



POSITIONALITY OF POWER IN THE CASTE SYSTEM

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Abstract: Caste system as an institution whose very existence is based on differential power relations, warrants the question of what constitutes this deeper dynamics of the power. Power by its very definition, institutes a certain individual or group of individuals overarching authority to command a situation, even steer others' behaviour to reach their preferred outcomes, even at the cost of others. Power, in this sense, is characterized as a 'positional good' for its very value lies in its scarce availability and the power one person holds is contingent upon the powerlessness of another individual. The power held by the upper caste would have no value if it's not through rendering the lower castes powerless. There is a case to be made about how persistence of durable inequality in the caste system is a function of differential power equation and instead of there being a discernible source of power, it stems from the practices that constitute the system.

Index Terms: Caste system; Power; Positional goods; Caste

I. INTRODUCTION

'Patience,' wrote Ambrose Bierce in *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906), is 'a minor form of despair, disguised as a virtue.' Over the centuries, India has seen a lot of this alleged virtue. There has been extraordinary tolerance of inequalities, stratification and caste division- accepted as allegedly necessary parts of the social order¹ (Dreze & Sen, 2013)

Our tolerance towards the institution of caste system has indeed been extraordinary. There has been and still are, instances, fairly high in number and severe in intensity that show the existence and thriving thereof, of this latent caste consciousness among the people. Caste has been a major impediment in the path to social progress in India and as Ambedkar (1936) points out, not just in the form of a counterproductive division of labour, but more importantly, "as a pernicious division of human beings into iron-curtained compartments". Further, another staunch opponent of caste system, Rammanohar Lohia said that 'Caste restricts opportunity. Restricted opportunity constricts ability. Constricted ability further restricts opportunity. Where caste prevails, opportunity and ability are restricted to ever narrowing circles of people.' (quoted in Agrawal, 2008: 212; Dreze and Sen, 2013). Caste thus, is mutually exclusive in that there is an inviolable code of conduct that divides the rights and privileges of the individuals in question. An individual from one caste can traditionally not tread freely into the arena of privileges and rights of the other; while a person from the lower caste 'cannot' (for fear of imposition of certain sanctions), a person from the upper caste 'will not' (for fear of getting polluted).

¹ Dreze, Jean and Amartya Sen (2013), "An Uncertain Glory: India and It's Contradictions", pp 285

II. CONCEPTUALISING CASTE SYSTEM

“India has a unique social division, the (endogamous) caste system. Caste is class at primitive level of production, a religious method of forming social consciousness in such a manner that the primary producer is deprived of his surplus with the minimum coercion” (Kosambi, 1954: 14). The term ‘caste’ has its roots in Latin word *castus* meaning chaste or pure. Dumont follows Bouglès’ definition of the caste system and defines it as a “system that divides the society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics: *separation* in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food); *division* of labour, each group having, in theory or by tradition: and finally *hierarchy* which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another” (Dumont, 1966: 21). The sustenance of the caste system is ensured by what Tilly (1998) calls *durable inequality* which basically theorizes the probable rationale behind why such institutions are often difficult to obliterate. Caste system, like any other discriminatory institution, is borne out of a necessity to establish an organizational structure in the society which by virtue of the fact that it simplifies and solves difficulties (Tilly, 1998; Pellissery, 2015). Dumont further goes on to say that far more than a ‘group’ in its definitional sense, the caste is a *state of mind*. Peculiarly enough, Chatterjee (1989) conceptualizes caste to be a “system of ideas, a phenomenon of consciousness, with ‘religion as a constitutive force’”. Dumont (1966) also believes that it is the ideological force of religion that binds the castes together by defining the place of each sub caste within the system, linking them and separating them simultaneously.

Dumont affords little consideration to the political and economic (in playing residual role in the middle of the caste hierarchy) aspect and establishes that religion manifesting itself in the concept of purity/pollution plays the most important role in determining the extreme ends of the caste hierarchy. Dumont’s conceptualization of the role of religion thus, surpasses the role of relations of power as an important factor in determining the place of a *jati* in the hierarchy of the system. Dirks, refuting the stance of Dumont, who sees religion as all-encompassing professes that in caste system, the political encompasses the religious. Thus, in words of Singh (2014) “Dumont empowers the spiritual while Dirks spiritualizes power”. Dirks in his much celebrated work says that the caste structure, ritual form and the political process are all dependent on relations of power (and not solely on religion). These relations are constructed in and through history; these relations are culturally produced and while

III. POWER AND CASTE: A CURIOUS INTERPLAY

Oxford defines power as “the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviour of others or the course of events” or as “authority that is given or delegated to a person or body”. Thus in its very weave, power is the ability to influence. This ability could itself be a result of multitude of factors ranging from religious ascription, historical factors etc.

Power, however is a highly contested concept and it is not easy to come up with an all-encompassing definition. Hobbes, in the opening of the tenth chapter of his seminal work, *Leviathan*, defines “[t]he power of a man is his present means, to obtain some future apparent good [...]” Holler (2011) defines power as simply “any ability to intervene into the course of the world, regardless of the preferences we espouse with respect to results of action” (Holler, 2011). Weber defines power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance” (cited in Sadan, 1997). Thus power came to be seen as a ‘position of will’, as a supreme factor to which the wills of others are subject. The will of a person (or for that matter of a group) is what leads to the activation of power.

Weber clearly sees power as a factor of domination, based on economic or authoritarian interests. He studied the historical sources of the formal authority that activates legitimate power, and came up with three sources of legitimization for exercising power: the charismatic, the traditional and the rational-legal. Dahl (1961) in his theorization of power defines it as “the ability to make somebody do something that otherwise he or she would not have done”. Thus power as a ‘production of obedience to the preferences of others’², is the dominant undercurrent in Dahl’s understanding of power. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) developed, as a response to Dahl’s singular conceptualization of power, a different model in their work titled *the two faces of power*. It critiqued the very basic premise of Dahl where he presupposes a pluralistic society, with an open system of representation of community interests and put forward the idea of an inherent connection between the overt face of power-the way decisions are made and the other, covert face of power, the ability to

² Sadan, Elisheva, (1997) “Empowerment and community Planning”

prevent decision making. Furthering this take on power, Lukes (1974) added a third dimension (first two being overt and covert), that is the latent dimension of power. This dimension deals with, according to Lukes, the ability to instil in people's minds interests that are contrary to their own betterment. This is the hardest of all to identify, because it is hard for the subjects themselves to comprehend it and discover its existence.

All the above theorists, more or less, insist on locating groups possessing power and establishing the existence of rational agencies and processes that channelize power and help in building and strengthening the its dynamics. Foucault (1980) refutes the existence of such an ordered channel and professes that "there is no source from which the actions stem, only an infinite series of practices" (Sadan, 1997). Thus, Foucault's complete thrust lies on the decentralization of the position of power. Anthony Giddens (1982, 1984) furthers Foucault's concept and a critique of it in his theory of structuration or duality of structure. According to this theory, power is an extremely important, if not the only important, component of the social structure. Power is practiced in every sphere of society; it is exercised by human agents and is also produced by them, influences them and limits them.

Caste, in India, is the unfettering basis of multitude of processes that take place in the country. Be it cultural, economic, social or political sphere, caste dictate the grounds and norms that are to be followed by the members of the society, each one categorized under one or the other caste and is expected to act accordingly. Dirks define caste as a "cultural construction of power".³ Caste, in other words "as a system of social and economic governance or organization (of production and distribution) is governed by certain customary rules and norms which are unequal and distinct" (Thorat, 2007)⁴. The division of people in different castes is done through ascription by birth, of civil, cultural and economic rights and violations of these canonical norms and arbitrary codes of conduct might lead to punishment in the form of social ostracism, which acts as a regulatory mechanism (Akerlof, 1976)⁵. Thus, in words of Akerlof, "the predictions of the caste system become a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Akerlof, 1976). The castes at the top of the social order have access to far more privileges and rights at the expense of those located at the bottom who are at the mercy of the upper caste. Thus, the caste system is essentially a hierarchical setting in which the privileges and freedom accrue to the top strata of the system and which successively dies down, leaving the bottom strata (the untouchables) with hardly anything to go by. This caste based exclusion has formed basis for various anti-discriminatory policies in India⁶.

The power dynamics thus play a very important role in sustaining caste system. The caste system runs on power differential basis, where the upper castes have the power and are "precursor to social interactions, with powerful defining how they are to proceed"⁷. Power constitutes and defines identity. Access may, thus not depend on tangible, material resources but on how relevant aspects of identity are selected, identified and understood. In the case of India, power comes with the position one holds in the hierarchy of caste system. The power that the upper caste possess, is by virtue of their being spiritually (pure/impure dialectic) superior to the lower castes and thus are able to shape the destiny of the latter. Thus, even going by the most basic conception of the term power as 'ability to influence', caste system does exactly the same. The upper castes are, in words of Elisheva Sadan, the 'activators of power' and dictate the terms of social interaction in which they are to indulge. Dumont professes that the ideological force of Dharma always binds the individual caste to the whole system.

The upper caste not only have the overt power to be able to take decisions on behalf of the others in the strata but also have the dispositional power to even change the rules of the game suiting their respective interests. Much like the legitimisation of colonisation using the western construct of 'white man's burden', the caste system has been legitimised by the canonical scriptures which themselves are nothing but manifestation of the power traditionally held by the Brahmins who were the architects of these canons. The conceptualisation of knowledge as power by Foucault where he sees knowledge as nothing more than a construct of power and a tool in the hands of the powerful, is what has been the case with the caste system.

This works in line with the Clegg's circuit of power in which he talks about how the power is a circular process flowing in three channels:

³ Bandopadhyay, Sekhar (2004), "Caste, Culture and Hegemony"

⁴ Thorat, Sukhdeo (2007) "Concept of caste and Ethnicity based Exclusion and discrimination"

⁵ Akerlof, George (1976) "The Economics of Caste and of the Rat Race and other Woeful Tales"

⁶ Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1979; Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989; Reservation Policies

⁷ Witcher, Sally (2013) "Inclusive Equality", pp 44-45

- **The overt circuit of power-** the circuit having a concrete form and which could be easily spotted in the decision making arena. It works in simple traditional ways: A activates resources, and influences B in a way in which B would not have acted had it not been for his relations with A. (entails real acts of power)
- **The social circuit of power-** this is an abstract circuit, known as the circuit of social integration, in which the rules that order relations of meaning, membership and belonging are created and codified. (description of the field of power)
- **The systemic-economic circuit of power-** in this both material and non-material resources are created. This is called the circuit of system integration. (influence of the field on the access to resources of power and their ability to use these)

The way these circuits play out in the Indian social fabric is clearly manifested in how the caste system works. Caste system uses what Gramsci calls cultural hegemony wherein there is a domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling group (caste in caste of India), who manipulate the culture of that society- the beliefs, values etc. so as to make their worldview the largely accepted cultural norm of the society.

IV. POWER: A POSITIONAL GOOD?

In a book edited by Samuel Bowles, Maurizio Franzini, Ugo Pagano, there is the following statement:

“In nearly all societies the good things of life, the things that people desire are unequally distributed; some have more, others less. When we ask-what good things? The answers that sociologists have given, since Max Weber, is that they are thought of under three main heads; *wealth, prestige and power*”⁸ (Bowles et al., 1998)

All three have a very profound impact on the social dynamics of a country. There has been quite a thrust on the first head of *wealth* by economists. As of the other two heads of *privilege and power* these still need a fair amount of scrutinised treading. In case of Indian society there is a very peculiar interplay of caste and power which ultimately results in certain sections of society (who lie at the bottom in this hierarchy of power), being excluded and discriminated against. Williams (1969) and consequently others, describe power as a ‘positional good’; one that not all can have; in fact its existence is contingent on others not having it. The concept of ‘positional good’ came from Economist Fred Hirsch (1976) who kept ‘positional good’ as a third type of good, the other two being ‘public good’ and ‘private good’, and delineates positional good as one whose value depends on its relative ownership. In fact ‘positional good’ (for A to have x amount of an object, B has to lose x amount of that object) is theorized to be the vastly different from ‘public good’ (A has x amount of an object, B also has x amount of the same object) in the sense that the consumption of the former by one party automatically implies a corresponding negative consumption of the same by a counter party while the consumption of the latter does not necessarily affect someone else’s consumption of the same. There are no externalities in context of ‘public goods’ as opposed to that of ‘positional goods’ where its consumption not only leads to certain externalities but is heavily contingent upon the production of these externalities. According to Walzer (1983), power, although an intangible good is also distributive along with many other tangible goods like, food, shelter, clothing etc. This distributive aspect of power (being a ‘positional good’) in the system is what renders such peculiarity and tenacity to this institution of caste system.

Power in caste system manifests itself, among other things, in the form ownership of resources like land and thus land could be seen as a tangible expression of power. Land, being a scarce resource, could also be seen as a positional good, for to hold much of it, one has to devoid somebody else of his fair share. This makes it a zero-sum game. This is what the caste system has been historically doing. Not merely through the use of coercion and force but through what Louis Althusser (1970) calls, Ideological State Apparatus wherein the consent is drawn from the subordinated caste groups by creation of a belief system that by and large restricts their access to certain privileges and which in turn curtails their ability to own resources that they have reason to value. Land, apart from being a commodity of value in a largely agrarian society like India, also enhances ones capability by instilling a sense of freedom to pursue different functionings that one has reason to value.⁹ The possession of tangibles, for instance land, can invoke a corresponding enhancement in intangibles like self-respect or economic independence etc. The historical denial of land ownership rights to the lower

⁸ Bowles, S., Franzini, M. and Pagano, U. eds., 1998. *The politics and economics of power*. Routledge.

⁹ The argument is premised on the conceptual notion of ‘capability approach’ proposed by Amartya Sen (1979) which professes that income or resources are valuable in only so far as they help achieve other valued outcomes (functionings) and what is more important is the aspect of ‘capability’ which is the freedom to pursue one’s desired functionings.

castes does not only affect them materially but restrict their 'capabilities' as they do not have the freedom to pursue what they consider to be of interest to them.

Power in caste system could thus be seen as being akin to the economic ideation of 'positional good' since its value lies in its differential distribution across the caste spectrum. The power that upper castes wield is at the expense of the lower castes and this differentiation has to be maintained for the system to sustain itself. While the general direction of flow of power and authority in the caste system is clear, its maintenance is a rather nuanced self-feeding cycle where practices legitimised through canonical traditional means like marriages etc and concretised through coercive sanctions, ensure the power dynamics remain positioned so as to keep it business as usual. The power-play in the institution of caste system has engineered itself so that it no longer requires central figures to emanate authority anymore and the system self-sustains itself like it has through ages.

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