

**Caste System, church, state,**

# **Hindu Brahmins and Democracy's Origins**

By Ron Banerjee

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Many of the founders of American democracy are intellectuals from distinguished families known as 'Boston Brahmins'. This term was coined from the Hindu priestly class, the 'Brahmins', who allegedly occupy the upper reaches of the maligned Indian 'caste system'

This skewed vision of Hindu hierarchy stems from foreign observers trying to frame non-Western societies within Western and other non-Hindu contexts. It is flawed and inaccurate, like fitting a square peg into a round hole. The only similarity that Hindu Brahmins share with American 'Boston Brahmins' is a reverence for culture and education, and a key role in the development of democracy

Criticism of this system arises from the allegation that upward mobility is impeded, in the same way that mobility between European and American classes was limited. What has happened in modern India is that social conventions regarding marriage between castes, though not prohibited by legislation, have endured as part of an ancient culture. Within employment, politics, and the labor market, however, barriers to advancement by 'lower castes' do not exist in democratic India

In European history, the Church and religious establishments wielded enormous economic and political power, taxing peasants, selling 'indulgences', and working hand-in-glove with the nobility to share wealth. Thus, it is natural that Westerners would view a priestly class as a dominant, and possibly oppressive, elite

This is not the case because Hindu society was the first to master the concept of separation of Church and State, one of the key elements of democracy. Power in ancient India was dispersed, with merchant classes running the economy and the nobility taking care of matters of state

The Brahmins, on the other hand, wielded no economic or political power, but had tremendous moral authority. Their education and knowledge inspired common people as well as leaders to solicit advice, which was often dispensed from remote forests and mountains where these 'sadhus' lived simple lives without material possessions

This setup gave rise to the world's first universities, and breakthrough discoveries in mathematics and astronomy. These concepts spread to the West via traders, and helped inspire the Industrial Revolution

This explains why Hindu-majority India today is both the world's largest democracy and also a knowledge superpower. Reverence for education, inspired by priests, percolated down to all classes and imbued all Hindus with a thirst for learning. The separation of authority, rooted in the Hindu belief that absolute power corrupts absolutely, explains why the world's largest democracy prospers even amidst staggering diversity and relative lower incomes

Hindu priests and religious leaders today do not interfere in politics. Even parties which are denounced as 'Hindu nationalists' do not include religious leaders. Fundraisers in temples and religious establishments for favored political parties do not exist, in the way that conservative churches in America back Republican candidates. For the most part, Hindu priests maintain the same distance from politicians and business as they always have

We can see a reflection of this separation here in Canada. Dozens of Hindu temples proliferate in the GTA, and yet temple leaders do not often comment or give interviews for news media. We do not see political rallies or regular delegations of vote-seeking politicians in temples, as we do in mosques and other community religious establishments

This does not mean that Canadian Hindus do not have concerns or political viewpoints; rather, the community is simply following the age-old tradition of refraining from sullyng religious traditions with crass political lobbying or aggressive media overtures. Sporadic attempts by temples to form such organizations have not been successful: Hindus have rightly recognized such endeavours as personal ego gratification by temple leaders undertaking goals inconsistent with abilities or traditions

As a director for the non profit Hindu Conference of Canada, my job is to strengthen the pillars of democracy by providing an outlet through which Canadian Hindus may express their views. Conversely, we serve as a source of information and dialog into the Hindu community for the Canadian mainstream

By doing so, we provide a service which Canadian Hindus badly deserve and want, while maintaining the separation of religion and politics which has sustained Hindu civilization's glorious democratic traditions

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