

Caste System In India: A Critical View Of The Issue

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Caste system in India has a long history and, despite the fact that India as a political state came into the existence on August 15, 1947, the history of casteism which can be traced from the Vedic period when India was known as an age old civilization and the consequent development of a rich culture. Keeping this in view, efforts will be made to cover this long history briefly. Apart from its richness, its history was blotted with the idea of caste discrimination which will be the focus of this article as far as India is concerned.

1.1 CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

The caste system is still very much prevalent in India. This system acts as one of the institutions of cruelty and injustice wherein it is very common for the lower caste people to be ostracized by the upper ones. Although the outward hatred might have lessened with the increase in the rate of literacy but it still acts at the back of the majority of the people's minds as a stigma which has been an obstacle to creating cultural equivalence.

The caste system in India has social, political and cultural roots even today. With the passage of time it has taken on different shapes. The recent Jat agitation and protests by the Patel community show where we have landed. In the era of privatization and globalization it was expected that social mobility will take place and divisions in society will go away. However, the reality remains gloomy. Most people from lower castes are either poor or below poverty line.

In some of the states of India the practice of untouchability seems to exist even today. In Rajasthan a village reportedly has two different taps, one for upper caste people and the other for lower ones. In several other states, the stories of people boycotting food in mid day meals at schools because it gets cooked by people from lower castes. Urbanization has given new dimensions to this cruel system. While in

villages outcasts were forced to live on the periphery, in cities they remain separated even after living within. Reservation policies are not implemented in a manner it should have been. Moreover, there is a lack of concerted efforts for a proper socialization of this section of the society.

Even today there are incidents of honor killings if someone marries in lower caste. Inter-caste marriages are not a reality yet. Even in this modern era, every human being is not being treated equally. Women get subjugated at different levels. There already exists gender discrimination. The caste system and economic deprivation add further levels in this subjugation process. It divides the nation culturally and socially. Hence, there is a need to move ahead of these hindrances in order to develop the society peacefully. An attempt will be made in the following paragraphs to discuss the genesis of the caste system in India.

1.1.1 GENESIS OF CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

There are various theories about the origin of the caste system in India. These include: religious-mystical theories, biological theories and socio-historical theories. All of them have different explanations about the origin of the caste system.

1.1.1.1 Religious Theories

Religious theories explain how the four Varnas were established but they failed to explain how the change from Varna to Jati took place. However, an attempt will be made to look at the change from Varna to Jati at a later stage. According to the Rig Veda, one of the oldest scriptures, the primal man destroyed himself to create a society with various communities. The different Varnas were created from different organs of the body. The Brahmans were created from his head, the Kshatrias from his hands, the Vaishias from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet (For details, see, verse 7 of Purush Sukta). . Hence, the Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created. However, this idea was criticized by Pandit Bishan Narayan Dar, who categorically stated that "It is proved beyond dispute that it (caste system) did not exist during the Vedic period, that is, about 1000 B.C. But still, it appears from the literature of ancient India, that the process of its formation had commenced before the rise of Buddhism, that is, 500 B.C." (Dar, Bishan Narayan, 1888: 4). Hence, he was amongst those who opined that this division of the castes was purely on the ideational level i.e., to run the society by dividing the work.

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1.1.1.2 The Biological Theory

The biological theory claims that all existing things, living or non-living, have three qualities in different proportions. Sattva qualities include wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness etc. Rajas includes qualities like passion, pride, valour etc. The third one is Tamas which includes dullness, stupidity, lack of creativity etc. People with different ratios of these implicit characteristics adopted different types of occupation. It can also be described in terms of the texture of the body which is explained as “different shades of texture or color 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” (Lahiri, R.K., 15).

According to Gita the origin is supposed to be carried out by the Creator himself on the basis of “Guna” (quality) and the “Karma” (action) (Bhagvad Gita, Chapter 4, Verse 13). Hence, as per this theory, the Brahmins inherited Sattva, Kshatriyas and Vaisias have Rajas qualities and the Shudras inherited Tamas qualities. Because of these qualities, they were assigned different kind of works.

1.1.1.3 The social-Historical Theory

The social-historical theory explains the creation of the Varnas, Jatis and of the untouchables. According to this theory, the caste system began with the arrival of the Aryans in India. The fair skinned Aryans arrived in India around 1500 BC. It is believed that they arrived in India from south Europe and north Asia. Before the Aryans there were other communities in India of different origins. Among them were Negrito, Mongoloid, Austroloid and Dravidian. The Negrito has physical features similar to people of Africa. The Mongoloid have Chinese features. The Austroloids have features similar to the aboriginals of Australia. The Dravidians originate from the Mediterranean and they were the largest community in India. When the Aryans arrived in India their main contact was with the Dravidians and the Austroloids. The Aryans disregarded the local cultures. They began conquering and taking control over regions in north India and at the same time pushed the local people southwards or towards the forests and mountains of north India.

Through the literature based on Vedas we can easily find that when the Vedas had been written the caste problem was not so complicated nor any rules had been made for any caste. People were free to perform the work of another caste. If we explore Rigvedic and

other literature of that time carefully, we can find many examples to understand that caste system was not so rigid. The stories of Shabri, bhilini, whose already tasted fruits were eaten by Lord Ram Chander without considering her lower caste. Maharishi Balmiki belonged to Lower caste but he had done a great work like a Brahmin as he composed Ramayana. Lord Krishna was said to be a Kshatriya who guide Arjuna through gospels which were written in the form of Bhagwat Gita which should have been done by a Brahmin. But the same Krishna is said to be scolding Ashvatthama and Kripacharya for joining war despite being Brahmins. Guru Dronacharya was a Brahmin but he was an expert of military warfare like a Kshatriya. Hence, by that time, the loose style of castes was becoming stricter.

So, it can be said that a caste system divided a society into a number of self-contained and completely segregated units (castes), their mutual relations being ritually determined in a graded scale (For details, see, Hutton, J.H., 1977).

1.1.2 Manu and Manusmriti

There is a debate over the period to which Manu belonged and so is the case with his work. Commenting upon this, it is stated, “Max Mueller opines that the Manusmriti was written after the fourth century. G. Buhler, on the other hand, states that the eminent work existed in the second century. Dr. Jolly holds that Manusmriti was composed earlier than Yagnavalkyasmriti which was not composed before the first or second century. K. P. Jayaswal century. Dr. Jolly holds that Manusmriti was composed earlier than Yagnavalkyasmriti which was not composed before the first or second century. K. P. Jayaswal asserts that it was composed in the period lying between two centuries B. C. and two centuries A.D. (Bhagwan, Vishnoo, 1996: 4).

The question of the origin and the spread of the caste system are intertwined. The main cause is that the two questions of spread and of origin are not separated. This is because of the common belief among scholars that the Caste system has either been imposed upon the unproductive or non-dynamic population of India by a law-giver as a divine order or that it has grown according to some law of social growth unique to the Indian people. The writers like Brian K. Smith explained it as “procreative act of the creator god” (For details, see, Smith, Brian K., 1994).

Ambedkar talks about 3 principles on which the caste system was developed. These are: “First one society is divided in four classes known as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. Second one these

four classes inter connected with each other by their status and linked together in an order of graded inequality. The Brahmins are prominent and head of the other three classes. The Kshatriyas comes below the Brahmins but superior and above the Vaishyas and Sudras. The Vaishyas comes below the Brahmin and Kshatriyas but superior and above the Sudras and the Sudras below of all the classes. Third one the occupation of all these four classes is fixed by birth. Learning and teaching is the occupation of Brahmins, fight for the Brahmins is the occupation of Kshatriyas, trader known as Vaishyas and that of the Sudras knows for serves for menials to the three classes of above him” (Ambedkar, B.R., 1979: 257.)

The laws of Manu Smritia terrible setback to the Sudras who were regularly being tortured under the dictators by their compliance. The Priest class accepted and implemented these rules without any delay to make their influence on the rest of the Indian society. Even a king was not able to perform any religious rituals without the permission of a Brahmin. The priest class filled these laws in the mind of the people that if anybody disobeyed these rules, it would be a dishonor to God or will be a sin the consequence of which he has to face in the next life. There was no uniformed penal system during that period. Commenting over this, it was stated, “The penal system, as laid down in the Dharmasastras, was discriminatory. For the same offence, a brahmana offender had to bear a lighter punishment, whereas it became heavier as we descend the caste hierarchy, the heaviest punishment being reserved for the sudra” (Krishan, Y., 1986: 71).

This atrocious caste system became the cause for opposing it and paved the way for the emergence of two new religions, namely, Buddhism and Jainism.

1.1.3 Buddha and the Caste System

Buddhism is one of the 6 philosophies of India. Apart from showing reaction against the unequal system of Hinduism, this philosophy is centred on the Madhyam Marga and non-violence. It is one of the atheist philosophies which deny Vedas as the last word. Responding to the question of one of his disciples about the existence of God, he said that instead of treating a wound, one is asking about how an arrow is made. Hence, the main issue is how to lead life rather than wasting time in tracing how life came into existence.

The Buddha introduced the idea of placing a higher value on morality and the equality of people instead of one’s belonging to a

particular caste. The Buddhist and Jain texts openly challenge the Caste System and the Supremacy of Brahmanas. Both Buddhists and Jainis also challenged to the old Vedic faith and practices hence, the society started taking new turns in terms of posing questions to the traditional practices. Buddha condemned the caste system which he considered unethical. He pointed out that there existed wicked and cruel people as well as virtuous and kind people in every caste. Any person who had committed a crime would be punished accordingly by his karma irrespective of his caste. He said that a person may be considered to have come from a high or low caste according to his good and bad deeds. Therefore, according to the Buddha, it is the good and bad actions of a person and not his birth that should determine his caste. This was a breakaway from the traditional thinking that there is a relationship between virtue and one’s caste. But even today, even in the name of sanskaras, people still relate the behavior of someone with his family lineage.

However, it is a law of nature that when oppression reaches its peak, people revolt against it. Oppressed people raise their voice in protest, refusing to accept the conditions being imposed upon them. Yet, there is no guarantee that their revolutionary stirrings will necessarily succeed. This is precisely what happened in the case of numerous revolutionary movements that emerged against Brahminism in the early period of Indian history. The Shudras were victims of the oppression of the Brahmins and expressed resentment against them. So far as Kshatriyas are concerned, they developed alliance with them and, in the name of maintaining system, supported the atrocities of the Brahmanas and also use the same tool against the Shudras. Yet, a large section of the Kshatriyas became increasingly resentful of Brahminical hegemony and despotism. This was reflected in the emergence of powerful anti-Brahminical movements led by Mahavir and Gautam Buddha, both of them belonged to the ruling Kshatriya clans.

1.1.4 Jainism and Caste in India

Jainism is also one of the 6 Indian philosophies. It is a more rigid philosophy if compared with Buddhism, however, astonishingly, it is the accepted philosophy as a religion. It is not clear if Mahavir, the 24th Tirthankar, was committed to ending untouchability. But, one cannot deny the fact that unlike the Buddha, he did not make a radical critique of the caste system, although, all castes were welcome initially in the Jain fold. It seems that Mahavir did not disagree with the Brahminical theory that birth in a particular caste is determined by actions in one’s

previous life. That is why, it is stated that “The presence of Caste System in the Jain community has often been seen as a problem by the observers and scholars. Jain religion as such does not recognize the castes in the community. It was at later stage that the Jains adopted this feature. Variety of factors can be related to the formation of the caste system among the Jains. In many respects the caste system among the Jains shared similarities with those of the Hindus. Yet by twentieth century certain unique and typical ‘Jain’ features emerged in the Jain castes” (Sanghavi, Hemali, 2013: 196).

Like Buddhism, the Jainism denied the authority of the Vedas. So far as caste system is concerned, it is stated that “Metaphysically Jainism emphasises that all souls are essentially the same. It has been repeatedly stressed that rank depends upon moral qualities rather than purity of birth. In the early period, in fact, there was strong tendency in Jain tradition to counter caste system” (Sanghavi, Hemali, 2013: 196). From the above description, it appears that both Jainism and Buddhism preached equality amongst the people but it did not talk about a radical social equality. Obviously, this approach to equality was hardly sufficient for the overall emancipation of the oppressed castes and for mounting an effective challenge to Brahminism. Yet, the message of equality preached by Mahavir and the Buddha attracted vast numbers of people from the oppressed castes but for retaining their status, the Brahmins left no stone unturned to almost reduced Buddhism to a negligible group and to Jainism, for all practical purposes, reduced to an almost inseparable part of Hinduism.

Gradually, Jainism and, especially, Buddhism managed to gain such popularity that, especially in large parts of northern India, Hinduism was threatened in terms of its existence. Consequently, the centre of Brahmanism shifted to south India. The supporters of Brahmanical philosophy took revenge to bring back the Shudras into their former position of slavery so as to retain their hegemony. They planned all types of conspiracies to finish Jainism and Buddhism and to restore Brahmanical rule by involving themselves in the Buddhist monasteries so that they could be convinced them to re-join them in their fold and made all efforts to destroy the basis of Buddhism. At the same time, they connived with Hindu kings to launch a violent campaign against Buddhists and Jainis. Jain and Buddhist monasteries and temples across the country were brutally destroyed or converted into Hindu shrines. The Brahmin king Pushyamitra Shung announced a huge reward for every head of a Buddhist bhikku brought to him. The tree in Bodh Gaya

under which the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment was cut. Professor R. S. Sharma very rightly notes that it must not be thought that the extermination of Buddhism from India was simply a result of the ideological or missionary counter-offensive of the Brahmanical revivalists. Rather, a key role in this project was played by terror and violence unleashed against Jains and Buddhists on a very large scale, which left the remaining Buddhists with just two alternatives—to either flee to other countries or else to embrace Islam. Majority of the Buddhists left India that is why despite the idea of middle path propounded by Buddha, there is an existence of a measly number of such people.

This kind of description is found in the writings of S.L.Sagar, a well-known Dalit Buddhist scholar, who writes that Hindu revivalist kings ensured the destruction of Buddhism in India by the use of the sword, massacring vast numbers of Buddhists all across the country. Many others were forced to flee to other lands. To reinforce their campaign of hate against the Buddhists, the Brahmins filled their books with scurrilous references to the Buddha and branded the Buddhists as Untouchables. Similar terror tactics were used by Brahmins and their allied Hindu kings against the Jains, as has been noted by numerous scholars.

1.1.5 Bhakti Movement and the Caste System in India

Bhakti means staunch love or devotion to God. It is believed that the devotees of God do not make caste distinctions and hatred and have faith in the brotherhood of all humanity. They are of the view of the unity of God and discard all sorts of ceremonies and rituals. Basing on this understanding, the Bhakti reformers preached equality and brotherhood of human beings. Hence, in sum, it can be said that they were against the disparity on the basis of caste, rituals, sacrifices etc. Due to its impact, a great set back was given to the superiority of the Brahmins in the society. Among these great saints of the Bhakti movement were Namdev, Kabir, Ravidass, Guru Nanak, Tukaram, Dadu, Ghasidas and many others who came forward for the protection of Sudras. These saints did their best through their teachings to remove the untouchability. As they were mere social reformers, they never made any organized system for the removal of caste system. They do not have any social model to bring about equality and unity amongst the castes.

Before discussing the impact of this movement on casteism, it is pertinent to make a brief discussion about the history of the Bhakti movement. Commenting upon the history of the Bhakti movement, it is said, “The cult of Bhakti was first popularized in South India. When

Buddhism had lost its glory and disappeared from the land of its birth ... In South the Shaivite Nayannars and Vaishnavite Alvars spread the cult of Bhakti under Pallavas, Pandyas and Cholas. These saints looked upon religion not as a cold formal worship but as a loving bond based upon the love between the worshipped and worshipper. For their devotional poems they used local languages, Tamil and Telugu. Nath Yogis began to spread throughout northern and central India during the twelfth century onwards but their influence was visible only in 13th century” (Shrivastava, Priyanka Singh, 2013: V). This movement was divided into Saguna and Nirguna and they were using the lingua franca of the common mass of that period hence, were more communicable than the old scriptures which were written either in Sanskrit or Pali.

Different historians tried to find the causes of this movement. The historian like Romila Thapar treats the Bhakti movement as an integrated phenomenon and generalizes about it and taking it with the Tamil Alvar Saints of the 6th and 7th centuries. (For details, see, Thapar, Romila, 1966). R.S. Sharma describes the Bhakti Movement as a reflection of the medieval feudal order. (For details, see, Sharma, R.S., 1974). D.D. Kosambi interpreted Bhakti as unflinching loyalty to God similar to the loyalty that linked together. (For details, see, Kosambi, D.D., 1970). But, Scholars like H.H. Wilson, MonierMonier-Williams and Grierson have argued that Bhakti movement emerged in India under Christian influence. R.G. Bhandarkar was of the view that it was an indigenous movement. (For details, see, Bhandarkar, R.G., 1965. Jadunath Sinha believes that it blossom forth in the Epic and Literature and later devotional literature. (For details, see, Sinha, Jadunath, 1956. The historian like Ishwari Prasad analysed its cause in a very different way and says that Bhakti Movement started against rigidity of Vedic religion. (For details, see, Prasad, Ishwari, 1952). Apart from this, the influence of the Muslims cannot be denied as these people, apart from ruling India, brought forth the idea of equality which can be seen

It was only Guru Nanak the founder of Sikhism who totally rejected the caste system and organised social institutions based on the equality of all castes in the northern India. The idea of the unity of man and unity of God was supplemented by these institutions where people from all castes and creed, high and low were equal participants in the worship and in social activities. The Institution of Dharamsal established by Guru Nanak was perhaps one of the first social organizations in India where people from all castes sat together, worshipped, ate and shared social responsibility equally. The rejection of caste in Sikhism is

not only social oriented but it had economic implications also. Along with naam-simran, sewa, langar, pangat the teachings and practices introduced by Guru Nanak were followed by the later Sikh Gurus consequently the caste System at ideological level was totally discarded in the Sikh society.

In sum, it can be said that the Bhakti movement contributed in the form of devotional literature the idea of parity amongst human beings. It may be the replica of the idea of ‘aham Brahmasmi’ which could not impress the people of that time or the influence of Soofism or even a reaction to the exploitative nature of casteism, it left some imprints on the mind of the people of that age. Unfortunately, these preachings got further diluted in a particular religion or Panth because backward castes of Hindus were forced to launch their own fight through various other social reformists.

1.1.6 Caste System in the Post-Bhakti Movement

Social life and culture in the eighteenth century were viewed as stagnant and influenced by the past. Broadly speaking, there was cultural unity that had developed due to the development of mixed culture over the centuries, but there was no uniformity of culture and social patterns all over the country. Hence, there was the intermingling of both Hindus and Muslims in the society. Despite this intermingling, people were divided by religion, region, tribe, language and caste. Moreover, there was a sharp difference between the classes irrespective of their religious lineage. the social life and culture of the upper classes was different from the life and culture of the lower classes.

So far as the Hindus were concerned, caste was the central feature of their social life. The four Varnas were divided in to various castes and sub-castes. But the nature of these castes varies in nature from one state to another. The caste system rigidly divided people and permanently fixed their place in the social scale. The higher castes, headed by the Brahmins, monopolized all social prestige and privileges as usual. Rules for these castes were very rigid because of which inter-caste marriages were forbidden. There were restrictions on inter-dining among members of different castes and situation became worsened in the sense that the food touched by the lower castes was not accepted by the upper castes. Castes often determined the choice of profession, but with the changes in the administration, exceptions occurred on a large scale. However, all people, irrespective of their higher or lower standards, respected one another’s religion and a spirit of tolerance to the extent that

even harmony prevailed. The mutual relations of Hindus and Muslims were those of brothers among brothers. This was particularly true of the common people in the villages and towns who fully shared one another's joys and sorrows, without taking care of religious affiliations. In other words, it was the composite culture of its time.

So far as Muslims were concerned, they were no less divided by considerations of caste, race, tribe, and status, even though their religion enjoined social equality. A large number of Hindus converted to Islam carrying their caste into the new religion and observing its distinctions, though not as rigidly as before. Moreover, the sharif Muslims consisting of nobles, scholars, priests, and army officers, looked down upon the converted Muslims or the lower class Muslims in a manner similar to that adopted by the higher caste Hindus towards the lower caste Hindus.

Despite all these developments, no exclusive anti-caste movement was visualized during this century. The colonial rule or the Company rule was more interested in using these scattered groups for their own purpose by aligning them with various newly developed groups so that they may run their administration. However, if a critical analysis is made, one cannot deny the fact that the company was using the upper strata, or, may be upper castes of both the religions because of which the gap between various castes remained un-bridged.

It is stated that three factors were to assume importance for the growth of Untouchable movements as the 19th century progressed. The first was the attitude and influence of British officials. The second was the effect of missionary activities on local Untouchable communities. The third was a growing realization among all Indians, including Untouchables that in education lay the key to future political power, as the British government prepared to extend limited representative institutions to Indians themselves (For details, see, Joshi, Barbara R., 1986: 16-20).

The leading role was played by Jotirao Phule who revolted, in 19th century, against the unjust caste system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. Phule was born in 1827 as the son of a gardener in Poona. He did not fall in the trap of the sources of the caste system as he called all old scriptures as legends. He just raised the question of equality and tried to find the uselessness of this division. For him, these "legends may offer some insight into past Indian history, and as products of a group (Brahmans, Aryans) seeking to establish control over the minds of the people" (Omvedt, Gail, 1976: 106). He, instead of rejecting the idea of Dharma, gave the concept of Sarvajanik

Satya Dharma which was humanistic in nature and gave a universalistic outlook to his idea. He was of the strong believer of the world as good in contradiction to the Vedantic concept of the world as an illusion. The orthodox opponent called his views influenced by the Christian missionaries because he got education in the missionary school.

To conclude, it can be said that there were 2 waves of thought during the post-Bhakti movement: one, which was making reform within the Hindu religion and with a view to saving it from the influence of Christianity and others were making endeavors to find solution of the unequal behavior of Hindus by developing institutions like Satyashodhak Samaj.

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