

# Caste Away

India's high-tech revolution helps  
'Untouchables' rise; Mr. Thoti's job hunt

By PAUL BECKETT

June 23, 2007

(See Corrections & Amplifications item [below](#).)

*Hyderabad, India*

Venugopal Thoti's father, grandfather and ancestors worked as field laborers in a tiny village in the state of Andhra Pradesh in southern India. As Dalits -- members of the "untouchable" caste at the bottom of Indian society -- they were barred from temples used by upper-caste Hindus and from upper-caste homes. Their name defined their low status: A "thoti" in their village communicates news of a death by walking door to door.



**Venugopal Thoti**

Mr. Thoti, 37, is in a different line of work and a much different station in life. Last fall, he got a new job as a software developer in the Hyderabad office of American Infoserv Inc., a New Jersey-based technology and outsourcing company.

Mr. Thoti's success, after a long slog, has been modest by U.S. and even some Indian standards. He earns about \$800 a month and travels by bus around this clogged technology hotspot of about four million people. But his monthly earnings are roughly double what his father made in a year. And he has left the one-room thatched hut with no electricity or running water that he grew up in for a basic three-bedroom apartment that he shares with his wife and two young children. "Now, we are a little comfortable," he says.

For thousands of years, advancement in India has been restricted by its caste system, which is enshrined in the country's dominant Hindu religion. While Brahmins, the highest caste, are said to stem from the mouth of Purusha, or Universal Man, Dalits were considered so impure they were left outside the structure altogether. Castes -- which often can be identified by a person's last name -- reach into every part of Indian society.

But India's rapid economic expansion -- and its booming high-tech sector -- are beginning to chip away at the historical system that reserved well-paying jobs for upper castes and menial jobs for Dalits. With annual gross-domestic-product growth exceeding 9%, companies that have hired tens of thousands of workers in recent years are looking beyond their traditional sources of employees. High-tech firms, both foreign and domestically based, are at the forefront of that search. As a result, some Dalits are rising into India's middle class.

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Technology giant Infosys Technologies Ltd. now recruits from 700 colleges around India, many of them in semi-rural areas where lower-caste people often live, up from about 50 urban colleges 10 years ago, says T.V. Mohandas Pai, the company's director in charge of human resources. "Today, a great number of the people whom we hire come from poorer backgrounds both economically and socially," he says. "It is changing the ground rules in India."

International companies are also having an impact. "We don't give a damn about any of these differences in caste or religion," says Ravi Venkatesan, chairman of [Microsoft Corp.](#)'s India unit. "It has made talent the number one issue for all companies."

The ranks of Dalit entrepreneurs have also been growing, as India morphed in the past 15 years from a Socialist-modeled economy to a market-driven one and a new generation of young earners began to spend freely, take vacations and rack up shopping bills. That has created opportunities for Dalits to open hotels and restaurants, as well as find jobs as plumbers, electricians, air-conditioning repairmen and construction workers.

In 1993, after moving to Hyderabad, Jayaker Daniel Erpula borrowed from an associate to purchase his first taxi. The next year, he bought another car and in 1995, a third. Today, age 42, he runs a fleet of 100. About 60% of his employees are Dalits.



**Jayaker Daniel  
Erpula**

Mr. Erpula, who also owns a filling station, an inn and a small water-bottling plant, recently held a party for 400 guests at his new \$360,000 three-bedroom home. Three of his employees who belong to a higher caste failed to show. He says he later heard that one of them told a colleague: "He's a Dalit. Why should we go?"

But Mr. Erpula says many of the higher-caste neighbors in his prosperous neighborhood have welcomed him. "They respect me because I'm financially sound," he says.

Still, success stories like those of Mr. Erpula and Mr. Thoti, who struggled many years to get his job, are rare. Estimates of the number of Dalits with skilled jobs and steady salaries in India's New Economy vary from tens of thousands to around 100,000, according to employers, workers, experts and government officials. That's out of a total Dalit population estimated at about 167 million, or about 16% of India's total population of 1.03 billion.

Many Dalits, especially in rural areas, don't have a shot at a decent education -- a must for the fastest-growing areas of India's economy like software development, medicine and engineering. Those that are educated are typically taught in their native language, leaving them ill-prepared to compete with wealthier, English-schooled job applicants.

Because a person's caste can often be determined by last name or father's occupation, hiring managers can stick to their own kind, dismissing lower castes who frequently lack refined social skills or self-confidence in job interviews. "We find our interviewing staff is very biased toward people who look right, particularly at the initial interview stage," says Azim Premji, chairman of Indian technology giant [Wipro](#) Ltd. He adds that merit remains the number one criterion for hiring. Some even argue that the new economy is bolstering caste distinctions. An August 2006 study of technology workers at multinationals or sizeable Indian tech companies found that 86% came "from upper castes and/or economically better-off communities."

India's government has long employed an affirmative-action program that reserves 23% of all national government jobs to those from underprivileged classes. Now Prime Minister Manmohan Singh wants companies to voluntarily diversify their workplaces.

Across the street from a small park with children's swings, Mr. Thoti and his family rent a ground-floor apartment. A Sony large-screen television set he bought in January on credit dominates one corner of the main room. A blue refrigerator sits in another. The rest serves as a living room and dining room. A small, neat man with a trim moustache, Mr. Thoti is quick with a laugh and has a self-deprecating smile.

He was born in 1970 in the village of Pedda Thayiur, a hamlet of 300 Dalits about 490 miles away. For performing his duties as a thoti, Mr. Thoti's father earned about \$1 a day in addition to the pittance he earned working the fields. "At the early stage of my life I strongly desired not to follow in my father's footsteps," Mr. Thoti says.

As a child, Mr. Thoti was a good student, and was particularly interested in math and science. Graduating first in his high-school class, he was accepted to the equivalent of a junior college in the area. Mr. Thoti's parents urged him to forget school and get a job. Instead, Mr. Thoti borrowed about \$4 to help pay the admission and application fees and for travel.

When he arrived, Mr. Thoti slept on a bus-stop bench under a tamarind tree for two weeks. Odd jobs later allowed him and some friends to rent a room. After two years, in 1987, Mr. Thoti was called by a college to interview for a bachelor's-degree program, but couldn't raise the money for the bus ticket and overnight stay in Hyderabad. Dejected, he returned to his village.

He began working as a teacher's assistant for a nongovernmental organization working on Dalit issues. Financially supported by the NGO, he completed his bachelor's degree and entered a master's program in computing at a nearby university.

Mr. Thoti, who learned to read and write basic English in school but couldn't speak the language, read grammar books at night and practiced speaking. Higher-caste students called him and other Dalits "Gold Medalist Students" -- sarcastically referring to the fact that Dalits, usually lacking English language skills, are less academically prepared but benefit from the school's affirmative-action admission policies.

The taunts angered Mr. Thoti, but he said nothing. One night, when he wasn't feeling well, Mr. Thoti and a friend stood up to their tormentors. They backed down, but Mr. Thoti says his classmates didn't speak to him or his friend for a month.

In 1996, master's in hand, Mr. Thoti struck out for Bangalore, the heart of India's technology industry. Sleeping at night in a friend's office, he looked for work for six months. He got 15 job interviews, but says he did poorly at each one.

Sometimes, he provided answers that revealed his caste. Noticing that higher-caste applicants were landing jobs, Mr. Thoti applied as "T. Venugopal." Venugopal, his first name, is a common Brahmin name. But his main problem, he says, was his lack of English. The rejections continued.

"I was very upset," Mr. Thoti says. "I didn't sleep sometimes."

Then he got a break. He met Srinu Rao, then group manager in India for [VeriFone Holdings Inc.](#), a San Jose, Calif.-based electronic payments company and now managing director of the Indian unit of Datacard Group, an identity and payment-card company based in Minnetonka, Minn. Mr. Rao's wife was involved in Dalit issues, and Mr. Rao says he's sympathetic to the cause.

"I did see the desire in him to be successful," Mr. Rao says. VeriFone hired only from India's top colleges so Mr. Rao found Mr. Thoti a job writing software code for a small company that worked with VeriFone.

Mr. Rao recalls that in interviews and in the first few months of his new job, Mr. Thoti spoke little. "If he wasn't sure of the answers, he wouldn't even talk about it and stay absolutely quiet," Mr. Rao says. He often said nothing in meetings with higher-caste colleagues, and didn't sit down when chatting with higher-caste acquaintances. "You'd have a casual conversation with him and ask him to take a seat and he wouldn't. I literally had to force him to sit down," says Mr. Rao, a 44-year-old Brahmin. He adds that Mr. Thoti called him "sir" for the first 18 months they knew each other, even though Mr. Rao told him not to.

Like other Dalits Mr. Rao knows, he says Mr. Thoti "was always scared of making a fool of himself in table manners." In his village, Mr. Thoti ate with his hands and sitting on the floor. In Bangalore, he had to get used to sitting at a table to eat and learn to use a spoon. He exchanged the tightly-folded towel he typically wore around his waist when in the village for trousers and shirts that are the uniform of high-tech Indian office workers.

In 1999, Mr. Thoti moved to a new job in Chennai, on India's southeast coast. At his new workplace, he dodged many questions from colleagues until finally revealing he was a "scheduled caste" -- the term for those who benefit from affirmative action for government jobs. After that he says, "They were maintaining their distance, not close like previously."

Once their caste is revealed, other Dalits say they too are sometimes shunned at work by higher-caste colleagues. "Most of my friends in other industries don't reveal their caste," says Raghu Eshwar, a Dalit and senior software developer at MindTree Consulting Ltd. a technology-consulting company with headquarters in Bangalore. But Mr. Eshwar says the money earned in tech gives Dalits self confidence. "The moment you have money, people will give some value to you," he says. "With the power I have, I feel I don't have to hide" my identity.

With his \$200-a-month salary, Mr. Thoti bought a new small concrete house with two rooms and an outside toilet for his parents. But in 2001, after the technology bubble burst, Mr. Thoti lost his job. He considered returning to his village to start a school, but his wife Jayamala convinced him to stay in high-tech. "What is there in the village? There is no rain, not much work. How can we eat food?" she told him.

The family moved to Hyderabad and Mr. Thoti took a job as a technician at a microfinance company, where he worked for the next five years. The company frequently didn't pay employees for two or three months. "There was no rice, the rent was due, shopping, fees, paying bills -- very difficult," his wife says.

Mr. Thoti posted his résumé at online job sites including [Monster.com](http://Monster.com). Last fall he got an interview as a software developer for American Infoserv.

He was interviewed by Abhishek Jain, executive vice president of information technology at Lyndhurst, N.J.-based IncentOne, a company that runs employee incentive programs. IncentOne outsources some technical work to American Infoserv in India. Mr. Thoti says he told Mr. Jain that interviews have been a problem for him.

"Some people don't interview well but do good work and work hard, so I'm giving an opportunity to you," Mr. Jain responded, according to both men. Mr. Jain, a 34-year-old Indian who has worked for technology companies in the U.S. for a decade, says Mr. Thoti's English skills "weren't all that good." But he liked Mr. Thoti's approach to a case study that involved writing a short computer application on a laptop.

Mr. Jain, who is part of a different religion that is technically outside the caste system, says he was unaware Mr. Thoti was a Dalit. "Even if he is, it doesn't matter to me," he says. "It's a global industry. In America, the only caste that matters is talent."

In his new job, Mr. Thoti leads a small production-support team that processes work and writes computer code. He must speak to clients in English. He says his skills are improving but he has problems understanding spoken English, especially when it is pronounced with an American accent. From time to time, Mr. Thoti sends money back home to help educate some village children. When he visits his illiterate sister there, she sometimes jokes with him about his city clothes.

He says he's happy. "I never ask him about his caste," says K. Sreenivasulu, a 30-year-old colleague from a higher caste. "Caste doesn't matter to me here, especially in the work environment."

Outside the office, the picture remains more complicated. Recently, Mr. Thoti learned he would have to move, and began searching for a new apartment. He approached a building just around the corner. The landlord's response: "Brahmins only."

--Vibhuti Agarwal and Binny Sabharwal in New Delhi and Jackie Range in Bangalore contributed to this article.

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### **Corrections & Amplifications:**

Jawaharlal Nehru was the first prime minister of independent India. In earlier versions of this article, an accompanying graphic incorrectly said he was the first president. The above graphic has been corrected.

# India's Traditional Corporate Ladder

Rooted in Hinduism, India's complex caste system includes 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes, all traditionally related to occupation. They fall under four basic "varnas" or categories:

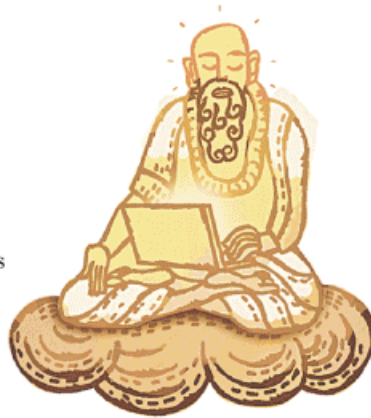
## **BRAHMINS:**

Priests, scholars and teachers.

*Famous members include:*

**Jawaharlal Nehru:** First prime minister of independent India

**Rahul Dravid:** captain of India's cricket team



## **KSHATRIYAS:**

Warriors and rulers

*Famous members include:*

**Vasundhara Raje Seindia,**  
chief minister of the  
Indian state of Rajasthan



## VAISHYAS:

*Traders*

Famous members include:

**Lakshmi Mittal:** chief executive,  
Arcelor Mittal steel company

**Mohandas Gandhi:** Independence  
leader, the “father of the nation”



## SUDRAS:

*Manual workers  
and servants*

## DALITS:

*Formerly known as*

*‘Untouchables,’ Dalits perform  
unpleasant jobs like cleaning or  
leather tanning. With changes in  
India, some Dalits are now becoming  
entrepreneurs or getting jobs in high-tech.*

Famous members include:

**KR Narayanan:** Former President of India

**BR Ambedkar:** Political leader and chief  
architect of the Indian Constitution

