
CASTE AND SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The caste system is a composite structure of different social classes in the Hindu religion. The caste system in India has a long history dating back to the ancient past. It dates back to the era when people used to believe that they were born into a particular social status. Caste is discrimination and suppression with hatred towards downtrodden people. Though Caste discrimination is worse than slavery and Apartheid in many respects, the West has not taken any significant position against Caste. Is it because Caste falls outside the definition of discrimination for reasons of race and ethnicity? Perhaps it is because of a widespread view in the West that Indian notions of life are more religious than their Western equivalents. Yet what has passed as religious views in India are very often mundane theories and rules of social control that have been deemed sacred.

Keywords: Caste, Society, Dalits, Discrimination, Buddhism. etc

Introduction

The caste system is a composite structure of different social classes in the Hindu religion. The caste system in India has a long history dating back to the ancient past. It dates back to the era when people used to believe that they were born into a particular social status. They also believed that experiences in past lives and good deeds can actually reincarnate one into higher social strata in the next life. The Indian caste system has never been rectified even with the changes in modern society. Education has been massively instrumental in bringing a change in the state of mind of a large section of society, mostly the older generation which is still under the restraints of the caste system, where still one's caste influences their food habits, their clothing and they may be peasants, labourers, or servants doing menial jobs and also do certain 'unclean' jobs like disposing of the dead. A caste system is a social system where people are ranked into groups based on heredity within rigid systems of social stratification, especially those that constitute Hindu India. Some scholars, in fact, deny that true caste systems are found outside India. The caste is a closed group whose members are severely restricted in their choice of occupation and degree of social participation. Marriage outside the caste is prohibited. Social status is determined by the caste of one's birth and may only rarely be transcended. Certain religious minorities may voluntarily constitute a quasi-caste within a society, but they are not apt to be characterized by cultural distinctiveness than by their self-imposed social segregation. A specialized labor group may operate as a caste within a society otherwise free of such distinctions (e.g., the iron-smiths in parts of Africa). In general, caste functions to maintain the status quo in a society.

Caste Means Discrimination and Recognition Caste and religion have always been interwoven in complex ways. While Hinduism has often been seen, and rightly so, to provide a theological justification for caste hierarchy, as the detailed reports of the four countries and other writings on the subject show, there is enough qualitative evidence to suggest that caste differences exist in these four countries of south Asia. Further, they exist not simply in terms of distinctive groups; but also maintain identities or ethnic differences, reproduced through caste Endogamy; but also, in terms of hierarchy and ideas of purity and pollution. Interestingly, in some ways, there seem to be striking similarities across different regions of the subcontinent in the manner in which caste-based deprivation is reproduced on the ground.

Ludicrous as this may seem, it is the way the claim to the special religiosity of Asia is made in defence of Caste. Even prominent intellectuals like Ananda Coomaraswamy have written, 'If it be asked what inner riches India brings to aid in the realization of civilization, then from the Indian standing, the answer must be found in her religion and her philosophy and her constant application of abstract theory to practical life. To make this the 'Indian' paradigm, the views of vast masses of 'low Caste' Indians must be excluded. In fact, discourses on India constantly ignore their perspective. Caste has, indeed,

been in existence for centuries in South Asia. Though its forms and sometimes even its contents, varied across regions, it was practiced in most of South Asia. However, it was during the British colonial rule that a common theory of caste, as we have come to understand it today, was first articulated. . Extending their notion of oriental cultures, caste, and untouchability were perceived in the colonial discourse to be peculiarly Indian and Hindu practices. The colonial writers also developed theories and models of the caste system, which appeared as a cohesive and peacefully integrated system, constantly reproducing itself through the idea of karma and notions of purity and pollution.

According to this understanding, caste was found among all Hindus, across the subcontinent, and without any internal variation or difference. Caste became a metaphor of tradition and rigidity. Since it had survived for ages, without any change, the basic principles of its working could presumably be de-codified from the ancient Hindu texts. Following this, one could also assume that since caste was essentially a cultural and ideological reality with its roots in classical Hindu texts, it did not exist among the non-Hindus, the believers in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, or Sikhism. Even when the census enumerators and anthropologists reported the existence of caste-like structures among the non-Hindus in the subcontinent, such reports were not considered relevant. The presence of caste-like relations among them was often attributed either to Hindu cultural influence or as evidence of their Hindu ancestry, their having been converted from Hinduism to Islam or Christianity.

Indian Caste System as a social status India is a multicultural, multilingual country that adopts a liberal attitude towards its diverse religious practices. One can find the prevalence of the caste system more in Hinduism than in any other religion. The caste system in India has a history and it defines how caste has evolved through the ages. Caste and social status have always been quite puzzling. In the British era, they tried to equalize the caste system in India with the class system. Castes are the divisions, into which a certain section of the community belongs, which also enjoy social status accordingly. What is generally meant by the social status is the prestige or honour that is attached to one's position in the society. An individual might acquire more power and privilege due to a characteristic; this puts him among the privileged group of people who enjoy high status. Brahmins are the priestly class, the protector of religion while the Kshatriyas hold the political power. Therefore, caste and social status were interrelated. A higher caste individual was always looked at with awe and reverence. Below the category of Sudras were the untouchables, or Panchamas (literally "fifth division"), who performed the most menial tasks.

Although there has been much confusion between the two, Jati and Varna are different in origin as well as function. The various castes in any given region of India are hierarchically organized, with each caste corresponding roughly to one or the other of the Varna categories. Traditionally, caste mobility has taken the form of movement up or down the Varna scale. Indian castes are rigidly differentiated by rituals and beliefs that pervade all thought and conduct. Extreme upper and lower castes differ so widely in habits of everyday life and worship that only the close inter-grading of intervening castes and the inter-caste language communities serve to hold them together within the single framework of Indian society. The explanation that Indian castes were originally based on color lines to preserve the racial and cultural purity of conquering groups is inadequate historically to account for the physical and cultural variety of such groups. Castes may reflect the distinctiveness of religious practice, occupation, locale, cultural status, or tribal affiliation, either exclusively or in part. Divergence within a caste on any of these lines will tend to produce fission that may, in time, result in the formation of new castes. Every type of social group as it appears may be fitted into this system of organizing society.

And also, India has a hierarchical caste system in the society. Within Indian culture, whether in the north or the south, Hindu or Muslim, urban or village, virtually all things, people, and groups of people are ranked according to various essential qualities. If one turned to the theme of hierarchy in India, one can discern it everywhere. Although India is a political democracy, in daily life there is little advocacy or adherence to notions of equality. The caste system in India and caste-like groups those quintessential groups with which almost all Indians are associated are ranked. Within most villages or towns, everyone knows the relative rankings of each locally represented caste, and people's behavior toward one another

is constantly shaped by this knowledge. Between the extremes of the very high and very low castes, however, there is sometimes disagreement on the exact relative ranking of castes clustered in the middle.

Caste in Modern India Caste has not been present in India since time immemorial. There were many migrations and conflicts among various groups. Over a long period of time, a homogenous culture developed and exogamy was normal. Later, with groups enclosing themselves, Caste and endogamy became the rule. Discrimination on the basis of group began during this time, and religious and judicial notions were developed to justify Caste. We try to come into collapse and revolt against Caste, leading to a virtual ousting of this system. The radicalism of Buddhism at this time was its fundamental rejection of Caste and acceptance of all persons on the basis of equality. The results included more widespread democratic practices, equality, and freedom. They were accompanied by the abandonment of religious and judicial norms justifying Caste and the emergence of new ethical and judicial norms. We shall examine this era in greater depth momentarily.

Caste Discrimination in 21st Century In the 21st century, the untouchability in different spheres of life in contemporary rural India is continuing. This exercise was not merely meant to satisfy academic curiosity or contribute to scholarly debates. Untouchability is a practice that profoundly affects the lives and psyches of millions of Indians, and we believe that it concerns all citizens and requires urgent action from the state and civil society (Ghanshyam Shah, Harsh Mander, Sukhdev Thorat, Satish Deshpande). Despite the abolition of untouchability by the Constitution of India, and despite the passage of numerous legislations classifying untouchability in any sphere as a cognizable criminal offense, and despite several 'affirmative' measures to improve the socio-economic conditions and opportunities available to the victims of untouchability, the practice lives on and even takes on new idioms. This continues even when post-Independence India claims to have undergone radical transformations in terms of 'feudal' to capitalist (of Indian variety), economic growth in industrial and agriculture sectors, substantial changes in agrarian relations, penetration of markets, patterns of consumption, literacy, exposure to media, new lifestyles and aspirations, make it more shocking. Clearly, untouchability is not a fast-fading remnant of our 'feudal' past or 'traditional' society, but a persistent and flexible part of contemporary reality that needs to be recognized and addressed.

The term Dalit is now used more broadly to include all oppressed people, including Adivasis. Caste and class merge into one identity based on deprivation and exploitation for most poor Dalits, even well-off Dalits have to contend with the humiliating experience of untouchability. The power of the regime of untouchability is that it transcends the factor of economic well-being in order to derive moral authority from religion and culture (Ibid.26). The practices of untouchability experienced by Dalits, in all the major spheres of everyday life. As this paper showed, even as the word 'Dalit' continues to denote the historical experience of being downtrodden, it has now been resignified to mean a new, proudly assertive collective identity. Many Dalits are still confined to those occupations that were traditionally assigned to Ati-Shudras. These 'polluted' and 'unclean' callings, stigmatized and ill-paid, are still exclusively performed by Dalits because of the compulsions of tradition and the forbidding challenge of finding alternative employment opportunities.

Untouchability is practiced in one form or another in almost 80 percent of the villages. It was most extensive in the private and religious spheres, and least present in the public and political spheres. Though the most blatant and grotesque practices have significantly declined, they have not yet been relegated to the yellowing pages of history. Every other day, untouchability related instances make news stories in the media. In some places Upper castes reiterate that Dalits have no claims to public space in the form of village common lands and resources, or to its cultural life festivals and public events. If they are now allowed access to common property resources it is because of the 'broadmindedness' and benevolence of the dominant strata, and not by right.

In this context, Dalits are not permitted to enter savanna homes and eat with upper castes. One may argue that this prescription is a matter of individual choice and that the state cannot intervene and enforce social interaction in the domain of private life. However, the private realm does not exist in a vacuum. Since individual values and practices are shaped by the wider cultural context, state and civil

society can and should work to stimulate a rethinking of individual values. Education and re-socialization to inculcate a critical perspective on caste and untouchability, is imperative for challenging entrenched norms. State practices can set an example by encouraging intercaste mixing in spheres such as housing. At present, there is almost universal.

Residential segregation in villages, which reinforces social distance and cultural taboos. As a rule, the Dalit colony or hamlet will be located apart, on the periphery of the village. Even in urban areas, white-collar Dalits such as school teachers and public health workers find it difficult to get a house for rent or to buy accommodation in non-Dalit localities. Such segregation is often discreetly maintained even in government colonies meant for public employees. The same practices of segregation and the prejudices of untouchability are reproduced when the state creates new villages to rehabilitate those displaced by development projects or natural disasters.

In a majority of villages, Dalits are prohibited from entering into places of worship. At most, they are allowed to view the idol from a distance, so that other devotees and the deity do not get polluted. To avoid such discrimination, whenever Dalits can raise enough resources, they construct their own separate temples. We find that practices of untouchability are not confined to Hindu places of worship but are also prevalent in churches, Hindu and Buddhist temples that is, even in the public spaces of those communities whose religion does not sanction discrimination based on birth. The most widespread and blatant practice of untouchability in the public secular sphere relates to cremation/burial grounds, the bare necessities of life and death. Despite being common amenities that are managed and maintained by the local government, access to cremation/burial grounds continues to be governed by the notion of caste-based pollution and untouchability. In almost all the villages, Dalits do not have free access to common drinking water facilities. In several villages, Dalits are assigned a separate place on the river bank (generally downstream of the place where upper castes bathe and wash) or on the edge of the pond meant only for 'untouchables'. In other words, segregation is maintained in life as well as in death also.

Practices of untouchability continue to pervade the public sphere, including a host of state institutions and the social interactions that occur within them. In one out of four primary schools in rural India, Dalit children are forced by their teachers or by convention to sit apart from non- Dalits. Thus, instead of being a place where children imbibe the values of equality and fraternity, rural schools impress upon young minds and bodies the principles of segregation and discrimination, reproducing the hierarchies of caste and untouchability. The same hierarchy at the workplace in nearly one third of the village panchayats, elected Dalit and non- Dalit members were made to sit apart. We found the same practices in police stations, with Dalits in more than one-fourth of the villages reporting that they are denied access to or discriminated against in police precincts. It is appalling that the police, a state authority charged with the responsibility of upholding the laws against untouchability and investigating and prosecuting those who discriminate against Dalits, is itself a major practitioner of untouchability.

Ambedkarism: Liberation from Caste Discrimination India's Dalits indeed face all manner of deprivations and discrimination within India. But India as a nation also remains deeply deprived and discriminated by the so-called "world community". One cannot solve one without solving the other. A lot of sociologists and intellectuals from nations more fortunate than India can feel superior that they don't have such problems but if they really cared to solve the problems, they would be spending less time making pompous speeches and passing meaningless resolutions. Ambedkarism is today a living force in the Indian system, much Marxism is: it defends the ideology of the Dalit movement and, to a large extent, an even broader anti-caste movement. Ambedkar has to be distinguished from the actual theorizing of Karl Marx, so the urge to abolish the social and economic exploitation involved in caste and capitalism which is the main significance of Ambedkarism' as a general movement ideology, must be distinguished from the complex grappling of an individual activist- theoretician with the interpretation of Indian reality.

Critical Appraisal in India, Caste is a boon to some and a bane to some. For some people, it adds honour and for some people, it's a disrespectful and shameful thing. Caste enables Hindu upper castes and

disables Dalits. Over the years, caste discrimination has taken various spheres. Though nowadays, physical untouchability is still very rampant in Indian villages, among urban educated societies, we may not clearly observe physical untouchability, if we can examine it deeply, there becomes institutional untouchability. In the fields of education, employment, politics, media, sports etc; the Dalit participation and involvement of Dalits would be very meager. Moreover, the developed castes, like Kamma in A.P having complete command overland, could able to occupy the fields of politics and media, through which they have been very successful in imposing their culture, and their religious dogmas over rest of the society, especially the Dalits. Numerically their total percentage is around 15%, but they have been very diligent and prudent in maintaining their hegemony over 85% of society. They have hijacked all the natural resources, looted the hard work of Dalits and Adivasies and amassed huge stocks of wealth, and thereby attained political power, which makes them further suppressive, casteist, and hostile.

Therefore, Ambedkar rightly says that “without social and economic democracy, political democracy is of no use,” which means that, even if you have political representation, if there is no social equality and economic equality, it won't lead to an egalitarian society. Therefore, he has championed the principles of “liberty, equality and fraternity”, which is a universal language; these are the principles that are supposed to be the base of Indian society, infect for any society. He believed that Hinduism is based on the pillars of caste inequality, untouchability, purity, and segregation as long as you remain in Hinduism there won't be dignified and respectful type for Buhujans. Therefore, he gave a call to quit Hinduism and adopt Buddhism to annihilate the caste and achieve political power. Following the footsteps of Manyasri Kanshiram, with a little modified thinking, realized the importance of political power and decided to strengthen the caste as he believed that as long as the caste is a boon to higher caste people, it can't be avoided. It can be annihilated only by making all lower castes powerful, for which he decided that political power is the only way. He worked relentlessly for that and achieved political power in U.P thereby strengthening the lower classes and promoting an alternative culture, i.e, Buddhism filled with liberty, equality, and fraternity. Therefore, for dalits, in order to come out of the oppression, atrocities, and discrimination, political power is the only way forward these communities.

Conclusion

The caste system in India is a complex system of several distinctions, which have divided the society into high and low strata. Lots of measures at present have been taken up by the government for the up-liftment of the downtrodden castes who do not have a social standing. There are disputes and complications regarding the caste system in India, which sometimes take the shape of a sensitive issue. From ancient times till the present-day Caste system has gone through a vast shift from how it was considered by the people and now its rigidity.

The occupational barriers among Indian castes have been breaking down slowly under economic pressures since the 19th century, but social distinctions have been more persistent. Although untouchability was declared illegal in 1949, resistance to change has remained strong, especially in rural areas. As increased industrialization produced new occupations and new social and political functions evolved, the caste system adapted to these trends and thus far has not been destroyed. Caste is a discrimination and suppression with hat redness towards downtrodden people. Though Caste discrimination is worse than slavery and Apartheid in many respects, the West has not taken any significant position against Caste. Is it because Caste falls outside the definition of discrimination for reasons of race and ethnicity? Perhaps it is because of a widespread view in the West that Indian notions of life are more religious than their Western equivalents. Yet what have passed as religious views in India are very often mundane theories and rules of social control that have been deemed sacred.

On this basis, it is possible to argue that if serfs still existed in Europe believing it as their religious duty to remain subservient to aristocrats, Europe too would have been a more religious place than it is now. Hence, Caste is not changed but its farm is changed, caste mind exists in every upper caste Hindu mind from generation to generation. Mostly the direct discrimination has come down and it is replaced by indirect discrimination. Upper castes Hindus do not maintain physical discrimination now a day in the name of reformation, but they do maintain all manner of deprivations and discrimination in their deeds

in the society. They try to impose the hierarchy in various forms. We can say that always discriminated mind is associated with Caste Hindus. This reason why Ambedkar asserts that, Caste is a notion, it is a state of mind but it is also a disease of the mind, as it repeated everywhere in all over the whole life.

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