

75 YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE AND CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

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Abstract

Caste system is deeply embedded in Indian society. To understand Indian society, one has to have deep understanding of Indian Caste system. Even after 75 years of independence caste system is omnipresent in India society but its contours have been constantly changing. While G S Ghurye (known as father of Indian sociology) looked upon Indian caste structure from structural functional perspective in which its rigidity,

hierarchy, endogamy, restriction on food, occupation based on ascription, segmental division of society were the prominent features. Louis Dumont has focused on the binary dialectical approach in which there is opposition between Brahmin and untouchable; high caste and low caste: spiritual and temporal. Ethics doesn't allow bifurcation in society on the basis of caste but its presence is harsh reality of India. But today caste scenario is changing. These set features of traditional caste system in India have been weakening to some extent. Caste as a system is weakening but ironically caste identity has become stronger these days. Dipankar Gupta has called it an optical illusion and looked it as a temporary phenomenon. Even prominent sociologist like Srinivas and Andre Beteille feels that caste is losing its strength but it is going to stay in India. This paper tries to explore the changing scenario of caste system in India after 75 year of independence.. What features of the caste system is becoming more prominent these days. If caste as a system is weakening then can we assume that caste will evade from Indian society in near future. This paper tries to focus on the nitigrities of caste system in today's India.

Keywords: caste; caste identity; change, illusion; weakening.

Caste system is indispensable part of Indian society. We can't really understand Indian society without looking at the caste structure. Caste system in India has been constantly changing. While G S Ghurye looked upon Indian caste structure from structural functional perspective in which its rigidity, hierarchy, endogamy, restriction on food, occupation based on ascription, segmental division of society were the prominent features. Louis Dumont has focused on the binary dialectical approach in which there is opposition between Brahmin and untouchable; high caste and low caste: spiritual and temporal. But today caste scenario is changing. These set features of traditional caste system in India have been weakening to some extent. Caste as a system is weakening but ironically caste identity has become stronger these days. Dipankar Gupta has called it an optical illusion and looked it as a temporary phenomenon. Even prominent sociologist like Srinivas and Andre Beteille feels that caste is losing its strength but it is going to stay in India. What features of the caste system is becoming more prominent these days. If caste as a system is weakening then can we assume that caste will evade from Indian society in near future. This paper tries to focus on the nitigrities of caste system and its changing perception in modern India.

Even in 21st century of LPG era, when the whole world has become a global village, Indian society can't be imagined without its complex and unique institution of caste system. Its not that caste system is unique to India. In many pockets of the world we have similar people as dalits in India like Osu in Nigeria, BuraKumins in Japan- yet the complexity of caste structure which we see in India is not seen anywhere else in the

world. Although we can see discrimination between different races (white and Black in America) yet caste system in India has its unique feature. Caste system in India has prevailed from early Vedic period and is continuing till date. But changes in the structure of caste system has always been there, may it be early or post Vedic era, medieval era or modern era. In India we come across a special type of social stratification in the form of castes. The word 'caste' owes its origin to the Spanish word 'casta' which means 'breed, race, strain or a complex of hereditary qualities.' The Portuguese applied this term to the classes of people in India known by the name of 'jati'. The English word 'caste' is an adjustment of the original term.

Major sociological trends look at the caste issue in their own ways. The "founding fathers" of sociology are generally taken to be Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Marx understood caste as a form of division of labour connected with the specific Indian form of the Asiatic village, and believed that it would wither away under the impact of industrialisation and modern transport and communications. Durkheim also wrote little on caste; he did not consider himself a specialist in the area, and discussed most often pre-state societies in his major contrasts with modern industrial societies. Among the classics, it was above all the German sociologist Max Weber who dealt with the issue as part of his broad ranging comparative studies. He rejected the "Aryan theory of caste" as such, the inheritance of racial differences and the idea that castes could be explained by deriving upper castes from Aryans, Shudras, Dalits and Adivasis from non-Aryans. But he did believe that the Aryan incursion had led to relations between lighter-skinned conquerors and darker-skinned conquered, and that the role of visibly distinct racial types.

There are various theories about the origin of the caste system in India. Racial theory is supported by some sociologists like G S Ghurye. In *Caste and Race in India* Ghurye (1969) concludes that the Indo Aryans belonged to the larger Indo European stock that dispersed from its homeland after 5000 B.C. He reiterates the racial interpretation of varna as colour and the idea that the dasas described by the Aryans were the dark and snub nosed natives they encountered when they entered India. Caste derives from the varna classification of the early Vedic age, which referred to skin colour and differentiated the Arya and the Dasa.

According to the political theory, caste system is a clever device invented by the Brahmins in order to place themselves on the highest ladder of social hierarchy. According to the occupational theory, the origin of caste system can be found in the nature and quality of social work

performed by the various groups of people. Those professions which were regarded as better and respectable made the persons who performed them superior to those who were engaged in dirty professions. According to the traditional theory, the caste system is of divine origin. There are some references in Vedic literature wherein it is said that castes were created by Brahma the supreme creator, from Brahma head brahmins were created, from arm kshatriya, from thighs vaishyas were created and from the feet shudras.

These are some theories which cast the origin of caste system in India. But change is ever going process which continues to go endlessly. Change is necessary also so that a system could revive and doesn't end. Caste is no exception to that. Caste is indispensable part of Indian society. Without understanding caste system we couldn't understand Indian society. Caste system in India has prevailed from early Vedic period and is continuing till date. But changes in the structure of caste system has always been there, may it be early or post Vedic era, medieval era or modern era.

Various intellectuals have looked upon caste in their own way. B.R Ambedkar considered religion- shastras as the main culprit of discrimination within the caste system. He proposed for inter caste marriages as a solution to annihilate this evil system of discrimination. Gandhi defended the four fold social division in the sense of varnashrama dharma, that is, in the sense that there were certain social functions or duties which were related to one's order or status in society. He approved of a society with functional distinctions based on the different abilities of different members as a way of preserving the stability of social life. According to him, one form of occupation should not be considered superior or inferior to another. He suggested that after removal of untouchability caste system will be purified.

According to GS Ghurye (1979) features of the caste system are segmental division of society, hierarchy, restriction on feeding and social intercourse, lack of choice of occupation and endogamous marriage. Srinivas(1985:3) has listed five features-hierarchy, endogamy, pollution and purity, occupation and commensality. Louis Dumont looked at the whole system in the form of binary opposition like purity and pollution, tradition versus modernity and so on. Bougle (1971:27) finds hereditary, specialisation and reciprocal repulsion as the main characteristics of caste system. I propose to take these indicators as the reference point and intends to analyse the changes that has taken place on these indicators.

Indian society is divided in terms of small segments of social group called caste under which membership is based on ascription. So, segmental division of the society is one of the major characteristic of caste system. Caste membership is an indisputable and unalterable fact by which a man's position in the social structure is wholly determined. The membership of an individual does not undergo any change even if changes in his status, occupation, education, wealth etc. take place.

Caste membership is life long process and that is normally not changeable. Caste is based on ascription. However M N Srinivas(1973) in his book modernisation of Indian tradition has denoted changes in the segmental division of society through Sanskritisation and Westernisation. But even through this process the caste in which one is born is not changed. A Sudra by imitating a Brahmin cannot gain status of a Brahmin. There are many instances of low caste people moving to upper social echelons through the acquisition of political power and control over the state (Pannikar,1955; Thapar,1966). New economic opportunities have also been found to be socially liberating. Jatavas (Chamars) of western UP have elevated their socio economic position by transmuted their erstwhile polluting occupation of skinning of dead animals into modern shoe making industry (Lynch, 1968). Democracy and electoral politics have provided another avenue of group mobility in the post independence period. It's not that only upper caste people are imitated through sanskritisation and westernisation, even upper caste people imitates the culture of lower caste people, the process which has been termed as parochialisation by Srinivas. But if there is adaptability of culture in both ways by upper caste and lower caste people, then one can assume that a time will come when there will be an ideal society where there is no segment within the society with all people following the same culture. But India is known for its unity and diversity. People here has adapting nature, they adapt the new culture without losing their own. Adapting certain traits ensures the feeling of being high in the hierarchy within the particular caste or group. But mere adaptation doesn't ensure rise of status. Segmentation in the society still persists even in the LPG regime.

Hierarchy was one of the prominent feature of caste system in earlier days in which Brahmin was at the apex followed by Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Each caste had its own social position accordingly they follow their way of life; even occupation was fixed according to their caste hierarchy. In modern era rigidity of caste system has weakened and there is sharp decline in the supremacy of Brahmin. Brahmins do not enjoy the same status as it was earlier. Today they cannot impulse their dignity

and importance on other caste as it was in earlier days. It does not mean that caste hierarchy has altogether diminished in today's society. Today also caste members are proud of their caste ideology, which gives salience to their identity. This is more prominent in rural areas than in urban areas. The phenomenon of caste conflict and struggle for power makes quite clear that castes operate in the villages as separate groups, independent of an all-encompassing caste hierarchy. Earlier it was difficult to question the hierarchical relation but now it's not so. Caste groups have been formed both for the upper as well as the lower caste. In Bihar caste senas are examples of that, like ranvir sena for bhumihars and MCC for dalits. Caste conflicts that took place has a different story but what we can see the trend that earlier people in the lowest rung did not dare to question upper caste people. Caste assertion by the dalits which are taking place shows that at least now they are able to show their resilience towards the upper caste. However it has its own political and judicial dimension. So, the hierarchical position which was unquestionable earlier has losen its rigidity

Caste commensalism i.e restriction on feeding and social intercourse. Food habits have defined identities and discrimination has long been associated with perceptions of certain foods being "polluting", "unpurified" and therefore untouchable. The concept of kaccha for lower caste and pucca food for upper caste existed since long back. Higher castes maintained their traditional purity by different food habits. Thus Brahmins took 'Satvik' or 'Pure' food, Kshatriya and Vaishya took 'Royal' food and Shudra took 'Tamsi' food. Each individual caste has its own laws which governed the food habits. There was no restriction against fruit, milk, butter, dry fruit etc. but food was accepted only from the members of own or higher caste. With growing sanskritisation and westernisation people food habit has also changed. All types of food are being consumed by different caste people. There were some Brahmins who turned into vegetarian and there were few dalits who became pure vegetarian. Choice of food now depends more on market and peoples financial status.

It's very interesting to know that in India, one's choice over food does not remain a personal when various caste names have originated from eating habits. For instance, *Mahars* became *Mahars* because they were *mrutahari* (those who eat dead animals, mostly dead cattle or bada gosh/big meat); similarly *musaharis* got their caste name for being rat eaters. In some cases identity was based on food habits.

Today due to some political gain, again there is step forward to restrict choice of food. The present beef ban is not about food habits, but mostly about imposing one's belief system on others. It is a political way

of polarising communities based on their food habits. The four young people were beaten up in Una for skinning a dead cow, the murder of Akhlaq, and the recent lynching in Rajasthan are symptoms of the disease in the minds of the caste Hindus where they rank people on the basis of not only inhuman scriptural beliefs but also on the basis of food habits. The food is a secular affair. Who eats what is their personal matter. Even the state cannot legislate on it, but the archaic state that is deeply running India has the audacity to claim that they can legislate that.

As it is well known that in ancient India there was division of labor according to the expertise. Occupational change was permissible in early Vedic period. Later in the post vedic period **occupational mobility** became rigid and it got attached to the hierarchy of the varna system. Brahmins were priest, Kshatriya were warrior, Vaishya were merchant and Shudra did the menial jobs. The position of castes in the social hierarchy had a clear relationship with their economic status and wellbeing. The Shudra clustered in occupations that were least paid and most degrading in terms of manual labour. The social and occupational restrictions imposed by the hereditary nature of the caste system were the biggest impediment to social mobility among them. The continued occupational linkage with caste contributed in the perpetuation of the caste system.

In an independent India the link between caste and occupation has weakened considerably. The jajmani system has all but vanished, 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 belonged 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). All of these trends would suggest that the link between caste and economic status in modern India is marginal at best. In an analysis of the numerically preponderant dominant castes in south India, noted anthropologist M N 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)

Looking at the traditional linkage between caste and menial labour we find that the occupations connected with the Dalits were mainly unclean and degrading ones, with little or no scope of vertical mobility. However, with the enactment of radical affirmative action policies, providing quotas in state and central legislatures, village governments, the civil service and government-sponsored educational institutions to SCs a progressive shift and dissociation can be seen between occupations and caste status. Such changes albeit slow are the indications of social change. Several studies find clear evidence of occupational mobility among low castes over time. For example, based on fieldwork for around 20 years in Behror, a village in the Western State of Rajasthan, Mendelsohn (1993) finds that with increasing political consciousness, the *Chamars*, engaged in shoe repair and leather work, the *Bhangis* engaged in toilet cleaning and the *Dhanaks* engaged in weaving are no longer willing to perform small traditional work and are increasingly moving out of the village in search of new employment opportunities. The increased modernization and development have created supply and demand of new goods and services. With this, new occupations with skilled and diversified job requirements and division of labour have emerged (Sharma, 1961). The studies have indicated that the impact of caste is declining on new and modern occupations (Karade Jagan, 2009). The dissociation between caste and occupation can be seen relatively more in urban than rural areas because of the concentration of modern occupations in urban areas. The analysis of the process of delinking becomes important to know whether the trend points towards the evolving of a homogeneous, integrated and casteless society.

However, it is quite possible that the social stigma associated with traditional occupations reinforces the continuance of SCs and marginalized groups into the traditional occupations. To a large extent the influence of caste on occupation varies by the level of education and professional skills and unless the community is empowered both educationally and socially, the disparity in society entrenched within the caste-occupation nexus cannot be eliminated. In other occupations we see changes where education and professional skills matter and people of any caste may take up job according to their qualification, but menial jobs like scavenging etc

are still by and large done by the scheduled caste people. As traditional thinking persists even now in India priestly works are still done by the Brahmins. Rituals in marriage or death by and large are still performed by the barbers, dhobi and the Brahmins.

Concept of **purity and pollution** is one of the major aspects of caste system. Purity impurity was subject to the social order. Brahmins were considered as the purest whereas untouchables were the impure. Untouchables were forbidden to enter temple until Gandhian reform. There was temporary and permanent impurity. Temporary impurity like, impurity after child birth, death ceased after certain time and performance of certain rituals but permanent impurity never ceased. It remained for life time. Impurity was also defined according to the social order. Like eating non veg. was considered impure by the Brahmins but there are instances in which it was found that they offered bali of animals and ate it in form of Prasad. Barber, washerman was considered impure but during death rituals they were the one who made affected people pure. Regarding utensils also expensive utensils like copper, silver utensils became pure by sprinkling water but utensils made by mud can never become pure. Untouchability has reduced due to various initiatives taken by Mahatama Gandhi, Baba Bhim Rao Ambedkar and various other leaders. Temporary impurity like, impurity after child birth, death is observed even today. Today the concept of pollution is not obvious and has certainly reduced from the earlier times but still in 21st century there are instances of temple getting polluted by the entry of dalits, water source getting polluted by lower caste people and so on.

Endogamy is one of the prominent feature of caste system in India and it is one of the main factors which has kept caste system rigid in its form. Religious and caste endogamy are two of the most pervasive forms of endogamy in India. Hindu marriage is an important institution and it is based on religion, religious rites and for the pursuit of religion. The practice of monogamy, absence of widow remarriage lack of facility for easy divorce and chastity are regarded as important ideals. Now we see that changes have occurred in the institution of Hindu marriage, because of several factors such as urbanization, industrialization, secularization, modern education, impact of Western culture, and marriage legislations; changes are taking place in Hindu ideals, forms and values of marriage.

There have been some visible changes in the matter of rules of endogamy and exogamy. The rules of Varna, caste and sub-caste endogamy, Gotra and Pravara exogamy have been banned by legislations. The Hindu Marriage Disabilities Removal Act of 1946 allowed marriage

between different subdivisions of the same caste. The Special Marriage Act of 1954 and Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 have enabled marriages between persons of different castes and religions. Arya Samaj Movement has promoted inter-caste marriages. Inter-caste marriages, hitherto considered unthinkable, are now not only permitted but also encouraged. The old tradition of Kanya Dana prohibited the marriage of widows. The remarriage of widows was generally not favoured in Smritis. The Widow Remarriage Act, 1856 allowed widows to remarry if they liked. Apart from this law, the Arya Samaj Movement also favoured widow remarriage.

Despite all the legal provisions made for marriage and the process of modernisation too we still found that people in India by and large follow endogamy. Honour killings and Khap panchayats ensure this. Honour killings in the most horrible form continue in rural India, particularly in Haryana, the state that has become the epicenter of honour killings. In the last week of April, 2018 the country witnessed the brutal murder of a journalist in the name of honour. Nirupama, a 22-year-old journalist was found murdered at her home in Jharkand. Nirupama, hails from a Brahmin family, was in love with a boy from another caste. Even a women journalist was not able to survive this kind of ruthless ethos. Then think, what is the condition of an ordinary village girl in rural India.

Conclusion

There has been functional as well as attitudinal changes in the caste system over the period of time. Earlier, birth was taken as the exclusive basis of social status. But in the changing social scenario, birth no longer constitutes the basis of social prestige. Criteria such as wealth, ability, education, efficiency etc. have become the determinants of social status. Education is no more confined to the higher castes. The significance of caste as an ascriber of status has been relegated to the background. Today occupation is not the hereditary monopoly of any caste any more. One is free to take up any occupation he likes according to his ability and interest. There is an increase in the cases of inter-caste marriage, love-marriage and late-marriage. Unit of commensality has changed especially in urban areas. People dine together in restaurants, offices. Change in the commensality is observed more in urban areas and public sphere but in private people do tend to follow their cultural norms. In rural areas it is more observed. The concept of pollution and purity has also diminished. However importance of certain caste like Brahmin, barber, Dhobi is still there to become ritually pure in marriages or sraddha. Earlier caste Panchayat played the role of a

judicial body but now they are on the decline. Law courts and village factions have taken over most of their roles. Casteism has increased. It has affected political issues and political decisions. Now caste based politics has become more prevalent. So, we may say that functional changes are seen in the caste system but structural continuity still persists. Caste will not wither away as long as its social acceptance and functional utility is being appreciated and made use of. A strong will and inspiration is needed to wash out this evil institution from our society in order to see it developing and progressing on the path of success with its secular structure intact.

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