Caste System and Political Change in Indian Democracy – A Study

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Abstract:

In India, the caste system developed and is prevalent since ancient times and it remains as a great thorn in the growth of Mother India. Caste in Indian society refers to a social group where membership is largely decided by birth. This caste system became fixed and hereditary with the emergence of Hinduism and its beliefs of pollution and rebirth. The Laws of Manu (Manusmitri), refer to the impurity and servility of the outcastes, while affirming the dominance and total impunity of upper castes. The origin of caste system could be the functional groupings, called varnas, which have their origins in the Aryan society. Scheduled Castes was first coined by the Simon Commission and used it in the Government of India Act-1935 to refer to certain castes. Social change may be defined as the process which is discernible in the alteration of the structure and functioning of a particular social system. The nature and pace of social change are not uniform in each age or period in the same society. There is no inherent law in social change according to which it assume definite forms. It is difficult to make any prediction about the exact forms of social change.

Keywords. Caste System, Democracy, social change, untouchable, varnas

Introduction

The Indian Caste System is historically one of the main dimensions where people in India are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. Although this or other forms of differentiation exist in all human societies, it becomes a problem when one or more of these dimensions overlap each other and become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige. The Indian Caste System is considered a closed system of stratification, which means that a person's social status is obligated to which caste they were born into. There are limits on interaction and behavior with people from another social status (Sekhon, 39). Its history is massively related to one of the prominent religions in India, Hinduism, and has been altered in many ways during the Buddhist revolution and under British rule. This paper will be exploring the various aspects of the Indian caste system related to its hierarchy, its history, and its effects on India today.

Caste in Indian society refers to a social group where membership is largely decided by birth. This caste system became fixed and hereditary with the emergence of Hinduism and its beliefs of pollution and rebirth. The Laws of Manu (Manusmitri), refer to the impurity and servility of the outcastes, while affirming the dominance and total impunity of upper castes. Those from the lowest castes are told that their place in the caste hierarchy is due to their sins in their past life. Vivid punishments of torture and death are assigned for crimes such as gaining literacy or insulting a member of a dominant caste. Manusmitri, the most authoritative text of Hindu religion legitimizes social exclusion and introduces absolute inequality as the guiding principle of social relations.

Caste still very much matters to Indian citizens even in the modern world, though one must point out that different groups of citizens have different reasons for maintaining the system of caste. The upper castes want to keep caste alive to oppress the lower castes thereby maintaining their domination. It is very interesting to note that the lower caste groups, who are supposed to hate the caste system, also want to use their caste identity to gain benefits in the corridors of power and politics and, at the same time, they want to put a stop to the caste oppression imposed upon them by the upper castes. It is an ironical and interesting situation of the Indian society in modern India.

Actually, it was meant to show that the four classes stood in relation to the social organization in the same relation as the different organs of the Primordial Man to his body. Together they had to function to give vitality to the body politic. But the caste system grown to the level of retarding the growth of an individual in the name of caste and there by affecting the fundamental rights of an individual to live or to grow, which is the essence of democracy. How caste system affects the Democracy can broadly be classified under two headings.

> ➢ Societal Democracy

> ➢ Political Democracy

Religion, Culture, and Caste

The division of castes constitutes one of the most fundamental features of India's social structure. In Hindu society, caste divisions play a part in both actual social interactions and in the ideal scheme of values. Members of different castes are expected to behave differently and to have different values and ideals (Béteille, 45). These differences are sanctioned by the Hindu religion. Traditionally, the caste system of stratification in India was legitimized through classical Hindu religious texts, especially as interpreted by Brahmans (Sekhon, 45). The caste system was rationalized in ancient India on various grounds. One of them was the justification in the Vedas. The caste system would not have found approval among the vedic people unless there was some reference to it in the Vedas.

India who was oppressed (like the Shudras and the "untouchables") joined anti-Brahmanical movements in order to take a stance against the discriminatory acts they were facing. Even in 1950, one of the primary reasons for the conversion to Buddhism in India during the 1950s under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar was the caste system and the plight of the oppressed "untouchables" (Sekhon, 45). Conversion to Buddhism seemed to be believed as the only means of emancipation from the injustices associated with the caste system. This is where the term Dalit derived from; those termed untouchables referred to themselves as the oppressed people, and the term is used to denote both pride in their community as well as resistance to exploitation (Sekhon, 45-6). Sometime the oppressed Shudra castes and tribal groups also refer to themselves as Dalit. These Dalit activists rejected being defined as Hindus and supported the movement against social and economic injustice (Sekhon, 46).

Movements and Political Policies against Caste

There were many movements and governmental actions that took place pre- and post- independence in order to overcome and attempt to eliminate the inequalities and injustices associated with the caste system. During the national movement, Gandhi began using the term "Harijans" (God's people) to refer to the untouchables in order to encourage a shift towards positive attitude towards the lower castes. Many lower caste members, however, found the term to be patronizing. The Census of India had started by the British in the late 19th century, and in 1935, "the British Government of India came up with a list of 400 groups considered untouchable, as well as many tribal groups, that would be accorded special privileges in order to overcome deprivation and discrimination. Those groups included on this list came to be termed Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

In the 1970s, however, many leaders of castes considered untouchable started calling themselves Dalits" (Sekhon, 48). The anti-caste Dalit movement began with Jyotirao Phule in the mid-19th century, and he started a movement for education and the upliftment of women, Shudra's, and Dalits, and the movement spread to many parts of India. He also worked to abolish the idea of "untouchability," which meant getting rid of restrictions on entry into temples, and finding a place for Dalits within Hinduism (Sekhon, 2000)

Another prominent movement was the Dalit movement under B.R. Ambedkar, which began between the 1920s and 1930s. He campaigned for greater rights for Dalits in British India, and even after independence. Both Ambedkar and Gandhi were advocates for the abolishment of the caste system, but they disagreed on the means to go about it. Gandhi believed "untouchability to be a moral issue that could be abolished through goodwill and change of heart among the upper-caste Hindus" (Sekhon, 48). During the 1970s, the Dalit Panthers movement sprouted up among the younger generation of Dalits along with other social movements in India, and their movement expressed their anger and frustration at the failure of implementation regarding policies that would eliminate acts of violence against Dalits by upper-caste Hindus in many parts of urban and rural India.

There are three main categories of people that have been identified as eligible for preferential policies that reserve seats in legislatures, in government jobs, in public sector enterprises, and in state-supervised educational institutions, in terms of their population proportion in their area. The first group is the Scheduled Castes (SCs), which includes communities who are considered to be untouchables (Daniel). The second are the Scheduled Tribes (STs). This category includes in it those communities who did not accept the caste system and preferred to reside deep in the jungles, forests, and mountains of India, away from the main population.

In the 1960s, the reservation system for SCs and STs began, but the individual states were the ones that were to determine which would be identified as OBCs. Many southern states identified economically disadvantaged castes as OBCs, but there has been considerable opposition to implementing these policies in other Indian states. The Central Government appointed a commission headed by B.P. Mandal to look into the issue, and by 1978, the Mandal Commission report was completed. Many seats in state institutions were reserved for the three groups. The Commission recommended that 27 percent of seats be reserved for OBCs, in addition to 15 percent for SCs and 7 percent for STs. Unfortunately, the government did not implement these policies in fear of large scale opposition from the people, but in 1990, the Janata Dal government "attempted partial implementation of recommendations leading to widespread unrest and opposition from middle- and upper-caste youths, intellectuals, and elites".

Caste System Vs Societal Democracy

The roots of democracy lie not in the form of Government, Parliamentary or otherwise. A democracy is more than a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living. The roots of democracy are to be searched in the social relationship, in the terms of associated life between people who form a society. *Dr. Ambedkar*

Caste is the most confused knot of all social problems. Indian society is cast ridden. Religion is just a belief and it can change anytime in the life, but caste is a constant factor which don't change even when religion changes. It doesn't change when occupation changes or social status changes. That is Caste remains constant. It is like a omega value simply a mere constant don't change in any situation.

Caste system does not allow for upward mobility in society. If a person's family comes from the lower economic strata, in a society based on a caste system, that person would need to remain within that restricted level. Caste system affects the society by making the people more exposed to prejudice, stereotyping and other things. These differences in rankings often cause disputes within the society. Caste system is filled with inequality and injustice.

The people of one caste don't like to mix with others. This division of society into so many religions, castes and sub- castes comes in the way of the unity and integrity of the Indian nation. Caste System is the only reason behind women slavery. It encourages child marriage and opposes remarriage. Women are treated only as sex machine. In many castes, women are not allowed to study, work outside or speak their mind. Caste system is the reason behind the lower status of women in some of the communities. No caste in India respect women rights and their feelings. An Indian cannot eat or marry with an Indian simply because he or she does not belong to his or her caste. An Indian simply cannot touch an Indian because he or she does belong to his or her caste.

Caste System is the precursor of Communal Violence by continuously suppressing a section of people. It forces lower caste people to take weapons in their hand. Naxalite, maoistic movements are just an aggression of lower caste people on economic inequality. Limited choice of occupations, which is enforced within a caste as well as by other castes. A caste might follow more than one traditional occupation but its members would nonetheless be constrained to that range Restrictions on dietary and social interactions that define who could consume what and accept from whom. As with marriage arrangements, these restrictions apply at sub-caste level, not merely at the caste level. Physical segregation is there in many parts of the country. These are accompanied by limitations on movement and access, including to religious and educational areas and to basic facilities such as supplies of water.

Since caste is an age old system which is followed traditionally, people find it difficult to accept the new ideal and scientific principles. Caste system discriminates people and it violates all human rights norms on which UN instruments are founded. In its application, Caste has led to sub-human treatment of a vast population. Presently, India's Dalits constitute around 17% of the population. With other minorities, such as tribal peoples, Sikhs and Muslims, minorities in India constitute roughly 85%; the overwhelming majority. To this day, the level of violence against Dalits and other 'lower' Castes is atrocious. Social degradation perpetuated under the Caste system has very few parallels in human history. Such treatment continues to this day. Discrimination is extended to all aspects of life: whether in employment, education, health, land holding, security, and all aspects of women's rights. The psychological effects on 'inferior' Castes constitute gross human rights abuse and a continuing cruelty and thereby affecting the democracy.

Caste System Vs Political Democracy

Caste system is a bane to democracy. Castes are not equal in their status. They are standing one above another.

Acts & Constitutional Provisions for a Casteless Society

India has one of the best constitutions but it is rarely implemented fully. The below provisions are the results of the sincere efforts taken by the Great Indians.

➢ Protection of Civil Rights Act-1976

➢ Prevention of atrocities against SC & ST's Act -1989

Fundamental Rights – First Right is the Right to Equality

➢ Article 14 – Equality before law and equal protection of laws.

➢ Article 15 – Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

➢ Article 16 – Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.

➢ Article 17 – Abolition of untouchability and prohibition of its practice.

➢ ☐ Article 18 – Abolition of titles except military and academic.

Fundamental Duty

51A- (e), to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

Directive Principles of State Policy

Article 38 – To promote the welfare of the people by securing a social order permeated by justice – social, economic and political – and to minimise inequalities in income, status, facilities and opportunities.

Article 46 –To promote the educational and economic interests of SCs, STs and other weaker sections of the society and to protect them from social injustice and exploitation.

Article 330 – Reservation of seats in Lok Sabha for SC and ST's.

Article 332 – Reservation of Seats in State Assembly for SC and ST's.

Conclusion

The Indian caste system has played a significant role in shaping the occupations and roles as well as values of Indian society. Religion has been the constant push towards this stratification system for centuries, beginning with the Aryans and continuing down a long road of unfortunate discrimination, segregation, violence, and inequality. Hinduism was the backbone of the purity- pollution complex, and it was the religion that influenced the daily lives and beliefs of the Indian people. Even after sixty-three years of independence, Indians continue to be in the grip of caste consciousness. Historically, India has been surviving as a nation for millennia with closed groups divided by caste, creed and language. However, the relationship between caste and hereditary occupations has become less significant now, and there are fewer restrictions on social interaction among castes, especially in urban areas. The present Indian society is moving from its closed systems towards a state of change and progression marked by the assertion of the human spirit irrespective of castes and creeds. Numerous movements challenging the injustices associated with the caste system have encouraged individuals in India to be more civil towards other caste members. Many of the lower castes have gained a lot from the partial elimination of the caste system, and India should be applauded for its constant effort to eradicate this system of stratification from its culture. Many movements and governmental actions that took place pre- and post- independence in order to overcome and attempt to eliminate the inequalities and injustices associated with the caste system. During the national movement, Gandhi began using the term "Harijans" (God's people) to refer to the untouchables in order to encourage a shift towards positive attitude towards the lower castes. It is, however, important to look at the importance of how caste status has affected the quality of life and social mobility in India today.

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