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THE CASTE SYSTEM AND ITS IMPACT ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND POVERTY IN INDIA: SOME EXPLORATIONS AND CONJECTURES

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ABSTRACT

Peculiarly Indian in origin and development, the caste system has become an inseparable aspect of the Indian society and there is no comparable institution elsewhere in the world for the caste system. Briefly speculating caste as a system of social stratification precipitating poverty and deprivation of human rights and its persistence in the Indian society and politics, despite efforts by the government and by civic institutions, this paper also focuses on the transformation of the role of caste in the recent times.

Keywords: Social Stratification, Poverty, Deprivation, Human Rights, Transformation.

1. Introduction

Caste system has become an inseparable aspect of the Indian society. Peculiarly Indian in origin and development, there is no comparable institution elsewhere in the world for the caste system. The Indian Caste System is historically one of the main dimensions where people are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language, causing unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige, resulting in deprivation of human rights as a consequence of such differentiation. It is considered a closed system of stratification, with limits on interaction and behaviour with people from another social status. (Sekhon 2000:39) Risley defines caste as "a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling, forming a single homogeneous community". (Hutton 1963:47).

2. Caste System in India

The Indian caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked castes called varnas. They are classified according to occupation and determine access to wealth, power, and privilege. Initially, the system was created to promote the harmonious workings of society, but eventually, it has mostly through corruption, reached the prejudiced and discrimination-filled system of today. The *Gita* states that caste is not determined by birth but by behaviour. However, today people's castes are determined as soon as they are born (Kar 2007). Leadership positions in society are monopolized by a few dominant castes.

The Brahmins, usually priests and scholars, are at the top of the pyramid. Following the Brahmins are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. Next are the Vaishyas, or merchants. A Vaishya's duty was to ensure the community's prosperity through agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. Later, the Shudras took over agriculture and cattle rearing while the Vaishyas became traders and merchants.

At the very bottom are those considered the “untouchables.” These individuals performed occupations that were considered unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and are considered outcasts. The Hindu law books insisted that there were only four varnas and never a fifth, which was used as a reason to not accept the tribal people of India. Their services, however, were still essential to the health of the community and therefore still had to be part of the system in order to serve the upper castes. Since they were rated outside the caste system, they were destined to remain only in the outskirts of the village and were never an integral part of village community (Velassery 2005:8). They were therefore not considered to be included in the ranked castes. In some cases, the untouchables could face criminal charges if they polluted certain things, for example, a temple, with their presence (Hampton 2010)), violating their basic human rights.

When the British ushered in the modern period, which resulted in the introduction of industrialization and scientific learning, the Indian caste system was widely seen as unjust, and a block on further progress. Only the upper castes mostly benefit from higher education, better jobs, and better standards of living, and hence there was no real societal impetus to gradually dissolve caste boundaries as meaningless distinctions.

The persistence of this system of social stratification for 3000 years of changing economic and social environments is puzzling. The pertinent question is why does caste continue to play such an important role in Indian life? One explanation is that ancient inequities and prejudices are slow to change. The higher castes, which exploited the lower castes for centuries, continue to discriminate against them both socially and economically today. A second explanation, which has been the subject of intense public debate, is that caste reservation in higher education and the government has served to perpetuate a system that would otherwise have withered away. Caste is an important tool in the game of national and state politics. A third explanation that has received relatively little attention is based on the many forms of economic support that the caste provides to its members.

According to the India Human Development Survey of 2004–05, even in modern India, scheduled castes (SCs) continue to dominate the ranks of the sweepers (*safai karmacharis*). SCs form nearly 60% of the sweepers in central government compared to only 18% of other Class D workers (GoI 2006). An interesting analysis of the Indian Administrative Services (IAS), shows that as late as 1985, about 37% of the IAS officers self-identified as being brahmin (Goyal 1989), a disproportionately large number since brahmins constitute only about 5% of the population. Consequently, it is not surprising that many studies have found a strong link between caste and economic status (Deshpande 2000; Thorat and Newman 2009).

One of the reasons caste has excited sociological imagination is because it is seen as a representation of pure status, based on religious and ideological grounds (Milner 1994; Dumont 1980). This disjunction between the sacred and the profane gives the Indian caste system a “sociological” character that sets it apart from other forms of social inequality based on material resources. Two aspects of caste inequalities deserve attention: inequality of opportunity and inequality of outcome. However, caste-based inequalities are not simply limited to inequality in opportunity. It has also been argued that even highly qualified members of lower caste face social and economic discrimination resulting in inequality of outcomes (Thorat and Newman 2009).

The law of Karma in Hinduism plays a huge role in the prevention of people revolting against the caste system. However, many in India who were oppressed (like the Shudras and the “untouchables”) joined anti-Brahmanical movements in order to take a stance against the discriminatory acts they were facing. 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 2000:45-46)

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. 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. 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. After 1910, however, Dalit leaders started focusing on distancing themselves from Hinduism and began to advocate for a separate electorate for the Dalits. But Gandhi, who was one of the leaders of the Indian National Congress, tried to instead encourage the incorporation of Dalits as part of reformed Hinduism. Another prominent movement was the Dalit movement under B.R. Ambedkar, which began between the 1920s and 1930s.

Ambedkar did receive constitutional guarantees after independence that reserved a certain percentage of seats in elections for Dalits, but by the mid-1950s, Ambedkar was not satisfied by the rate of implementation of the measures. He therefore resigned from government and began to recruit Dalits to seek rights. In 1956, he encouraged around six million Dalits to convert to Buddhism “as a means of escaping the social stigma of untouchability within the Hindu caste system”. 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. The Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), 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. However, there was an ongoing disagreement over whether to assign OBCs on the basis of caste or on economic criteria.

3. Economic State of Untouchables in India

Since it was thought that the Indian society was highly fragmented into communal groupings that served as centres for social identity, it was the Portuguese who first suggested caste identities in trying to make sense of these groupings. Initially, the system was created to promote the harmonious workings of society. The British expanded on that idea to promote order in Indian society. (Pye 2002: 177). The caste system gradually seemed to have played a large part in creating poverty in India.

Specifically in India, there are still 350 million people who live on less than one dollar-a day (Waldman, 2005). As of 2005, the country ranks 127th out of 177 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), which measures life span, education and living standard. Nearly half of India’s children are undernourished, a level worse than sub-Saharan Africa (Waldman 2005). These horrible conditions are magnified by the fact that India has such a large population (over 1.1 billion people), which is growing at 1.4 percent a year. This adds more competition to the workforce as well as puts extra strains on families by forcing them to provide for more people. Although this is definitely a factor in the continuing poverty in India, the caste system that had been present for hundreds of years had a large role in creating these poverty rates. (World Bank Report 2009: 204).

The caste system that was established in India forced many people who belong to the lower castes into poverty. There are approximately 180 million to 220 million people who are considered to be in the lowest caste in India (Ninian, 2008). These lower castes or Dalits (broken people) are essentially shunned from society (Thekaekara, 2005).

Many are forbidden to hold jobs because their caste may be one of an untouchable, or a person with basically no rights. Out of the 180-220 million Dalits, 40 million are essentially doing slave labour because they must work off the debts of their ancestors (Ninian, 2008). These people are taught to expect nothing in life but to work all day in the sun and hope that someone will buy their

labour or produce, which is in fact uncommon because those of higher castes often refuse to touch anything an untouchable has touched and feared that even a simple glance at an untouchable could pollute their standing in a higher caste position and aid in the eventual downgrade of caste in the next life (Rao 2010: 101). Because of this discrimination and work bondage, it is difficult for many people of a lower caste to have a steady income, therefore keeping them in extreme poverty.

Another rule within the caste system is that no marriage can take place outside one's own caste. This notion has helped in preserving the poverty level in India as well. Although India has supposedly denounced the caste system currently, the people still unofficially go by this marriage rule because of social pressures (Banerjee et al. 2009). The people in lower castes are assigned menial jobs. This helps in explaining why there is so much poverty. These lower caste members are not allowed to move up the career ladder and instead remain poor. (Silva and Hettihewage 2001: 70) It is only by bringing the socially excluded into mainstream society, and ensuring their fundamental human rights in the process that it will be possible to help overcome poverty and deprivation among the disadvantaged in society.

Dr. Ambedkar was dead against the Hindu Caste structure as he was of the view that this structure has been primarily responsible for committing all sorts of atrocities on the various sections of the society particularly the weaker sections, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes. According to Dr. Ambedkar the root of untouchability is the Caste system and the root of the Caste system is religion, the root of the religion attached to varnashram and the root of the varnashram is the Brahminism, the root of Brahminism lies with the political power. (Shabbir 2005: 309)

To Ambedkar real democracy was a social democracy. According to him, it is essential to realize that political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social and economic democracy. He pleaded for the realization of economic and social democracy in India, for political democracy was unreal unless preceded by economic and social democracy. He was against Manu Smirti as it gives a blank Cheque to the Brahmins to commit all sorts of atrocities on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and justify their evil designs.

To restore human dignity of the untouchables in society, he sought them a religion that could free the depressed classes from the bondage of caste hierarchy. For him, a true religion was one that enabled the upliftment of the individual irrespective of caste, creed, sex, etc. But the Hindu religion, instead of according equality to all, treated people, especially the untouchables, unjustly. After analyzing the Varna mode of Hindu social system, he put forward an appropriate alternative by which the untouchables in Indian society could attain socio-political strength. He proposed Buddhism as the best option which, in his opinion, could shoulder the responsibility of the depressed classes: "Buddhism teaches *prajna* (understanding) as against superstition and supernaturalism, *karuna* (love) and *samata* (equality)...neither God nor soul can save the society...it's a revolt against "parasitic luxury". (Kuber 1967).

The Central Government appointed a commission headed by B.P. Mandal to look into the issue. The Mandal Commission report in 1978 concluded that caste was the main contributing factor to social and economic backwardness. 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". People from these disadvantaged groups have largely made their way into government jobs as well as all levels of educational institutions (Sekhon 2000:50).

Even though there is an increasing acceptance of lower-caste individuals, there is also more overt hostility and violence expressed against the lower castes and classes in many parts of India. For example, in parts of Bihar, upper-caste landowners formed a private army in 1994 called the Ranvir Sena to "protect" themselves from the lower castes. Although this was outlawed, the Ranvir Sena had

carried out 20 massacres of Dalits by early 1999. Hostility is also expressed by the many people who support the removal of reserved government jobs and in institutions for technical education, particularly on the part of many from the traditionally higher castes who are economically disadvantaged. Individual achievements, merit, as well as economic position are also still significantly affected by caste (Sekhon 2000:51).

An age-old cultural indifference to the poor and marginalized and the practice of manipulating them politically or by force has resulted in several long-standing rebellions, the most important being the Naxalite or Maoist one among tribal populations; the Kashmir conflagration and the like. Policies to accelerate national growth based on elite economic trickle-down theories have again mostly benefited the rich and the super-rich, and even worse left behind in partial stagnation the huge agricultural sector on which the bulk of the people depend for livelihoods. The added tensions only exacerbate caste and class tensions, and many times result in horrendous superstitious acts such as honour killings of women and the burning of witches. Recently a Brahmin woman journalist was murdered by her own family for wanting to marry a professional colleague of a lower caste! [International Business Times 2010].

4. Caste in Transformation

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. In an independent India the link between caste and occupation has weakened considerably, with the end of the *jajmani* system, allowing for market-based pricing for services rendered by the workers (Commander 1983). Additionally a variety of forces have disrupted the link between caste and occupation. Land reforms transferred landownership to many former share-croppers, most of whom belong to the middle castes (Dantwala 1950); declining incomes of artisans and influx of mass-produced goods have led to declining caste-based occupations among potters, weavers and other artisans who must now rely on manual labour for subsistence (Bayly 1999); and increased requirements for education among modern professions have led to influx of people from a variety of castes into modern occupations (Sharma 1999). (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3379882/>)

There has been decrease in poverty rates from 1950 to 2005, of which a part can be attributed to moving away from the caste system as well as the reservation systems that were created in order to give the lower castes more access to education and jobs which were previously reserved for higher castes. Since the caste system was removed, Dalits were able to have more job opportunities, therefore opening up more income possibilities. Due to higher incomes, many people were able to pull themselves out of poverty. Since Dalits make up 16 percent of India's population, this may account for the large dip in poverty, especially in more recent decades. (World Development Report 2008)

In an analysis of the numerically preponderant dominant castes in south India, noted anthropologist M A Srinivas found that certain peasant castes enjoy numerical superiority as well as political and economic power, although they remain "middle castes" by the *varna* schema (Srinivas 1987). Politics of affirmative action has further strengthened the power of lower castes with reservations in government jobs and higher education (Beteille 1992). Recent studies further document the dilution of the role of caste in shaping economic well-being and suggest that migration, expansion of dalits in non-traditional occupations and changes in agriculture combine to improve the relative position of dalits in recent years (Kapur et al 2010) (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3379882/>)

While few scholars claim a demise of caste, there is an increasing tendency to view caste as a form of ethnicity in which castes compete with each other for power and proudly brandish their own narratives of origin, with even the lowest castes claiming a place in the national history characterised by valour and accomplishment (Narayan 2004). This has been bolstered by political developments in

modern India. Regional political parties have begun emerged as power brokers (Brass 1990) and many of these parties rely on numerically large middle and lower castes for support.

5. Caste and Politics

Caste has influenced the policy-making of the government, for example the policy of reservation in favour of certain castes. Politics of each state, as M.N.Srinivas says, is virtually the politics of confrontation of its 'dominant caste'. There are many political experts who consider the increasing influence of caste in politics as a negative tendency, not helpful in the development of democracy. Experts like D.R. Gadgil and famous sociologist M.N. Srinivas hold this view. Caste feeling also endangers the growth of national sentiments and unity. However, there are commentators and thinkers who hold that the role of caste is essential to give momentum to the political process. American political experts I.Rudolf and S.H. Rudolf in their book, 'Modernity and Tradition' hold the view that caste politics in India has reduced the distinction among castes and has brought about political equality among the members of different castes.

6. Conclusion

Thus the politics of affirmative action have unleashed a stiff competition and led to increased attempts to capture the support of the state. Consequently, the middle and lower castes have staked out a claim to economic and political power that is at par with, if not greater than, the Brahmins and other upper castes (Gupta 2005). This observation points to active political participation on the part of lower castes instead of suggesting a sense of ingrained subordination or sense of disenfranchisement,

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