

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF CASTE IN THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The caste system has influenced all the areas like education, economy, politics, marriage, and religion. Since endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste. People are not ready to compromise with endogamy. There is a significant influence of caste from birth to death in the life. People are more influenced by Manusmriti than Indian constitution. Even today also Dalits are last to be employed in days of prosperity and the first to be fired in days of adversity. The caste instead of disappearing in the wake of modernism has become still stronger. This article focuses on how people have become conscious on caste in contemporary society. It also talks about the impact of the caste consciousness.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Dalits and the Democratic Revolution

INTRODUCTION

Caste system has become inseparable aspect of Indian society. There was a prediction that if people were educated then there will not be any space for caste system. But today there are many incidents of caste discrimination among educated. As society is becoming very much advanced in same way caste is also becoming advanced. There is no any field where caste is not practiced. It has influenced all the areas like education, economy, politics, and religion. Since endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste. People are not ready to compromise with endogamy. There is a significant influence of caste from birth to death in the life. Caste system is peculiarly Indian in origin and development. There is no comparable institution elsewhere in the world for the caste system.

The Hindu society is a caste-ridden society. ¹It is divided into a number of segments called 'castes'. It is not a homogeneous society. Castes are groups with a well defined boundary of their own. The status of an individual is determined by his birth not by selection or by accomplishments. No amount of power, prestige and pelf can change the position of man. The membership of the caste is hence unchangeable, unacquirable, inalienable, unattainable and non-transferable. Further, each caste has its own way of life. Each caste has its own customs, traditions, practices and rituals. It has its own informal rules, regulations and procedures. There were caste councils or caste panchayats to regulate the conduct of members also. The caste used to help its member when they were found in distress. Indeed, 'the caste is its own ruler'.

Two aspects of caste inequalities deserve attention: inequality of opportunity and inequality of outcome.² Centuries of caste-based social organisation have left a legacy of inequality in access to land, education, business

¹ Shankar Rao, C.N. 2011, *Sociology Principles of sociology with an introduction to Social Thought*, S Chand and company Ltd. New Delhi

² Thorat, Sukhadeo and Paul Attewell (2007) The Legacy of Social Exclusion: A Correspondence Study of Job Discrimination in India *Economic and Political Weekly*. Volume 42 (41).

ownership and occupation. These processes lead to unequal access to productive resources and thereby lead to material disadvantages. 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.

Even today also Dalits are last to be employed in days of prosperity and the first to be fired in days of adversity. According to Ambedkar there is an utter lack among the Hindus of what the sociologist call "conscious of kind". There is no conscious of kind. In every Hindu the conscious that exists is the conscious of his caste. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste his responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted to his caste. Virtue has become caste ridden and morality has become caste bound. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is an appreciation of virtue but only when the man is a fellow caste man. Caste is a no doubt primarily the breath of the Hindu. It must be recognised that the Hindus observe caste not because they are inhuman or wrongheaded. They observe caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing caste. What is wrong is their religion which has inculcated this notion of caste.³

According to Dr. Ambedkar the caste problem is a vast one, both theoretically and practically.⁴ Practically, it is an institution that portends tremendous consequences. It is a local problem, but one capable of much wider mischief, for "as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem." Indian migrated to other countries are practicing caste system in other countries also. Lower caste people who migrated to other countries are subjected to various kinds of caste discriminations. India is not a homogenous society where there is a level playing field on which everyone can prosper. Caste continues to dominate Indian society. Caste is no doubt primarily the breath of the Hindus.

Today caste organisations are increasing and are making every attempt to obtain the loyalty of their members and to strengthen their caste-identity and solidarity. Though caste Panchayats are dwelling, caste organisations are on the increase.⁵ Some of these organisations have their own written constitutions and managing committees through which they try to preserve some of the caste rules and practices. Caste organisations run their own papers, bulletins, periodicals, monthlies etc., through which they regularly feed information to the members regarding the activities of caste organisations and achievements of caste members. Attempts are also made to increase caste integration through the establishment of caste based trusts and trust units. These trusts arrange annual gatherings, get-togethers, annual dinners, occasional festival celebrations. They provide shelter to the needy members of the caste. They offer scholarships to the poor students of the caste. Some of them run schools, colleges, hostels maternity-homes for caste members and so on. The occupational casts are making determined efforts to improve the economic conditions of caste members by establishing cooperative credit and industrial societies. Caste organisations collect regular subscription from the members, arrange annual conferences, discuss matters and issues affecting caste interests and caste solidarity and organise agitations and protest meetings against the governmental policies if they were to damage caste interests.

Caste and politics have come to affect each other now. Caste has become an inseparable aspect of our politics. In fact, it is tightening its hold on politics. Elections are fought more often on the basis of caste. Selections of candidates,

³ Ambedkar B.R. (1936) *Annihilation of Caste*. Jalandhar: Bhim Patrika

⁴ Ambedkar B.R. 1945, *Castes in India*, Published by *Prabuddha Bharat Pustakalaya*, Nagpur.

⁵ Ibid Shankar Rao.

voting analysis, selection of legislative party leaders, distribution of ministerial portfolios etc., are very much based on caste. Politics of each state, as M.N.Srinivas says, is virtually the politics of confrontation of its 'dominant caste'. Caste consciousness is more dangerous to democracy. Democracy and caste strictly speaking, cannot go together, because caste is based on inequality. Caste feeling also endangers the growth of national sentiments and unity.⁶ After 65 years of independence, India is still controlled by the caste system.

Caste makes political and national unity almost impossible. It encourages its members to have limited group loyalties and commitments. Caste members are more loyal to their caste rather than to the larger national community. One of the most tragic results of the caste system is that it prevents the development of national consciousness among the people. It has facilitated the intrusion of foreign invaders. Even Max Muller too had said that "the Indian never knew the feeling of nationality". Sir Lepen Griffin had recommended to the British Government that it should make use of the instrument of caste to make permanent the British rule in India. He had said that "A nation divided against itself, is the proper description of the Hindu race". In the words of G.S. Ghurye, "It is the spirit of the caste patriotism which engenders opposition to other castes, and creates an unhealthy atmosphere for the growth of national consciousness".⁷ Caste consciousness has brought about segregation and seclusion. Each caste thinks of its own and conveniently forgets the interests of the others. The division of society into caste has given rise to the strong in group feelings and ethnocentrism of the worst type. It has also made people to become fatalistic in their attitude. This fatalism has made people to become conservative in their outlook.

Caste puts limitations on the occupational choice of the members by making occupations almost hereditary. It does not give any opportunity to an able and talented person who has an aptitude for a particular job. It does not believe in the principle of "right man for right occupation". Hence, the result is wrong men are placed to pursue some particular jobs. Both the person and the work suffer because of this. Due to the caste system, society is not able to utilise fully the talents of its members. Caste in this way has constituted a strong barrier to maximum productivity. . Caste has very badly damaged the prospects of geographic mobility and also occupational mobility⁸. Caste is often blamed for having imposed many restrictions on women. For example, it has not encouraged the education of women; it has not given equal participation for them in religious discussion, political activities, business endeavours. It insists on the marriage of girls at an early age and makes them confine themselves to the home and the four walls of the kitchen. It denied women the right to divorce and it put restrictions on the widow remarriages for a very long time.

CONCLUSIONS

The caste system imposes restrictions on marriage. Caste is an endogamous group. Endogamy is a rule of marriage according to which an individual has to marry within his or her group. Each caste is sub-divided into several sub-castes, which are again endogamous. Inter caste marriages were strictly forbidden then. Even at present, inter caste marriages have not become popular. Violation of the rule of endogamy was strictly dealt. This rule of endogamy has resulted in close in-breeding. Some writers like Hutton regard endogamy as the very essence of the caste system.⁹ Today the people who violated the caste rule and got inter caste marriage are living in the fear of honour killing. Even though there are legislation to deal with this issues people are not bothered. People are more influenced by Manusmriti than Indian constitution. Even today choice in marriage, in education, politics, business, food habits, family customs, practices, etc. are

⁶ Ibid, C.N. Shankar Rao,

⁷ G. S. Ghurey 'Caste and Race in India' Page-200

⁸ Ibid, C.N. Shankar Rao,

⁹ Ibid C.N. Shankar Rao.

often dictated by the caste. The caste instead of disappearing in the wake of modernism has become still stronger.

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