**Student Handout**

**Sikhs and The Caste System**

Discussing the role of caste in Sikhism is a sensitive issue; many Sikhs will outrightly reject the suggestion that there is caste in Sikhism. Caste however, even though it contains a lesser degree of the purity/pollution aspects found in Hinduism, does, indeed, exist in Sikhism - this is most prominent in the case of Sikh marriages.

There are two major concepts associated with the caste system:

*endogamy* - marriage within one’s caste, and

*commensality* - eating with people of the same caste.

Hindu higher classes will not accept food from lower classes, if they do, the food has to be *kaccha* that is, raw, uncooked. *Pakka*, that is, cooked food cannot be accepted from lower classes to the high level of pollution it contains. (This is where the idea of *langar* in Sikhism plays a significant role).

Although the formation of many Indian religions was due to their condemnation of the caste system, they never actually lost totally the strong influence of caste which is so profoundly connected with India. One such religions is that of Sikhism.

In his following composition, Guru Nanak openly spoke of the worthlessness of caste:

Worthless is caste andworthless an exalted name,

For all mankind there is but a single refuge. (AG 83).

Guru Nanak’s mesage was also repeated by his successors, in the following hymn Guru Amar Das, the fourth guru, says:

When you die you do not carry your caste with you.

It is your deeds [and not your caste] which will determine your fate. (AG 363).

There are four main castes present in Sikhism:

*Jats*

*Ramgharias*

*Bhatras*

*Mazhabis*

The traditional occupations each are that the *jats* are predominantly farmers, the *ramgharias* are the equivalent of the Hindu *tarkhans* that is, they are carpenters. The *bhatras* are traders and travellers, the *mazhabis* are largely composed of the *chamars* who are leather workers, it also consists of *chuhras* who are traditionally the sweepers.