

Dialectics of Caste Culture: A Social Crisis in Indian Nation

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I. INTRODUCTION

Caste has successfully lived for centuries in the multi-religious and multi-cultural India and it is still surviving with a strong force in many intangible and invisible forms. It has stretched its monstrous arms into every sphere of human life in the country. In the Indian political arena, no ballot is possible without caste tag or caste identity in the trajectory of political power and economic empowerment. Caste has its deep roots in the *varna* system which is inseparable from Hinduism as it has become a foundational component in Indian nation. This invisible monster has been persecuting a section of people in Indian society at the cost of cultural and social unity as one nation. This paper intends to explore the pernicious impact of caste on an average Indian in general and on Dalit groups in particular.

Caste is a hard problem for foreigners to understand even at the peripheral level. For them it is a mystery with its innumerable social intricacies and contradictions. It is doubtful whether an alien person despite his long stay in India would understand the complex nature of caste and its harmful impact on socio-economic and cultural relations in India. It is not possible to feel its pernicious pain unless one experiences it. Only the victim knows the sting of caste pain. For the low ranking people deemed as Dalits in Indian society, caste system became a bane for centuries in social life. Quoting an English man, Ketkar says that "caste in India is an interesting institution". It may provide him with some amusement and it might be a nice topic for discussion. He can afford to laugh at the absurdities and contradictions of this institution"[1]. But he may not seriously accept for a critical debate since it becomes a favorite subject for his enjoyment in the academic world. It is because he never happens to come into such a painful experience.

The crude feeling of the Hindu orthodox is that caste system must be good as it was introduced and cultivated by the ancestors who were wiser than those of the present society. This unscientific and illogical thought of the religious fundamentalists has further strengthened this obnoxious social institution that divided Indians into different social groups on basis of the caste rank. Manu's laws patronized this system with Brahmins as superior in the social ladder and other three *Varnas viz., Kshetriyas, Vysyas and Shudras* have been placed in the hierarchal order. Quoting *Manusmriti*, Arya states that "If a person of lower occupation takes up the occupation of a higher nature out of greed, then all his wealth should be seized and he be turned out of the country"[24]. The low ranking people like

Shudras and *Antyajas* were forced to work for the upper castes in order to avoid anticipated resistance from them. This was a technique to subjugate the deprived. Indian rulers being not satisfied with such hard core repressive social rules, they thought to create disunity among the productive castes so as to break their resistance and neutralize their revolutionary spirit., Quoting Ambedkar, Biswas says, "caste system is a hereditary division of labourers' a 'system of graded inequality', a 'process of sterilization and devitalization"[14].

Traditional occupations were distributed based on the gradation of caste. It is not just a division of labour but a division of labourers. Ambedkar rightly said, "Caste system is not merely a division of labourers, which is quiet different from division of labour-it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other" [32]. Caste gives such an innate power and a sort of immunity which determined the occupation of a person before his birth. It became a hereditary factor which is directing the future course of person's occupation. "The work a man does is not determined by his aptitude or desire but by his descent. Family and profession are coupled. The son can choose only the profession of the father. It is not only the right but also the duty of a son to follow the avocation of his father. This spirit prevails in a society subject to caste" [Narasu 13-14].The occupational scenario of this kind is prevalent among the servile classes. Such families are legion in Indian nation. On the whole, caste is nothing but the hereditary production relation. Since it was religious and was backed by the social system through political authority, its uninterrupted perpetuation became possible. Indian political set-up itself is caste-ridden, which is further backing both the religious and social systems. The caste perpetuation is a cyclic process with its invisible omnipresence. Untouchability is a by-product of caste system. "Several upper caste Hindus hold the firm view that untochability in India has disappeared. But it is not true" [Bheemaiah 56]. It has assumed myriad subtle forms in its practice.

II. BRAHMIN AND COW

It is interesting to relate Brahmins to cows in the *varna* world. In the post-Vedic era, the Brahmins sacrificed cows in their *Vedic Yagnas* and ate beef. Thus they were the heavy beef eaters. *Manusmriti* allowed Brahmins to eat cow flesh only on certain occasions. Buddha had insisted on good deeds and purity of life. Thus he preached against violence. Killing of cows in rituals didn't auger well in society. It is because of the Buddhist effect that the

Brahmins began to stop cow-killing and became vegetarians. Karma theory became ideal for them as they began to believe in *Moksha* which is a consequence of one's deeds. The Brahminical class ostracized the *Shudras* and other productive castes branding them as impure given their food habits.

The Manu law licensed Brahmins to marry a woman of any *varna*. However, violation of endogamy was frowned upon. When a woman of higher caste married a man of lower caste, their offspring was invariably treated as a *chandala*. In patriarchal society, male blood is taken into consideration while deciding the fate of a child. In the past and even in the present in Hindu society, woman was/is distrusted and she was kept in seclusion and her life was/is regulated by her male relation. This is a clear manifestation of female oppression. The Manu *Dharmashastra* prescribed stringent social norms for women and breach of the so-called sacred sanctions amounted to ruthless expulsion of the woman from her community as a punishment. This kind of social and cultural pattern induced child marriages which obviously came to the rescue of the surplus men.

III. CASTE AND ITS AVATAR

Centuries of the Muslim rule in India did not bring about any social change. The ruling of the predecessors was not in any way different from that of their successors. The internal political structure remained the same. Thus social conditions of *shudras* and women continued to worsen as the rigidities of caste system persisted. "Caste persists because it has public support and sympathy" [Rawal 3]. Non-productive caste writers are strongly writing about evil of caste and vehemently opposing its practice. When it comes to marrying off their children caste people say that they are personally against the caste-system but their elders want their daughters to be married within the caste. This underscores their dual nature about caste practice. "Caste is a prison; caste is identity; caste is a job; caste is surety in life; caste is an opportunity; caste is the circle of human endeavour, caste makes one anti-national because when people are divided in castes they become mutually warring nations: caste is past; present and future: caste is unchangeable while religion is changeable. People change their religions like clothes cut practice caste within their new religion" [Rawal 4].

From Rawal's views, we understand how caste takes different *avatharas* known as incarnations in its operation and effect. It is felt and subtly perceived at different levels of social interaction and approach. Thus the Hindus preserve the caste purity by scrupulously practising endogamy. The caste phenomenon and its practice percolate even into the lower order which is also imprisoned by the endogamous syndrome. Practicality always eludes theoretical formulations due to an individual hypocrisy that defends, cherishes, nourishes and sustains caste. At matrimonial ceremonies and other Hindu rituals, caste is a major consideration. Violation of endogamy also amounts to expulsion of the members of the group out of the circle to take care of themselves in any way they can. This social

system still survives especially in upper caste communities even in the present social order.

Caste has been institutionalized on the ideological foundations of purity and impurity. It is an open secret that as long as Hinduism survives caste will also survive along with it. The system of caste has percolated into non-Hindu religions too. This is so because of the proximity of Hindu cultural and social environment. "People belonging to non-Hindu religions in India, who were all invariably converts to those religions originally, could hardly escape the caste system as 'a lived in social order' as none of the converting religions offered or instituted a new alternative social order to displace it" [Jayaram 82]. Thanks to Hindu religious system, there is a perceptible caste practice among the lower communities too. Religious converts in India constitute a large chunk of the lower order which is experiencing strong economic disparities and social gradations. The act of conversion has created a glossy unity among different caste people but from the point of view of societal relations and economic status it is beset with gradational formulations in its terrible form. The converts being the victims of caste system in their earlier religious fold tend to practise and carefully maintain the gradational system of caste even in their new world of religion. Caste system in India has become an inescapable social phenomenon, which is felt and perceived in social dealings and interaction.

IV. CASTE AND VARNASAMKARA

The fact is that violation of endogamous marriages would generate new categories in the caste hierarchal arrangement. It is a theory of mixed union. This phenomenon generates intermingling of different castes but it is a clear violation of endogamy. The Brahminical concept of purity of blood is prone to dilution or impurity with the practice of exogamy in the hierarchal arrangement of castes. Deviation from the preferred endogamous marriages would amount to subverting the law of Manu. Endogamy can be breached in two ways: first, the man of upper caste marrying a woman of lower caste, the act of which can be called *anuloma*, which is known in anthropological parlance as hypergamy. The second, a woman of upper caste marrying a lower caste man is described as *pratiloma* which is known as hypogamy. According to Manu, higher caste man accepting a lower caste woman as his secondary union is permitted, which comes under a natural order of caste hierarchy while higher caste woman marrying a lower caste man is not permissible, which is unnatural. This biased law of Manu is blatantly prejudiced in its enforcement. The inverse order is reprehensible and the consequence of *pratiloma* marriages has created confusion. The offspring of the *pratiloma* marriages known as *chandala* is not accepted into the *varna* system. This created *avarna* (casteless) which is out of *chaturvarna* and it is denominated as *panchanma varna*, the fifth caste, *pratiloma* unions generate multiple castes through violation of endogamous unions. For the lovers of purity blood through endogamy would be an act of perversity from the principle of purity. The concept of purity and pollution is a result of the pyramidal structure of castes and traditional family occupations which reflect unequal

division of society. For example, a tanner's son is always treated as a tanner because of his birth in that family. Even if the person maintains hygiene, the Hindu concept treats him as an untouchable. Even if the tanner changes his traditional occupation and switches over to a different vocation, he cannot escape from his stigmatized caste label. In other words, the close relationship between caste and traditional occupation eventually contributed to the stability of caste system.

V. CASTE AND SATI

The practice of *sati* is genocide of women in India. Caste system has gone to such a far extent where it created a crude custom of *sati*. In this custom, when husband dies, his wife should invariably burn herself on the funeral pyre along with her husband. Unless she is disposed of, she will remain a surplus woman. "The victim was believed to have become *Devi* in heaven, by demonstrating her pious love and devotion for her husband through her death on her husband's pyre" [S.K.Biswas 25]. It is not done in the case of man because he is considered an asset to his community. For religious fundamentalists; this custom appeared to be a better solution than enforcing widowhood. Burning of the widow would eliminate widowhood and solve the problem of remarriage either inside or outside the caste in order to protect the caste purity through a crude shot-cut method. Woman is regarded as a menace to the system of endogamy and a burden to the society. "The husband may survive his wife and be surplus man, whom the group, while it may sympathize with him for the sad bereavement, has to dispose of; else he will marry outside the caste and will break the endogamy" [Ambedkar13]. The obsession of the orthodox Hindus with caste purity, no doubt, induced the practice of *sati* in India. This practice maintained the luster of the caste system and vice-versa.

Even though *Sati* is considered an Indian custom or a Hindu custom in the strict sense, it was not practised all over India by all Hindus but only among certain communities of India. On the other hand, sacrificing the widow in her dead husband's funeral or pyre was not unique only to India. In many ancient communities it was an acceptable feature. This custom, exactly not like that of India, was prevalent among Egyptians, Greek, Goths, Scythians and others. Among these communities it was a custom to bury the dead king with his mistresses or wives, servants and other things so that they could continue to serve him in the next world. This custom laced with superstitious belief was more dominant among the warrior communities in north India, especially in Rajasthan and also among the higher castes in Bengal in east India. In history, a few non-Hindu rulers like the Mughals tried to ban this custom. But they could not succeed as it was exclusively a Hindu issue. The British, due to the efforts of Hindu reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy outlawed this custom in 1829. Religious related custom of *sati* could be erased but caste could not be done away with. "The *kulin* Brahmans in particular were major practitioners of the social evil. It was this class of Brahmans who contributed largely to the *sati* in Bengal"[A.K.Biswas 11].

VI. CASTE IN RURAL AND URBAN INDIA

Caste has assumed different *Avatars* in rural and urban spaces. One can distinguish rural caste from urban caste. Upward mobility of person is expected to bring about a change in his/her attitude. The members of the same caste living in a region come together on occasions of common concern on one hand and they tend to rise above the members of their own caste so as to emulate the dominant upper castes to form a class in terms of cultural, economical and political status on the other. The co-mingling of the different castes who vie for their individual social and political image cannot be taken as an index of casteless society. In rural India, the members of a particular caste with their poor economic conditions may tend to co-mingle with their elite group in order to access to urban facilities and sources. The urban dwellers might need village contacts to provide them with servants to help them secure the marital alliances for their own castes and classes. Urban dwellers with political ambitions invariably need to have rural contacts in order to protect their vote bank. The dominant upper caste-forces tactfully exploit their caste for political power. The gullible rural poor heavily rely upon their caste men living in the urban world. This is a natural phenomenon in a caste society. This type of caste culture has already crept into the lower order too. The so called state's vision is to establish a casteless and classless society. The state power represents different social groups dominated by the advanced castes. Caste is numerically significant for political aspirants as it dominates power calculations. It is thriving and getting increasingly involved in politics and other human spheres despite *Bahujans* mobilizing support from their caste groups for their political accession. "Castes cannot change intrinsically as long as they are fundamentally founded on identities that draw their sustenance from rhetoric of natural differences that are imbued with notions of purity and impurity"[Gupta xix-xx]. The fundamental nature of caste can never be obliterated.

VII. CAN INTER-CASTE MARRIAGES WIPE OUT CASTE SYSTEM?

Women of the productive castes are the perennial victims of caste exploitation apart from gender discrimination and patriarchal dominance. Thanks to Manu's *Dharmasastra* which has been adopted by the upper caste dominant society in letter and spirit, woman is always deprived of her natural rights and freedom. Men of dominant castes do not see caste as a bar for their sexual intercourse with the women of the lower order in Indian social milieu. They never hesitate to keep mistresses from different lower castes. Taking advantage of poverty of the labouring communities, upper caste men unhesitatingly forge illicit relations with the so-called untouchable women too. To them, caste doesn't appear as an element of pollution or a physical barrier in their amorous activities. "Men have institutionalized mechanisms to escape the incurrence of pollution through sexual intercourse with a low caste woman. This often takes the form of a purificatory bath and the ritual expiation of the offence" [Dube 19].

The act of sexual intercourse by an upper caste man with the so-called lower caste woman doesn't invite serious consequences and no punishment thereafter while an upper caste woman's malicious act would amount to banishment. There are instances of murder of a lower caste boy for marrying an upper caste girl even on their mutual consent. This re-enforces how caste criminality has resulted in doing away with innocent life. The so-called successful inter-caste marriages have created some caste mixing environment to give an impression that such marriages are reducing the strong urge of the members of the low castes to annihilate the worst phenomenon of caste system. But this situation serves as a safety-valve for maintaining the status-quo of the primary nature of the caste system. In essence, the inter-caste marriages are proving to be a failure in making society casteless. Out of two different castes in the union, one is certainly dominant. The dominant caste always influences and absorbs any lower or servile caste. If the lower caste bridegroom happens to marry an upper caste bride, he will be part of the dominant community which the girl represents. This is a social reality.

VIII. IS CONVERSION A DEATH-KNELL TO CASTE?

Caste is not a physical monster. It is more of a psychological phenomenon. Every Indian is imbued with belief in fate and implanted with caste consciousness. The long social struggles of social saviors like Ambedkar against caste system proved futile. Some Indian progressive litterateurs like Mulk Raj Anand fictionalized the Indian social situation and put this social problem on the world map. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhiji's social movements against untouchability didn't bring any fundamentally required change. Ambedkar, after thirty years of his relentless struggle for social emancipation, decided to embrace Buddhism. He said that he was born Hindu and he would not die a Hindu. Several Indian ex-untouchables converted to another faith such as Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism. At the same time, caste was/is also carried forward into another religion along with the convert, which proves to be a tragedy. Within the new faith also caste hierarchy is visibly marked particularly in marital matters. Of course, new faith might provide a psychological solace to the depressed castes to some extent but the full-fledged emancipation as dreamt by them is still a mirage. "Annihilation of castes is not the wiping out of the nomenclature of 6000 castes, not the elimination of the caste characteristics from amongst the caste groups" [S.K. Biswas 51]. Caste system cannot be wiped out in the material sense but there is a possibility for a Hindu reformer to nourish a democratic and secular view of its practice. Pushing caste from its verticality to horizontality is only the collective exercise to be done by various social caste groups. Thus annihilation of castes would mean ensuring equal treatment of all existing castes in their horizontal pattern. Empowerment of the servile classes would also pave the way for annihilation of castes and equal enjoyment of social and economic liberty.

IX. CONCLUSION

Caste institution is an inferno of all social evils. The roots of caste are still strong in Hindu scriptures. Burning of *Manusmriti* by Ambedkar demonstrated his strong opposition to caste system but he could not annihilate it. Hindu caste system defied both the Muslim and British rule. Ambedkar's conversion along with the retinue of his community to Buddhism was a strong protest against the Hindu religion. He died without experiencing the fruits of his conversion. It is no doubt to say that caste system has created disintegration and strained relations between the depressed classes and caste Hindus. The four-fold system of caste gave birth to *Sati*, Child marriage, permanent widowhood, untouchability and among other things. Even among converts, not only the element of caste matters but also class influences their society. Though Brahminical society is already in existence, which is a bone of strong contention, the rich among lower sections have become Brahminical in their attitude. This trend is assuming dangerous proportions to become a new Brahminism. The 'moneyed class' and the 'dominant caste' tend to dictate terms to the hapless lower order of any social set-up as in India. The religious scriptures govern the state and while the dominant groups wield political power over the hapless Indian rulers in their religious belief prostrate before the so-called god-men who interpret the religious scriptural significance. Disempowered classes are always the subjects and victims of social maladies. India is beset with both the caste and class menace which has enormously inflicted socio-cultural crisis in the integration of the country and it is a stumbling block in the progress of the nation.

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