dedicated empirical attention.

► Level 4: Interpersonal-Behavioral

At the interpersonal level, caste is enacted through the behavioral routines of daily interaction like who initiates greetings, who yields physical space, who uses formal or informal address, who may share food and how. These everyday practices are the most embodied expressions of caste ideology, operating largely below the level of conscious intent. Goffman's (1963) stigma management framework is directly applicable where lower caste individuals engage in continuous, effortful management of their self presentation in caste marked interactions, a process that constitutes a chronic cognitive and emotional burden. This level is also the site of caste based microaggressions, subtle, often unintentional communications of devaluation that accumulate across encounters to produce distinct psychological harm (Sue *et al.*, 2007). Because microaggressive harm builds gradually rather than through discrete events, addressing it requires both individual level coping skill development and broader institutional cultural change that reduces the frequency of such encounters in the first place.

► Level 5: Intrapsychic-Self Representational

At the deepest level, caste shapes the internal models of self through which individuals experience and navigate the world. This is the level of internalized casteism, the process by which caste ideology is absorbed into the self concept such that the dominant group's evaluations become one's own judgments about oneself. Caste stops feeling like something imposed from outside and begins to feel like a truth about who one is and expressed as shame, unworthiness, or inadequacy in lower caste individuals, and as entitlement or superiority in upper caste ones. Self-verification theory (Swann, 1987) explains why these self-representations are so durable. People are motivated to maintain self concepts that feel consistent and familiar, even negative ones. For lower-caste individuals who have internalized negative self images rooted in caste, affirmation and opportunity may feel threatening rather than liberating, because they contradict an identity that has become deeply familiar. This is why changing material conditions alone is not enough but inner representations of self must be deliberately transformed alongside external structures.

► Inter-Level Dynamics and Research Implications

The five levels of the HIM-CP are mutually reinforcing. Sacred ideology (Level 1) shapes institutional practices (Level 2), which structure intergroup cognitions (Level 3), which pattern interpersonal behavior (Level 4), which are absorbed as self-representations (Level 5) and those self representations, in turn, provide the experiential ground from which sacred ideology feels true and necessary. This is the engine of caste's durability. No single level sustains the system alone, and no single level intervention can dismantle it, because the remaining levels continue generating the conditions for its renewal.

For empirical research, the HIM-CP implies that studies should specify which level they are examining and attend to how levels interact. Validated measurement tools are needed across all five: scales for sacred legitimizing beliefs (Level 1), measures of institutional normalization (Level 2), assessments of intergroup bias and deference norms (Level 3), instruments capturing microaggression frequency and impact (Level 4), and scales measuring internalized casteism (Level 5). For clinical work, treatment must be calibrated to the levels most salient in the client's experience like cognitive and narrative interventions for inner self-representations (Level 5), ideological counter narrative work for Level 1 imprints, and skill building for navigating microaggressive encounters at Level 4 while recognizing that the most durable outcomes will require coordinated change at multiple levels simultaneously.

6. Discussion

6.1 Towards an Indigenous Psychology of Caste

A persistent limitation of caste psychology research is its reliance on frameworks developed in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) contexts (Henrich *et al.*, 2010). Social Identity Theory, System Justification Theory, and the Minority Stress Model provide useful conceptual tools, but each requires significant adaptation to address the caste system's distinctive features like its cosmological legitimization of hierarchy, the ritually embodied character of pollution, the role of caste-prescribed marriage in boundary maintenance, and the specific phenomenology of untouchability. The development of a genuinely indigenous psychology of caste drawing on the intellectual tradition running from Phule to Ambedkar to Periyar requires not only culturally validated instruments but the inclusion of Dalit scholars as producers, not merely subjects, of psychological knowledge.

6.2 Policy Implications

Reservation policies in education and employment operate primarily at Levels 2 and 3 of the HIM-CP restructuring institutional opportunity and altering intergroup composition. These are necessary interventions, but insufficient on their own. Without attending to Level 5 self representations, structural inclusion may not translate into psychological empowerment. Without disrupting Level 1 ideological formations, social resistance to reservation policies will continue to be generated from within the belief system that makes hierarchy feel sacred and deserved. Educational curriculum reform that incorporates accurate histories of caste oppression and exposes students to the anti caste intellectual tradition represents an underutilized lever for Level 1 intervention. Workplace and institutional diversity programs should extend their scope beyond demographic representation to directly address Level 4 microaggression dynamics and Level 2 normalization processes.

7. Conclusion

Caste is one of the most psychologically consequential social structures ever devised. It does not merely sort people into groups but it reaches into the deepest layers of human experience, shaping how individuals see themselves, relate to others, aspire, suffer, and endure. On perception, the evidence is clear that caste is maintained not only through external enforcement but through the cognitive distortions of social dominance orientation, system justification, and essentialist belief, distortions that make hierarchy feel natural to those at the top and inevitable to those at the bottom. On persistence, the paper identified a convergence of historical structural forces, psychological mechanisms of socialization and cognitive

anchoring, institutional entrenchment, and identity-binding through caste-prescribed marriage, each reinforcing the others in a system that is self-sustaining at multiple levels simultaneously. On consequences, the toll includes chronic physiological stress, impaired aspiration, stereotype threat, identity distortion, moral disengagement, and democratic deficits that reach far beyond the individual.

Against this backdrop, the Hierarchical Imprint Model of Caste Psychology (HIM-CP) offers a theoretical architecture, a system of mutually reinforcing imprints operating simultaneously across the sacred, the institutional, the intergroup, the interpersonal, and the intrapsychic. This means that interventions which address only one level, whether legal reform, affirmative action, or individual therapy will remain partial. The HIM-CP is offered not as a finished theory but as an invitation to researchers and policy makers to develop the measurement tools, researches and interventions that each level demands.

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