

The Caste System: Continuities and Changes

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Abstract. This paper as entitled-“The Caste System: Continuities and Changes”, talks about the caste system, as prevalent in Indian society, its features and other issues related to it. But most importantly, it focusses on the characteristics of caste which are still continuing today, its features which have changed partially and also which have undergone complete changes. This paper also focusses on various Indian intellectual interrogations which talked about caste as an evil meant to be destroyed and eliminated from our society.

Keywords: Caste, Varna, Jati, Continuity, Change.

1. Introduction

This paper is an effort to bring to the fore the deep embedded institution of caste in India and moreover the kind of importance given to it and the role that one’s caste plays in our day to day life. Today every social institution is entrenched with the feeling of ‘caste solidarity’, be it political institution, or the so called “sacred” institution of marriage. Caste has an element of social exclusiveness attached with it, for example Hutton mentions about taboo on marriage is an outcome of taboo on food and drink rather than cause of it.

“In that country the laws of religion, the laws of the land, and the laws of honour, are all united and consolidated in one, and bind a man eternally to the rules of what is called his caste.”- Edmund Burke (Dirks, 2002).

2. The Caste System in India

The word caste was first used by the Portuguese to denote the social classification in India, as they thought that the system was meant to preserve the purity of blood. Caste includes three elements: repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization.

Dirks suggested that, it was under the British that “caste” became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all “systematizing” India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. In short, colonialism made caste what it is today. As Dirks says that when thinking of India it is hard not to think of caste. “In comparative sociology and in common parlance alike, caste has become a central symbol for India, indexing it as fundamentally different from other places as well as expressing its essence. Caste has been seen as omnipresent in Indian history. Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and it is seen today as the major threat to Indian modernity. If we are to understand India properly, and by implication if we are to understand India’s other core symbol- Hinduism- we must understand caste, whether we admire or revile it”(Dirks, 2002).

It is said that caste came to India after the arrival of British, but it is not so because caste was existing even before British arrived, they only codified it in a systematic way. Under colonialism, caste was made far more pervasive and more totalizing. There are various theories related to the evolution of caste system in India

The origin of the Indian caste system has many theories behind it. Some of them are religious, while others are biological. The religious theories explain that according to the Rig-Veda, which is ancient Hindu book, the primal man, Purush, destroyed himself to create a human society and the different part 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 Shudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created.

The biological theory claims that all existing things inherit one of three categories of qualities. Varna means different shades of texture or colour and represents mental temper. There are three gunas: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Sattva is white, Rajas is red, and Tamas is black. These in combination of various proportions constitute the group or class of people all over the world with temperamental differences. According to this theory, the Brahmans usually inherit the Sattva qualities. The Kshatriyas and Vaishyas inherit the Rajas qualities and the Shudras inherit the Tamas qualities.

Historically, however, it is believed that the caste system began with the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500B.C. Of the many cultures flourished in India, the literary records of the Indo- Aryan culture are not the earliest. The Aryans came from southern Europe and northern Asia with fair skin that contrasted with the indigenous natives in India. When they arrived, their main contact was with the Dravidians. The Aryans completely disregarded their local cultures and began conquering regions all over north India.

Traditionally, the caste system of stratification was legitimized through classical Hindu religious texts, especially as interpreted by Brahmans. The caste system was rationalized in ancient India on various grounds. One of them was the justification in the Vedas.

Initially there were only four orders, which later on came to be known as four varnas and Jatis are endogamous groups which are more than 1000 in number. There was nothing as low or high Varna in Vedic period. Division of society was there according to division of labour but not discrimination based. It was later in Brahmanic period (230B.C to 700 A.D) that four varnas came to be arranged hierarchically. Caste was not Varna but in due course of its development, it came to be associated with it and was seen equivalent to it.

3. Intellectual Interrogations on Caste

Caste is seen by some as admirer of its spiritual foundations of sacerdotal hierarchy; by some as those who look from below and see the tyranny of Brahmans; by those who view it as Indian equivalent of community and by those who see it as primary impediment to community. Caste is present not only in India, but also in other parts of Asia also but caste divisions and differences are not as strikingly sharp in countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan or Bangladesh as in India. However, unlike India, there has been no recognition of their special situation as socially excluded and deprived (Jodhka and Shah, 2010).

B.R Ambedkar considered the four varnas of the Hindu society as the classes and said that sub division of a society into such classes was natural but the unnatural thing about these sub-divisions is that they have lost the open door character of the class system and have become self-enclosed units called castes. Thus, he proposed for inter caste marriages as a solution to annihilate this evil system of discrimination. He said that “people observe caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of caste.” And hence his remedy to annihilate caste system is to “destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shasta’s... You must destroy religion of the Shrutis and the Smritis.” He was of the view that we should make our political democracy a social democracy as well. He said that the outcaste is a by-product of the caste system, there will be outcaste as long as there are castes. And nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of caste system.

Gandhi talked about caste as an ugly growth of a body or like weeds of a crop for which one will not destroy whole body for the sake of it. Therefore, according to him, only untouchability has to be removed and then caste system will be purified because for him, it was the duty aspect rather than ranking aspect which provided a functional legitimacy to the Varna system. Gandhi defended the four fold social division in the sense of varnashrama dharma, that is, in the sense that there were certain social functions or duties which were related to one’s order or status in society. He approved of a society with functional distinctions based on the different abilities of different members as a way of preserving the stability of social life. According to him, one form of occupation should not be considered superior or inferior to another.

The Caste system has struck such deep roots in India, that, Gandhi said; “it will be far more advisable to try to improve it rather uproot it.” To him, division of people into strata’s was the best possible adjustment for social stability and progress. In stark contrast to the principle of liberty, equality and fraternity, according to Ambedkar the Hindu social order was based on the principles of graded inequality, fixity of occupations

and fixation of people within their respective classes. Ambedkar described the Hindu social order as a ladder of castes placed one above the other, together representing an ascending scale of hatred and a descending scale of contempt.

For Ambedkar, the rejection of Hindu philosophy of life and society is complete, as it negates the principle of liberty, equality and fraternity to be active and useful values of life. The Hindu philosophy stands for class interests of the first three varnas and is initiated by language of inequality and discrimination. To sum it up, it can be said that Gandhi and Ambedkar represent two aspects of one truth, neither of which can be ignored.

As Dipankar Gupta mentions that the “book view” of the caste system is derived largely from sacerdotal Hindu texts, members of the upper castes find it extremely agreeable. It justifies the caste system in terms of purity and pollution, giving the impression that all castes-high and low- abide by this single, overarching textual hierarchy. Several Hindu texts also imply, when they do not say so bluntly, that a person’s position is determined by his or her karma. In other words, the fact that one is born into a certain caste is an outcome of one’s past deeds in an earlier incarnation. Thus members of high caste have no reason to feel that they are being unduly over privileged, as the perks of their caste status in this life are just rewards for their good deeds in their past ones. That book view has received tremendous ovation in literary circles is not surprising. As the authors of these texts and their believers come from upper castes, what they say and write quickly passes on to the academic work.

There are contrasting views and debates on whether “caste” in the strict sense of the term does exist in contemporary India, or it has withered away. There are various points of views on the issue. There are two views regarding the present and future of the caste system. One view is that caste system is fast changing and is weakening though it is not being disintegrated or abolished. To this school of thought, belonged early scholars of the 1950s, 60s and 70s like D.N Majumdar, Gardner Murphy, Pauline Kolenda and Max Weber and scholars of 1980s and 1990s like R.K Mukherjee, M.N Srinivas among others. The other view is that caste system is not transforming itself fast and the changes are gradual. To this school belonged scholars like G.S. Ghurye, I.P Desai, K.M Kapadia, Louis Dumont, Andre Beteille, Yogendra Singh and others.

It has become truism today that caste in India has not disappeared in direct proportion to the spread of modern technology. In the rural areas, caste, despite many modifications, is still persisting in its traditional form. In the contemporary urban-based order, caste is persisting in the form of complex networks of interest groups preserved through endogamy and legitimized by religion. In both forms, caste remains an extremely viable social institution and thus appears to be an instance where simultaneously old uses have been retained and new ones found for a traditional Asian social structure.

4. Continuities and Changes

Continuity and the change, the cliché which are so often applied to modern India, captures a fundamental problem which is more than a basic truth, because the relation between continuity and change is becoming complex in the face of the rapid and far reaching developments which are so apparent in each and every domain of contemporary Indian society, including the caste system. “Indeed, on the subject of caste, one of the most distinctive of India’s social institutions, anthropologists and sociologists have generally been far more confident about the structural continuity than contemporary change, and analysis of the relation between them has persistently posed serious intellectual problems.” (Fuller, 1996).

Our research using a macro-perspective and qualitative research methods suggests that using a sociological framework does indeed underscore that ‘tradition’ is only one part of the Indian story, and future work needs to also focus on the ‘modern’ aspects of Indian society to have a clearer account of social change in contemporary India.

Complete changes can be witnessed in the “jajmani system”, the relation between jajman and kameen which was prevalent in rural India, which has been done away with and also the non- existence of caste panchayats.

Then the changes which are only partial can be mentioned as occupational sphere which is considered to be devoid of caste factor (at least in contemporary times) is not so in absolute sense, as still there are places

in India, where the manual scavenging task is done only by the local scavenger caste. Pauline Kolenda mentions that despite the demise of occupational aspect of caste system, the solidarity of jati is intact. Then there are commensal relations, where changes have taken place to a great extent but still certain prohibitions do occur, as addressed by Adrian Mayer in C.J Fuller's edited book, where the author makes comparison in the commensal relations in 1954 and in 1992 and the subsequent changes thereafter.

Therefore there is a blurring line between continuity and changes which have taken place in caste system, i.e. structural continuity is there but functional changes have taken place.

The important role played by caste even today cannot be ignored. As it can be very well seen when we talk about caste census in 2011 irrespective of the fact that caste census was done away with after 1931 census. In early times, people tried to get themselves enumerated/enrolled as belonging to higher castes but now they try and even compete with one other to get backward caste status so as to avail the benefits meant for the depressed and marginalised section of our society by getting reservations in various fields. Progressive measures of reservation and affirmative action have sharpened caste loyalties instead of liquidating it. Then; the recent passage of Reservation Quota in Promotions Bill also bears testimony to the above fact. The existence of caste even in Diaspora further reinforces the belief that caste has its importance and hold even today's society and times.

5. Conclusion

It is obvious that the eradication of caste is a distant reality, despite the indications to the contrary. As long as caste performs the function of a welfare state in India and provides for the common bonds of kinship ties, political groups and alliances it can be assured of a continued existence in modern India. Caste will not wither away as long as its social acceptance and functional utility is being appreciated and made use of. A strong will and inspiration is needed to wash out this evil institution from our society in order to see it developing and progressing on the path of success with its secular structure intact.

Caste will not disappear but only shifts are taking place in the meaning and legitimacy of social relationships and social activities. The element of 'equity' rather than equality should take precedence while making the policies for the marginalised and depressed sections of the society, which to some extent has been done in India, via "protective discrimination" and "affirmative actions" being taken in regard to them.

As M.N Srinivas says that "A combination of wholly based on new technologies, institutions based on new principles and a new ideology which includes democracy, equality and the idea of human dignity and self-respect has to be in operation for a considerable time to uproot the caste system".(Srinivas, 2003)

6. References

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