

Caste as an Institutionalised System of Social Exclusion and Discrimination: Some Evidences

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Caste and its Representations in India

Defining the word "Caste" itself is harder than thought to be. The description of caste identified by (Risley, 1908) cited by (Hutton, 1963) describe it as "a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name, claiming a common descent from mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community". It can also be defined as endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivision (Velassery, 2005).

Caste is the term derived from a Portuguese word, *Casta*, meaning breed, lineage, or race (Rajshekhkar, 2002). It is a terminology that is used to identify the different social groups divided on the basis of their occupation in *Jajmani* system. According to Dr. Babasahab Ambedkar, it is mainly the custom of endogamy that has preserved the castes and prevented one caste from fusing into another. In India, caste is a system of stratification based on institutional sanction of the society, which ascribe the status for different caste based on their place in social hierarchy. The network of economic, political and ritual relationship between castes outlines the working of caste system.

The Indian caste system is historically one of the main dimensions where people in India are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, gender and language. Although this or other forms of differentiation exist in all human societies, it become a problem when one or more of these dimension overlap each other and become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income power and prestige (Sekon, 2000). The India caste system is considered a closed system of stratification, which means the social status of the individual is ascribed by the caste he/she born into. There are limitations of interaction and social exchange between people from different social status. The social division based on ranked groups (Castes) defined by descent and occupation, based on underlying notion of purity.

Srinivas (1962) defined caste as "a hereditary, endogamous group which is usually localised, It has a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relation between caste are governed among other things by the concept of purity and pollution and generally maximum commensality, i.e., inter-dining occur between castes". This definition described the ideal form of caste system.

However, in real life different patterns of caste ranking, customs, behaviours, marriage rules and caste dominance are found in various parts of the country.

In India 'Jati' is the common word used to define the endogamous communities. Dube (1990) defined the main attributes of Jati as a) Jatis are endogamous units; b) They are hierarchically graded; c) They invariably Jati-linked occupation; d) Consideration of purity and pollution determine the interaction between different units. Dutta (1968) in his book *Origin and Growth of Castes in India* has referred to characteristics such as restriction on marriage, eating and drinking, occupation, hereditary membership, and the hierarchical gradation of caste.

According to him, the caste system in its principle of exclusion, isolation and disintegration is reminiscent of the savage man.

In view of Ketkar (1979) caste is a social group having two characteristics of hereditary membership and endogamy. Ghurye (1993) outlined six basic attributes of the caste system: i) The sequential division of society; ii) hierarchy; iii) restriction on food, dress, speech and customs; iv) pollution; v) lack of unrestricted choices of occupation; and vi) endogamy. The outline of the basic features of the caste system reveals that the Hindu society is divided into hereditary caste groups which are arranged in a social and ritual hierarchy. The concept of hierarchy is one of the most essential attributes of the caste system. Endogamous is the other essential feature attributes of the caste system. (Davis, 1951) cited by (Kumar, 2005) called it the central and the most essential feature. In fact, it is one of the main reasons for the persistence of the cast system.

The Indian caste system has three important elements: repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization.

According to (Velassery, 2005) cited by (Deshpande, 2010) "a society is characterized by such a system if it is divided into a large number of hereditarily specialized groups, which are hierarchically superposed and mutually opposed. It does not tolerate the principle of rising in the status of groups' mixture and of changing occupation". (2)

There are many rules in India caste system which caste members must adhere to in order to avoid being shunned from their caste members or, according to Hinduism, being born less fortunate in their next life. The two most important characteristics of the Indian caste system have to do with endogamy and occupational restriction. Every member of the caste or sub-caste is required to marry within their own caste. Any violation of this results in excommunication from one's family and caste. When it comes to occupation, every caste is associated with a particular one to which its members are required to follow. Another characteristic is that every caste imposes restrictions on its members with regards to diet and has its own laws which govern the food habit of members. Another is the social interaction between the castes. There is strict barrier when it comes to mixing of a superior caste with an inferior caste. Hence, under the caste system every caste abides by well established customs and well defined norms of interaction.

A fourth element is the belief of purity and pollution. Cleanliness is considered to be very important value in Hinduism, and the caste system enforces this idea. Untouchability was thus a mean of exclusivism, a social device that become religious only by being drawn into the pollution-purity complex (Velssasery, 2005). Therefore, if become a social norm that the higher castes were more pure and the lower castes are unclean and can pollute the upper caste. Most important characteristic of caste system is discussed by (Pyakurel, 2010) cited by (Deshpande, 2010) as stabilization of caste system through imposing restriction of up or down in the caste based hierarchy ascribed by birth of an individual in a particular caste.

In India, caste is not a social category but is also an economic and occupational category. The omnipresence of caste system in all spheres of human interaction has made it among the longest form of economic and social exploitation than gender.

This multi-layered nature of caste system has made the discrimination against the deprived section, intense. The long deprivation and discrimination of the depressed section from the mainstream society have an impact on their ability to move to other forms of occupational opportunities.

Origin of Caste System

The origin of the Indian caste system has many theories; some have regarded the institution of caste as divine creation, for some European observers considered it as creation of a clever priesthood for permanent subjugation of masses, while some viewed it based on racial differences.

The religious theories explain that according to Rig Veda, which is the ancient Hindu book, the primal man, Purush, destroyed himself to create a human society and the different parts of his body created the four different varnas. The Brahmins were from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created. For example, Brahmins, who were derived from the head of Purush are considered the intelligent and most powerful varna because of their wisdom and education and are a representation of the brain. Next in the caste hierarchy comes the Vaisya's who are the traders, moneylenders and merchants. It's believed that they originated from Brahma's thighs and finally in the caste based ranking. We have the Shudra's who are numerically the largest Varnas. They are supposed to have originated from Brahma's feet and hence perform the most despicable and menial jobs.

Lastly, we have the Ati Shudras or untouchables. They performed occupation that were considered unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and hence not even considered a part of the Varna system.

The biological theory claims that all existing things inherit three one of three categories of qualities.

Varna means different shades of texture or colour and represent mental temper. According to the "Triguna theory" based on Bhagvat Gita, there are three Gunas: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas (Ghurye 1993). Sattva is white, Rajas is red, and Tamas is black. Sattva qualities include characteristics related to wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness and other positive qualities. Rajas include qualities such as passion, pride and valor. Tamas are considered to acquire qualities that include dullness, stupidity, lack of creativity and other negative qualities. People with different amounts of these inherit qualities end up adopting the appropriate occupation.

According to this theory, the Brahmins usually inherit the Sattva qualities. They are serene and self-controlled and possess the quality of austerity. They are considered to have purity, uprightness and forbearance. Brahmins also have the will to acquire knowledge, wisdom and faith. The Kshatriyas and Vaishyas inherit the Raja qualities, and the Shudras inherit the Tamas qualities. The type of one's actions, the quality of ego, the colour of knowledge, the texture of one's understanding, the temper of fortitude, and the brilliance of one's happiness defines one's Varna.

During the Vedic period the vocations assigned to each category was followed by people according to their ability and liking and occupations had not become hereditary. However, in the later Vedic period, the invasion of Aryans brought many changes in social, economic, cultural and political conditions in the society.

The institution of 'Gotra' appeared in the later Vedic period. During this period, higher castes were not allowed to marry lower caste but marriage relations with Shudras was not sanctioned. The concept of pollution started appearing during this period. In the later period, with the development of economy and agriculture a more stable institution of maintaining the inter-caste relations were evolved known as 'Jajmani system'.

Under this system, each caste was assigned certain services for land owners and upper class. The essential feature of Jajmani system was heredity relationship of *Jajmani rights*. The people who belong to service class were not allowed to change their professions and continued to remain as such. This system had left no scope for such community to move upward for maintaining their social status. In modern India, even after passing the 63 years of Independence, the *Jajmani system* has still not loosened its grip and it still follows in majority of the villages of rural India.

Caste as an Institutionalised System of Exclusion and Discrimination in Indian Society

The understanding of caste as a system of exclusion and exploitation stands in sharp contrast with traditional understanding of caste as tool of social control for preserving the Hindu society. While it is argued that all men are born equal, the social reality is that not all men are born equal. Caste with its practices of casteism, untouchability and discrimination continues to infect as well as inflict upon the social order and human collectively (Mishra, 2006).

Most of authors starting from Ketkar (1971), Ghurye (1994), Dube (1990), Velssasery (2005) all have fundamentally defined the caste system on the basis of hierarchy, social division, purity and pollution and endogamy. The dichotomy of purity and pollution has deprived certain groups from enhancing their mobility enhancing life chances.

At different points of history the so called polluted castes have been designated as chandals, untouchables, harijans, depressed class, scheduled caste or dalits. The presence of caste system in the society have always acted against them and also socially and economically ostracized them, violated their basic rights, dehumanized them and also instigated various caste based atrocities upon them.

Now, there is consensus upon the negative impact created by the Hindu brahminical world to the continuation of caste as institutionalised system of discrimination, deprivation and denial of developmental opportunities to the marginalized section (scheduled caste) in the mainstream society.

However, there are scholars who believed that the caste line have faded in the modern society because all its functions have collapsed. It has lost whatever relevance, role, utility and justification it may have had (Nadkarni, 2003) cited by (Mishra, 2006). Alvin Toffler (1980) cited by (Mishra, 2006) discusses the new phenomenon of what he calls presuming or prosumer, occasioned by the blurring line between producing and consuming. This refers to 'do-it-yourself' kits and self services, which is becoming more prominent. According to him there are certain tasks which were associated to certain castes are now performed by individuals irrespective of his/her caste like we do the daily shave ourselves with razor, taking over the tasks of a barber. Many of us wash our clothes ourselves and iron them too. The apparent message that it depicts is that the old phenomenon of caste based occupational 'fixing' is disappearing.

In the economic sphere also we can trace that the role of caste has declined in a limited manner. The a study conducted by (Bailey, 1957) cited by (Kumar, 2005) found out that the increasing contact of the villages with the cities due to introduction of better means of transport and mass communication has brought market economy to the villages.

A person participates the commercial economy as an individual and not necessarily as a member of a particular caste. The sources of income is not confined to land and agriculture alone, rather the factories have provided additional source of employment, which are caste-free. Jajmani system, which was hereditary patron-client relationship between various castes and the worker being traditionally tied to his master, has lost its insularity because of market economy, system of daily wages and hired labour.

The ideology of caste earlier prescribed specific occupations for specific caste groups. The vocations of the upper-caste were considered the most prestigious while the occupations of the lowest caste were considered polluting and defiling. But the growth of money economy and land reforms measures enabled economic relations to be governed by market conditions as opposed to inherited status.

Caste system, although rigid and closed by definition, has proved to be a dynamic reality having a great degree of flexibility in terms of internal structure and functions. There have been changes in caste hierarchy and its norms from time to time. (Singh, 1988) cited by (Kumar, 2005) says that whenever a particular caste could by stroke of fortune, or by changes in political power structure, or by its own industriousness and enterprises, improve its chances economically, often also politically, it claimed for itself a higher position in caste hierarchy, in which, it often succeeded. Such changes have been taking place right from the Vedic period and are still continuing.

In the modern context, there are some institutionalised and continuing processes existing within the boundaries of the caste system to facilitate upward mobility by emulating the lifestyle of upper caste Hindu. One of these processes is 'Sanskritisation' described by Srinivas (1952). However it is not only the upward caste mobility that is peculiar to caste system in India, simultaneously, downward caste mobility exists, although it is much less frequent.

The processes of 'Desanskritisation' described by Majumdar (1958) and 'tribalisation' described by (Kalia, 1959) illustrate this. In the present context, caste system is not as oppressive as it used to be.

During the last few decades, as a result of the forces of modernization, the ideology of caste has become less pervasive in an individual's day today life. Caste rituals have become increasingly personal affair rather than public, due to changes circumstances of living, forces of industrialisation and urbanisation.

In urban areas, caste norms have been confined to the four walls of the household where a person may or may not follow the rituals of his caste (Kumar, 2005).

However, despite the changes in the traditional form of caste system have come-up due to industrialization, modernization, urbanization etc. The lower caste or Dalits, a substratum of Indian population have continued to be subject of cumulative domination by rest of the population. They encounter same type of exclusion and seclusion as faced by the Untouchables. In study conducted by Gould's (1974) cited by (Kumar, 2005) on rickshaw pullers of Lucknow illustrated the point that at work place the caste norms are set aside but in personal or family life the caste norms exerts itself. The study conducted by Atal's (1979) cited by Kumar, (2005) points out that in villages the commensal restrictions and rules of social and ritual distances have been relaxed only partially. A villager is relatively free from them so long as he is on a visit to urban areas. But soon as he returns, he has to conform to the traditional caste norms of the village. His study further demonstrated that almost all the castes adhere to the practices of endogamy and rigidly follow the rules of Gotra exogamy.

The study conducted by Prasad, (1956) cited by Kumar, (2005) examined the reason for survival of caste system by looking into its history and Hindu philosophy which supports it.

He says that the Indian philosophy has, by and large, justified caste hierarchy and multiplicity behaviour patterns. Occasional shifts in the caste-relations were made possible by different reformation movements but the system of caste never changed. His study was based rail-way workers of Chapra region. He found out the Hindu mythology and Hindu caste had its hold over all the people and communities. The study demonstrated that the people continue to accept the mythical interpretation of the caste system in their thinking, feeling and willing behaviour without knowing whether it is desirable or undesirable.

They probably think that the caste system is predetermined and the possibility of reform and remedy does not arise. The study conducted by Mahi Pal (2004) cited by (Mishra, 2006) on the basis of his empirical investigation in Haryana highlights that caste system still exercises a stronghold on Haryana's panchyat institutions making a mockery of decentralized governance. Dalit women representatives of panchyats still face opposition from Members of the panchyat and village people belonging to higher caste, who hampers their activities. It is really shocking as well as a matter of shame that even in 21st century and at an era that boasts of postmodernism, egalitarianism.

Cosmopolitanism, empowerment and democracy, still upper caste members are not mentally prepared to accept one from Dalit background to be their representative. In Action Aid (2000) study on '**Untouchables in Rural India**' in 555 villages in eleven states across India found that discrimination in labour market operates through exclusion in hiring, and lower wages. In about 36 percent of the villages, the SCs were denied casual employment in agriculture. In about 25 percent villages, the SCs faced discrimination in terms of wage payment. The SC wage labour thus, received daily wage at a rate, which was less than the market wage rate, or wages paid to the non-Sc workers.

Belief in the concept of purity and pollution also come into effect in hiring of SC labourers in house construction – in about one-third of the villages, the SCs were excluded from employment in construction of houses.

In a recent study conducted by (Shah et.al, 2006) cited by (Rao et.al, 2010) covering 560 villages in 11 states found that public health workers refused to visit Dalits homes in 33 percent villages, Dalits were prevented from entering police station in 28 percent villages, Dalit children had to sit separately while eating in 38 percent of government schools, Dalits did not get mail delivered to their homes in 24 percent of villages because of segregation and untouchability practices.

The study conducted by Lambert (1963) cited by (Thorat, 2007) studied workers in five factories in Poona (now known as Pune) in western India. While studying the general situation in Poona, he found that workers in small factories where wages were low and where there was hardly any social security were apt to change their jobs. However, when these workers obtained employment in large factories where employment was secure and wages higher, they seldom left their jobs. For these workers factory employment implied lifetime commitment. In fact, the workers were overcommitted. At the same time they showed no signs of transforming their attitudes and social relations. They viewed their jobs in the same way as they viewed their traditional caste occupations where the specialist (the worker in this case) serves the patron (the industrialist). Lambert, thus, found that traditional culture was consistent with industrialization.

The study conducted by Verinder Jain (2008) in his study on issues related to discrimination and work related insecurities in the Punjab's urban unorganized manufacturing sector found a relative deprivation of SC/ST wageworker upholds the relevance of social class analysis in India's unorganized sector.

It finds that there exist considerable wage gap in due to endowment difference between two sets of workers, a high degree of discrimination in return to endowment also exist. Similarly, SC/ST wageworker are also relatively more exposed to various work-related insecurities. An analysis of the marginal effects of various worker-related characteristics on worker's severe exposure to various insecurities has revealed that a lack of skill makes SC/ST more vulnerable to the severe exposure of various insecurities.

The relationship between caste and politics is mutual give and take. While castes help the political parties in winning seats in the election, the political power helps caste in achieving higher social, economic, educational and occupational position in the society.

Even those caste which are socially and educationally backward have managed to move upwards within a very short period by judiciously utilising the caste vote bank. Ghurye (1930) studied the changes that were taking place in the political field under the influence of caste system of vice-versa. Caste consciousness in matter of election becomes manifest in first half of the twentieth century with the introduction of voting system by the British in India. As a result caste sabhas emerged as political organizations and caste consciousness become very definite and assertive. The caste often combined together the political purposes, i.e., the common purpose of fighting the other caste to gain political power.

Thus the interaction between caste and politics has given rise to three developments. The first one refers to emergence of dominant elites from different castes but shares a secular outlook and homogeneous values. Secondly, several caste emerged to give the caste system a secular organisational form.

The third refers to emergence of several factions along with elites groups have got politically organized. The system of factions is such that it divides not only political groups but also social groups. It thus facilitates the process of cross-cutting identification (Kumar, 2005). Kothari (1985) have rightly observed that the electoral system in India has given a new lease of life to caste identification.

The challenge before the Dalits is manifold. They have to struggle against discrimination persistently even passing the 63rd years of Independence. Pimley et.al (1985) commented that caste system is not merely a superstructure but also creates the infrastructure of our Indian society. Let us not expect miracles overnight. Quoting Teltumbde (1996) in this regards, "in social terms however, all Dalits, irrespective of their economic standing still suffer oppression. This social oppression varies from the crudest variety of untouchables, still being practiced in rural areas, to sophisticated forms of discrimination encountered even in the modern sectors of urban areas".

Conclusion

Caste system created the infrastructure for formation of social relations and interactions between different groups, people and social systems in Indian society. From the above evidences, we can conclude that the old age caste system is still perpetuating in Indian society.

However some changes have been observed in its representation and nature but still caste based discrimination, exclusion and divisions are persisting as Institutionalised system directed towards the marginalised, downtrodden and oppressed people through restricting all means and resources for enhancing their life chances and upward mobility.

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