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# Changing Nature of Caste in 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## Abstract

Caste as a system is embedded in Indian society, which took its birth in the Rig-Vedic period as part of Hindu community who constitute almost 80% of Indian population, dividing the whole community into four Varnas- Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, based upon the nature of occupation they hold and are practiced with. As the time went, 'Jatis' took its birth which are complex social groups within all communities (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian etc.,). Later, the society was segmented into groups whose membership was determined by birth which is now called Caste. Caste here meant-individually of the inborn classes of society, notable by relation amounts of customary pureness or contamination and of social prominence. From its origin as Varna to till today's Caste, the term and nature is undergoing changes and also getting deep rooted in the society which is well reflected in all the sectors- like education, employment, marriage etc., This paper tries to analyze and to bring about the changes seen in the Caste system in India in 21st Century is undergoing and also reflect upon how Caste has become an inevitable element in the individual's life right from Politics-Governance-Education-Employment and as a 'way of life' itself.

**Keywords:** Birth-hereditary, Caste System, Community, Governance, Indian Society, Post Independence.

## Introduction

The word 'caste' derives its meaning derived from the Latin word 'Custus'; it indicates that it is pure. Emile Senart define "caste as a close corporation equipped with a certain traditional and independent organization, including a chief and a council, meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festivals: bound together by common occupations, which relate more particularly to mar-

riage and to food and to questions of ceremonial pollution, and ruling its members by the exercise of jurisdiction, the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the community more felt by the sanction of certain penalties and above all, by final irrevocable exclusion from the group" (Senarte, 1975).

Caste system in Indian society is present from the ancient times, and also has found its references in the ancient texts, which came into being as an occupational-classification, spread its entirety in all the levels and aspects of the Indian society- Social, Political, Economic etc.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with growing levels of urbanization, secular education, the nature and influence of caste has undergone changes but the caste-identity is still prevalent, politics or political system alone cannot be blamed for the caste-violence in the country, it is the minds of the people and the prejudices held around the notion of caste and the attitude towards it needs to be reformed.

### **Origin and History**

There are many theories which trace the origin of caste system in India. Of all it, the religious and biological theories are predominantly in practice. According to these, the primal man indicated in the Rig Veda (One of the four Vedas- sacred texts of Hinduism), desolated himself for creation of a human society- wherein- his head turned into creation of Brahmanas, from his hands were Kshatriyas, from his thighs were the Vaishyas, and the Shudras from his feet.

Based on this descending order, the Varna hierarchy was determined. Brahmanas who were created from head was considered as most powerful of the Varna system and intelligent due to the education and wisdom. The Kshatriyas, created from arms were considered as warrior caste representing the strength and valor. The Vaishyas were traders and merchants representing the character of sacrifice, and hard work. The Shudras who were created from feet and last in the order were meant to serve the other Varnas.

According to the biological theory, all the things existing in the world (with life or life-less) innate three different qualities in different proportions. The three Gunas(qualities)- Sattva, Rajas and Tamas represents mental temper and also are assigned with different colors. Sattva indicates the qualities of wisdom, intelligence, honesty and goodness and is

regarded as White in color. Rajas is red and highlights the qualities such as passion, pride and valor. Tamas is indicated with the color of black and the qualities include dullness, lack of creativity and stupidity. According to this the Brahmans inherit the sattva qualities and are placed in the top position of Varna hierarchy. And below them were the Kshatriyas and the Vaishya who inherit Rajas (means King of territory) qualities, and in the lower rank were the Shudras, who inherited the Tamas qualities.

The appearance of the Aryans from southern Europe and north-east Asia, who were differentiated from the indigenous Indians by their fair skin, is thought to have started the class structure in India. The Aryans entirely ignored their native cultures and began conquering regions throughout north India, pushing the local people into the jungles. They had a social ordering theory known as Varna Vyavastha, which supported the four hierarchical divisions of function in society. They divided into two groups: Rajayana, later changed to Kshatriya, who were soldiers, and Brahmans, who were priests. These clans fought for political power, and the Brahmans eventually took over as the Aryan society's rulers. The early immigrants were dubbed "dark colour" and given the Iranian epithet "Dasa", which meant "enemy". Shudras were the honest labourers who were sandwiched between the outcasts and the three Aryan varnas. The most stringent of the Aryan laws was the expulsion of those Shudras who refused to follow the religious worship that they had devised, resulting in a deliberate attempt by the Brahmin community to remove the aborigines, and therefore the Shudras, from religious and social communion.

Different jats were blended into various Varnas according to their profession after a short period. The opposite communities, such as Greeks, Huns, Scythians, and others, who conquered India and established kingdoms, were amalgamated into the Kshatriyas, and so the communities that existed prior to the entrance of the Aryans were classified as Shudras. As a result, the dalit varna movement emerged here, with groups engaged in polluting vocations being labelled "untouchables".

People in the lower classes who were dissatisfied with oppression resorted to Buddhism in the 6th century because it focuses on individuals rather than society. It completely opposes the class structure that grew in popularity under Ashoka's rule. Priests who claimed to be superior were mocked by him. In the 7th century, another Buddhist group known as Tantrayana absorbed many characteristics of Hinduism and continued to welcome people of all castes.

The flexibility of the class structure was impacted by the entrance of the British. Initially, the British Malay Archipelago Company maintained caste privileges and practices, but as the British population grew, a number of traditional caste-related trades became obsolete as a result of the large influx of manufactured products from the metropolis. Due to newly opened factories, many weavers were forced to return to agriculture, and thus these events changed the occupational structure, but they also affected the social situations between the castes, and the three pillars of India's class structure were directly undermined by British administration.

### **Theories of Caste System**

Ketkar expresses in his view on "caste as 'a group' consists two significant features: 1) membership is confined to those born members and includes all persons so born; 2) members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group".

Class structure in India is discussed within the context of Indological view which is explained from different points of view. Indologists have explained it from the scriptural point, while Anthropologists from the traditional point of view. Whereas, Sociologists have argued that it is from the stratification point of view. Hence, essential ideas of class structure were developed.

'The theory of caste' explains by the Ketkar's point of view that the expression "origin of caste" has no meaning, however endogamy, hereditary occupation and commensality boundaries have their beginnings with the association of purity and impurity through class structure. Using psychological explanation of why endogamy was practiced, also he has given certain reasons, like initially due to emotional state of understanding and adoration, secondly, to ensure purity of blood and finally, for the reason that it makes collective modification easier. Ketkar also points out that the sense of superiority and inferiority comes from the practice of endogamy. Superior caste members don't marry people from inferior caste/s. Therefore, endogamy gave birth to psychological hierarchy or the sense of superiority and inferiority.

Prejudices of people from the earliest tribal society, he claims, hastened the emergence of castes in the system. Due to the adoption of endogamy practices, Indian tribes from various regions, later referred to as converted or developed tribes, were unable to mix as effectively as European tribes.

Instead, they got into a fight over territorial disputes. As a result, members of one tribal group tried to avoid forming bonds with others. In keeping with Ketkar's view, the Indian caste system was created by native Dravidians and later adopted by semi-civilized Aryans.

We can't ignore the influence of spiritual and socio-political variables in the formation of the class structure. Within the origin of caste, the "Brahmin's view of ceremonial purity or impurity, as well as racial superiority or inferiority, were decisive considerations. Senart's caste theory recognized that caste is the normal progression of old Aryan institutions that took on a peculiar form due to the peculiar conditions in India. The 'Varna' division method of forming class structure dates back to the Indo-European period of history as a fourfold division of society found in both Persia and Rig Vedic India. He remarked that Indians, Greeks, and Romans are all Aryans and belong to the oldest religion, and that they share some characteristics such as gotra in an exogamous group in India, phratia in Greece, and gens in Rome limited their marriages to their groupings. He wrote in his work that there is no trace of caste structure in Vedic hymns", hence the beginning of the caste system can be found in Brahman literature.

These theories attempted to research how with changing nature of the society the practice of class structure became more rigid resulting into stratification of the society. It also questioned that the invasion from the foreigners (Aryans) resulted in uprooting the indigenous natives from their own land resulting in complete denial of socio-economic also political rights to them.

### **Democratic Governance**

The founding father of constitution of India, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his final speech in Constituent Assembly, stresses on the need to work towards building and establishing not only political democracy, but also social democracy (Ambedkar, 1946).

In order to achieve democracy not just in fact but in practice, India needs to strive upon three things:

For accomplishment of social and economic objectives, the country must hold onto constitutional methods, and give up all revolutionary and unconstitutional methods including non-cooperation, civil disobedience and Satyagraha. And according to him, with the availability of constitutional methods, these methods needs to abandon as they are nothing but the

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'grammar of anarchy'.

For the maintenance of Democracy, quoting the Irish Patriot Daniel O'Connell- "There is nothing wrong in being grateful to great men who have rendered life-long services to the country. But there are limits to gratefulness, no man can be grateful at the cost of his honour, no woman can be grateful at the cost of her chastity and no nation can be grateful at the cost of its liberty"-Ambedkar cautioned the country not to Hero-worship as 'bhakti' in politics would be a sure road to dictatorship.

Ambedkar states that people of the country must try for establishing Social Democracy, based upon the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity, which in turn should become principle of everyone's life.

He remarked in his speech that presence of castes in Indian society is driving back the notion of considering the India as a nation, one must always not forget the presence of caste system in India and everyone should make a visible attempt to overcome the inequalities which could be the class system and the absence of presence of Fraternity Principle in the Indian society. And one should not forget that with these inequalities, India cannot be sensed as a nation in social or psychological sense, and one must always strive to end these inequalities to realize the goal of making India a Nation.

### **Caste and Politics- System of Quotas**

Rajni Kothari in his work 'Caste in Indian Politics', evaluated 'vote of castes' and its influence on political system through scrutinizing the relationship between caste and politics. He indicated- government patronage, education and expanding voting numbers as factors through which caste system has resulted in affecting and influencing the democratic politics in the country.

New institutions and leadership which came into existence due to expansion of politics and population offered economic opportunities, positions of power and administrative patronage which in turn drew caste into politics. This involvement made the caste system available to the leadership and institutions making it as an ideological and structural basis for political mobilization and alter the local opinions and employ castes to attain political and economic gains (Kothari, 1973).

The introduction of state support to the oppressed caste groups in the



form of protective discrimination has its base in confrontational identity politics raised or formed on caste. This in turn was strengthened with the institutionalization of political consciousness based on the caste identities, resulted in birth of caste-based political parties, which was based on the agenda of protecting and upholding the interests of specific groups including the castes. As a result, political parties framed on the lines of caste- BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) - upper caste dominated, BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) or the SP (Samajwadi Party) - lower caste dominated, and also left parties to some extent followed the caste-pattern in order to gain in electoral politics. This politicization of caste based confrontational identity politics democratized strengthened the Indian society into more caste-based and also have sabotaged the growth and development of the caste-based organizations.

In 1990, when V P Singh's administration intended to follow the recommendations of the Mandal Commission (or Socially and Economically Backward Commission founded in 1979, report delivered in 1983), the caste system became increasingly visible in Indian politics. "The Commission's report recommended that members of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) be granted 27 percent reservations" under the Central government and public sector undertakings (government jobs and educational institutions), 15 percent for Scheduled Castes people, and 7.5 percent for Scheduled Tribes or tribal (aborigine) people, bringing the total number of reservations to 49 percent in the political field.

The intention of National Front Government was opposed by all corners of country, including opposition political parties, students etc.

But even before the Mandal Commission's report was submitted, the states like Karnataka had already reserved 48% of quota to the socially and economically backward classes including OBCs, SCs and STs (India, 1983). In Tamilnadu, the caste based reservations totals to 69% after the amendment is brought to the constitution to exceed 50% reservation quota (which is still under litigation in Supreme Court).

After that, in Indian governance different ruling coalitions- UPA, NDA etc., announced different quotas for OBCs, SCs and ST, which makes caste-based vote-bank politics more visible and evident in Indian politics.

### **Constitutional Provisions**

The historical injustices against the lower ranks of caste system was high-

lighted and an attempt was made to rectify those mistakes through the constituent assembly and the makers of Constitution in 1950, which safeguarded the rights and strengthened the visibility and presence through Fundamental Rights, reservation quotas and introduced the principle of Protective Discrimination in the form of Directive Principles of State Policy.

And as time proceeded, reservation quotas in government jobs and educational institutions were altered and certain laws, acts were passed in order to protect and upgrade the lives of the lower castes referred under the nomenclature of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Protection under Part III of the Constitution- Fundamental Rights are;

“The State shall not deny to a person equality before the law or equal protection of the laws within the territory of India,” says Article 14.

Article 15 (1) “The State shall not discriminate against any citizen solely on the basis of faith, race, caste, gender, place of birth, or any combination of these factors”.

Article 15 (2) No citizen shall be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction, or condition based solely on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, or any combination of these factors, with respect to: (a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels, and places of public entertainment; or (b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads, and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly with State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public”.

Articles 15 (4) and 15 (5) authorize the state to provide special accommodations in educational institutions for socially and economically disadvantaged groups (OBCs, SCs, and STs).

Article 16: “Equality of opportunity in the public sector”.

Articles 16 (4), 16 (4A), and 16 (4B) “allow states to set aside seats in government jobs for OBCs, SCs, and STs”.

Article 17: Abolition of Untouchability- The term “untouchability” is forbidden in any form. Any disability imposed as a result of “Untouchability” will be treated as a criminal offence that will be prosecuted’.

Article 46 of the DPSP (Directive Principles of State Policy) strives to promote education and economic interests for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and other poorer groups of society.

Article 335 states, "In making appointments to services and posts in relation to the activities of the Union or of a State, the demands of members of the SCs and STs shall be taken into consideration, commensurate with the maintenance of administrative efficiency".

Article 243D and Article 340T-Provides for reservation in the Local self-government organizations.

Article 330- provides for the reservation of seats (to be made on the population basis) in the Lok Sabha for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Article 332- "provides for the reservation of seats in Legislative assemblies of State".

All these rights and reservations are meant to remove the hurdles and create for betterment of the lives of the deprived castes and classes in the society. But gradually, this has become an incentive to seek and an element of caste-based politics.

### **Acts that Ban Caste System**

To actively promote social justice and ensure the implementation of constitutional safeguards, Parliament (and other government institutions) has passed laws in the shape of Acts and Amendments to the Constitution from time to time to frustrate and terminate discriminatory acts against lower castes.

"The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Bill was introduced in 2013; the Prevention of Atrocities Act was passed in 1989; and the Untouchability (Offenses) Act was passed in 1955. It was renamed the Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976".

The Constitutional provisions and the quota system were aimed at achieving social fairness and, as a result, eliminating exploitation of the lower castes and integrating them into the mainstream of politics and the economy. To a significant extent, these have not been helpful in eradicating caste discrimination or improving the lives of those at the bottom of the caste structure.

## Caste in Employment and Education

According to NSSO statistics from 2011-12, 63 percent of SCs work as daily labourers. This is substantially greater than other social groups' values. Other Backward Classes (OBCs) accounted for 44%, upper castes accounted for 42%, and the rest accounted for 46%. Even among daily wage workers, SCs had a higher proportion of casual wage workers, indicating greater job insecurity and lower pay. SCs had a 47 percent share of casual wage labour, compared to one-third for OBC/higher caste/rest and the all-India average of one-third. In reality, SCs account for about a third of all casual workers in the country, more than double their population share of 16%.

SCs confront disadvantages that go beyond their excessive reliance on wage labour. Because of caste-based job discrimination, SCs have a higher "unemployment rate than the general population. According to the most recent NSSO data, the unemployment rate for SCs was 1.7 percentage points higher than the national average. Since the 1990s, SCs have had the highest unemployment rate in India".

According to a 2010 study by Thorat and Attewell, SCs had a 67 percent lower likelihood of being called for an interview than upper caste applicants (about 4800 each). What's more alarming is that a large percentage of lower-qualified high castes (undergraduates) received more calls than the better qualified SCs (post-graduates).

The eminent economists like Ashwani Deshpande who have observed "discrimination faced by SCs in hiring in urban areas. Due to job discrimination against SCs, there is a high rate of unemployment, low income, and poverty. In 2011-12, for example, over a third of SCs were poor, compared to 20% of OBCs and 9% of higher castes".

In the words of Sukhdeo Thorat, (emeritus professor of JNU) this "discrimination in employment not only results in high poverty among SCs, it also hampers economic growth in private economy. Discrimination on the basis of caste, leads to an imperfect and segmented labour market. This reduces overall productivity". This also been highlighted by EMS Namboodiripad in his 'History of Indian Freedom Struggle', where he said the varna (caste) system made the progress of commodity production slower than in the slave system. This calls for affirmative action policies for securing non-discriminatory access to SCs in hiring.

According to the 2011 education census report indicates about 43 percent of the Scheduled Caste population and 50 percent of the Scheduled Tribe population is not literate compared to non-SC/ST (34%). The dream of “ensuring inclusive and quality education for all” still remains that – a distant dream. Data on [dropout rates](#) continues to show that as we move higher up on the educational level, more scheduled caste and scheduled tribe students drop out than students from upper castes.

According to the data obtained from AICTE (December 2017)- “of the 15.5 lakh BE/BTech seats in 3,291 engineering colleges across the country, over half-51% were vacant, and 153 engineering colleges have had 70% vacant seats in the last five years”, this is the direct result of privatization in higher education, where private institutes fee’s structure is not affordable to the poorest students whose major category is constituted of SC’s and ST’s. This whole neo-liberal structure of education has demolished the ideal-‘knowledge a public good’.

In spite of presence of policies, anti-discrimination laws, and the constitution, still the country is not successful in bringing an end to the caste discrimination even in the field of education which is considered as basis for building an Ideal Society.

### **Caste –A way of life**

Caste in present era has moved from being a performer of ritualistic function to a regulator of social, economic and political behaviors and decisions of individuals. In the words of Ambedkar- “Caste may be bad. Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man’s inhumanity to man. All the same, it must be recognized that the Hindus observe Caste not because they are inhuman or wrong-headed. They observe Caste because they are deeply religious.”

From the birth of an individual till the death, Caste is present in every walk of life, sometimes it could be second-name attached, quotas claimed for education or employment reserved for certain categories or it being a prominent factor in marriages, and as vote-bank politics.

Compared to rural areas, one can claim the notion of Caste has diminished in urban areas, but still in the case of marriages, the presence is felt, and if the caste-boundary is crossed, in few cases it has led to ‘Honor-Killings’. And there is requirement of strict laws to deal such in-human acts along with an educative awareness to get rid of narrow-mindedness

which is present in the psychology of beings towards Caste system and lower castes in particular, which is well defined by Dr. B R Ambedkar- "Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind".

Further case studies would elaborate how Caste is very much a defining aspect of India.

### **Case study 1**

In the article *Caste Matters* author Suraj Yengde: "There is a new class of global Brahmin of each society" describes the atrocities and discriminations Dalits face together as a community. The scholar insists how Brahmin participation in the anti-caste movement would be meaningful. He criticizes how post-colonial modernity has led to emergence of new class of people adhered to same way of living including food, music and hums. This group according to him is the new class "global Brahmin". The researcher explored the terms like Dalit power, Dalit Rationality and Dalit patriotism to make the world aware of humanity for Dalits against Brahminical caste system. He added the capacity to ask is the one way to challenge the norms of nationalism and to work with rationalism when scientific temper is lost in dogmatism. According to him, Dalit power means a proper establishment of various ways and ideologies where a person from different ideologies, business and merchandize comes together to form something unique and noble as a community.

### **Case study 2**

In an article in Indian express "NCRB Data, 2016: Most atrocities against Dalits involve crimes against women, most cases in Bengaluru". The 2016 NCRB report tabulated city-wise data on atrocities against Dalits shows major crimes against Dalits involves violation of women including atrocities against Schedule Caste followed by rapes with 6.2% during 2016. This report also focuses on how different states practices atrocities against the Dalits. Lucknow and Uttar Pradesh top the list followed by Patna, Jaipur, Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh whereas as per as the data Kolkata, Chennai and Coimbatore have witnessed the least number of cases of atrocities in the 2016. Conversely in states like Jaipur and Hyderabad cases of atrocities have declined.

From above two articles we can conclude that how caste system has com-

plicated the entire egalitarian functioning of the society resulting in atrocities against the lower ranked community in the system. Women are made victims of rapes even in metropolitan cities like Bengaluru which is quite shocking and exposes us to the socially disgraceful acts of existence. This violence caused against them is anti- democratic and exist within a suffocating structure.

## **Conclusion**

For European philosophers and even Indian writers like Louis Dumont, Dipanker Gupta, Pauline Kolenda, Rajni Kothari, M N Srinivas, and others, the construction of Caste and the Caste system in India has been a centralized Western-gaze. Colonial India and British rulers of India re-configured Indian society based on their referential notions based on their experience of Indian culture based on the then-dominant Caste and Varna systems, which were then internalized in Manu dharma (Codes of Manu), Purushasukta (Hymn of the Primordial Being), Jatakas (Buddhist Tales), and Upanishads (Sacred Verses of Hindu Philosophy), and these were also.

The source and structure of explanation of India, its social system and its people were the discourses of the texts and models which were predominantly Western-centric. Louis Dumont, reveals that “Caste system centralized Indian society through structuring the notion of ‘caste’, invoking the fluid notion of ‘hierarchy’, ‘purity’, ‘impurity’ and ‘self-reliance’. Colonial construct of Indian caste system also indicated the classical analysis of the Indian society on the basis of the appropriated culture, religion, social system that prevailed during the medieval Europe. The Colonial accounts represented the Caste as ‘casting away’ in itself or as a process of ‘Othering’ among the Castes, or sometimes, they contested and appropriated the central dilemmas of caste reality in Indian society”. As Partha Chatterjee affirms, Indian reflections on caste system- as an exclusive Indian terrain also bear a similar kind of interrogation of Caste and the reality of Indian society.

Although the Welfare politics of the post-independent India is noted for the emancipatory wave of ‘social justice’, ‘reformatory advocacies’, ‘reservation policies’, ‘quota-system’ etc., the Social Science Research and even the educational policies are being continued with the colonial frameworks appropriated by the colonizers and the colonized. Similarly, the growth of Caste-politics in post-independent era is hegemonically structured with the Western-centric framework. This amplifies the necessity to interrogate

the caste-system of India beyond Western-lens and develop an indigenous perspective to locate the underlying limitations of such assumptions and meaningful constructs of Caste and Indian Politics.

In modern India it may appear that Caste has a minimal role to play but the social, economic, political, and legal frameworks reveal that this system remains complex as ever. The nature of the Caste might undergo changes from being too rigid to relax social practices, or might gain economic prominence or reduce its political-play. But Caste would prevail in Indian society as long as there is no change in the 'state of mind' of the individuals.

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