

## EXISTENCE OF CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA: CHALLENGES OF MODERN SOCIETY AND CHANGES

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### *Abstract*

*One of the important structural elements of the Hindu society in India is caste. In Indian society Casteism continues to survive as an important aspect of our society. In Indian politics and society caste plays a vital role as the political behavior of the mass, it is often inclined by caste consideration. Andre Beteille aptly said, "Caste enters much more directly in to the composition of political elites at the state level". This paper as entitled- "Existence of Caste System in India - Challenges of Modern Society and Changes", defines caste system, and its prevalent in Indian society, its structures and other concerns related to it and it focuses on the characteristics of caste which are still continuing today, This paper also emphasizes on various Indian rational interrogations which talked about caste as an evil and need to be destroyed and eliminated from our society.*

**Key-Words:** Caste, Society, Change.

In this paper an effort has been made to bring the light of deep existence and changing of caste system in Indian society and moreover the kind of importance that given to castism. In our communities, groups and society the role that one's caste plays in our day to day life because humans are social animals, therefore it is necessary for them to live together. Even during the beginning of the history of mankind, they started to live together. Every social group or institution is embedded with the feeling of 'caste solidarity', whether it political institution, or the so called "sacred" institution of marriage. An element of social exclusiveness has attached with caste. The laws of religion, the laws of the land, and the laws of honour, are all united and consolidated in one, and bind a man eternally to the rules of what is called his caste." - Edmund Burke (Dirks, 2002).

### *Origin of Caste System*

It is not ascertained about the origin of caste system come into existence in India. The history of Indo-Aryan literature is available from our Vedas and Upanishads that throw the deep light on the origin of caste system. This is what our scriptures like *Rig-Veda* psalm of *Purushasookta* preserved the most primitive reference to chaturvarna. From the study which

we know the great Purusha's mouth became the Brahmin. His two arms were made into the Rajanya (Kshatriya). His thigh turned into Vaishyas and from his two feet, the Shudras were born. The Taittiriya Samhita ascribed the origin of Chaturvarnata to the limbs of the creator and interpreted it theologically. It provides divine justification for their functional division. Also in Gita, Lord Krishna says the fourfold order was created by him on the basis of quality and action. Thus, the Hindu Dharma Sastras take caste for granted. All Puranas assume the existence of caste and if a person commits evil acts he will be born in a low caste or even as an animal. (Panicker, K. M. 1995). The system of caste in India is commonly based on the occupational pattern of different groups. The general form, caste is social organization in India and it varies from the social groups. A noted Sociologist G.S. Ghurye observes: 'Caste in India is a Brahman child of the Indo-Aryan culture cradled in the land of the Ganga and Yamuna and hence transferred to other parts of the country. (Ghurye GS 1972). The caste is the most salient feature of the Hindu social structure. It divides and stratifies the Hindu society into a number of sub-groups, separate and yet integrated. 'In India, the caste system comprises a large number of groups whose mutual relations are of an extremely complex in nature. (Andre' Be'teille 1992)

However, there are not similar opinions among historians and scholars with regard to the origin of caste system, though it is admitted that it was a very ancient institution. As part of a social system, the word 'caste' refers to stratification along lines of descent. In a caste-ridden society an individual is born into a given social category and remains there for life. The caste system existed since when the society was composed of birth-ascribed hierarchically ordered and culturally distinct groups. (Rajani Kothari (1970).

### ***Word Caste Initially Practiced***

The word 'caste' has been derived from the Portuguese term 'casta', meaning race, breed, family or lineage. The first used 'caste' word by the Portuguese to symbolize the social classification in India, they credit for this word as they thought that the system was meant to preserve the purity of blood. There are three elements in caste word is: repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization. Dirks suggested that, it was under the British that "caste" became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all "systematizing" India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. In short, colonialism made caste what it is today. As Dirks says that when thinking of India it is hard not to think of caste. "In comparative sociology and in common parlance alike, caste has become a central symbol for India, indexing it as fundamentally different from other places as well as expressing its essence.

### ***Indian Tradition Epic Defined Caste System***

Word caste has been seen as omnipresent in Indian history, caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and it is seen today as the major threat to Indian modernity. If we are to understand India properly, and by implication if we are to understand India's other core symbol- Hinduism- we must understand caste, whether we admire or revile it" (Dirks, 2002). In view of the various opinions it is said that caste came to India after the arrival of British, but it is not right so because caste was surviving even before British arrived, they only categorized it in a systematic way. There can be several theories related to the evolution of caste system in India the origin about the Indian caste structure has many theories behind it. Some of them have connection with religious, while others are biological. According to religious theories enlighten that according to the Rig-Veda, which is an ancient Hindu epic, the ancient man, Purush, destroyed himself to create a human society and the different part of his body created the four different varnas. The Brahmins were from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and Shudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created.

### ***Years Ago Theory of Casteism***

Another faith that would lead us to that the caste system arose with the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 B.C. The Aryans came from southern Europe and northern Asia with fair skin that compared with the indigenous natives in India. When Aryans arrived, their foremost contact was with the Dravidians. The Aryans completely disregarded their local cultures and commenced conquering regions everywhere north India. Traditionally, the class structure of stratification was legitimized through classical Hindu religious texts, especially as interpreted by Brahmins. The caste system was rationalized in ancient India on various grounds. One of them was the justification in the Vedas. Initially there have been only four orders, which afterwards came to be referred to as four varnas and Jatis are endogamous groups which are more than 1000 in number. There was nothing as low or high Varna in Vedic period. Division of society was there according to division of labour but not discrimination based. It was later in Brahmanic period (230 B.C to 700 A.D) that four varnas came to be arranged hierarchically. Caste was not Varna but in due course of its development, it came to be associated with it and was seen equivalent to it. Normally, the English speaking Indians refer to their caste as their community.

The word Jati, most frequently used, because the Hindu word for caste has several meanings. Bhargava's Standard Hindu-English Dictionary translates *Jatis* "Birth, Life, Race, Sex, Lineage, Parentage, State, Tribe, Caste, Sect, Genes, Species, Nature, Family, Sort, Kind, Name, Order, Nation, Section, Peoples, Clan, Community, and Breed". The anthropological term also suggests that it is a group into which one is born during which one has parents as well as linear ancestors. The term *Jati* includes all the three transformations, viz. a tribe, caste and community. According to Andre Beteille, the word *Jati* may be used to refer to linguistic, regional and religious categories of persons, when the term *Jati* is used in a caste context Andre Beteille states that it might refer to a caste association. Thus, *Jati*, the Hindu word is used synonymously with the anthropological term sub-caste to mean an endogamous large scale dissent group. The term caste is generally used to refer to a set of *Jatis*, sharing the same name, occupation and ethnic history. <sup>15</sup>(Andre Beteille 1969).

### ***Social Scientists Attempt to Analyze Caste System***

A number of Indian, British and American Social Scientists (1940s) have attempted to analyze the Indian caste system. The first important feature is the collection of the information about the caste system by participant observation in the life of an Indian community, usually in a village. The second feature focuses upon life as it is being lived at present supplemented by historical information which has been recorded in gazetteers or other documents of local region.

It is seen that caste is present not only in India, but also in other parts of Asia also but caste divisions and differences are not as extremely sharp in these countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh as in India. Unlike India, there has been no recognition of their special situation as socially excluded and deprived (Jodhka and Shah, 2010). As Dipankar Gupta mentions that the "book view" of the caste system is derived largely from sacerdotal Hindu texts, members of the upper castes find it extremely agreeable. It justifies the caste system in terms of purity and pollution, giving the impression that all castes-high and low- abide by this single, overarching textual hierarchy. Several Hindu texts also imply, when they do not say so bluntly, that a person's position is determined by his or her karma. In other words, the fact that one is born into a certain caste is an outcome of one's past deeds in an earlier incarnation. Thus members of high caste have no reason to feel that they are being unduly over privileged, as the perks of their caste status in this life are just rewards for their good deeds in their past ones. That book view has received tremendous ovation in literary circles is not surprising. As

the authors of these texts and their believers come from upper castes, what they say and write quickly passes on to the academic work. There are contrasting views and debates on whether “caste” in the strict sense of the term does exist in contemporary India, or it has withered away. There are various points of views on the issue. There are two views regarding the present and future of the caste system. One view is that caste system is fast changing and is weakening though it is not being disintegrated or abolished. To this school of thought, belonged early scholars of the 1950s, 60s and 70s like D.N Majumdar, Gardner Murphy, Pauline Kolenda and Max Weber and scholars of 1980s and 1990s like R.K Mukherjee, M.N Srinivas among others. The other view is that caste system is not transforming itself fast and the changes are gradual. To this school belonged scholars like G.S. Ghurye, I.P Desai, K.M Kapadia, Louis Dumont, Andre Beteille, Yogendra Singh and others. It has become truism today that caste in India has not disappeared in direct proportion to the spread of modern technology. In the rural areas, caste, despite many modifications, is still persisting in its traditional form. In the contemporary urban-based order, caste is persisting in the form of complex networks of interest groups preserved through endogamy and legitimized by religion. In both forms, caste remains an extremely viable social institution and thus appears to be an instance where simultaneously old uses have been retained and new ones found for a traditional Asian social structure.

### ***Unity and Diversity in Chaturvarna***

India presents a unique spectacle of unity and diversity. It is because it has not only a few dominant religious groups on the horizontal plane, but also an array of caste groups on a vertical dimension. Similar to castes among Hindus, several castes among other religious groups are also found. These caste groups are placed on a hierarchical plane exhibiting a paramedical structure and closely knit together. On an exhaustive discussion in the preceding pages, it may be pointed out that the caste system is traced from ancient Indian tradition in terms of Chaturvarna falling into four groups viz., Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra on functional basis.

### ***Significance of Caste System***

In middle-ages, in its changing scenario the significance of caste system the Varna system was metamorphosed into caste system. It is a typical hierarchical system that promoted division of labour which led to division of labourers. Thus this second process is unique to caste system. Castes of sudras were further divided into touchable

and untouchables based on wrong theory of purity and impurity. An Indian social activist mahatma Joti Rao Phule redefined this division of Bahujans as two categories of producer sudras and ati-sudras (Dalits). In the subsequent periods in the form of Bakti movements many social revolts surfaced for the cause of Sudras and Atisudras.

### ***Baba Sahib and Gandhi Ji View's on Castism***

According to Ambedkar the Hindu social order was supported on the principles of graded inequality, according to him there was no liberty, equality and fraternity, stability of occupations and fixation of people within their respective classes. Ambedkar defined the Hindu social order as a ladder of castes placed one above the other. To sum it up, it can be said that Gandhi and Ambedkar represent two aspects of one truth, neither of which can be ignored.

However, B.R. Ambedkar considered these four 'varnas' of the Hindu society as the classes and said that sub-division of a society into such classes was natural but the unnatural thing about these sub-divisions is that they have lost the open door character of the class system and have become self-enclosed units called castes. Ambedkar proposed for inter caste marriages as a solution to annihilate this evil system of discrimination. In their view it could have been a solvable way to unite our society. He said that "people observe caste because they are deeply religious. People are not wrong in observing caste. In my view, what is wrong is their religion, which has inculcated this notion of caste." And hence his remedy to annihilate caste system is to "destroy the belief in the sanctity of the Shastras... You must destroy religion of the Shrutis and the Smritis." He was of the view that we should make our political democracy a social democracy as well. He said that the outcaste is a by-product of the caste system, there will be outcaste as long as there are castes. And nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of caste system.

In Gandhian views they defended the four fold social separation in the sense of varnasramadharma, 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. The Caste system has struck such deep roots in India, that, Gandhi said; "it will be far more advisable to try to improve it rather uproot it." To him, division of people into strata's was the best possible adjustment for social stability and progress.

Gandhi talked about caste as an ugly growth of a body or like weeds of a crop for which one will not destroy whole body for the sake of it. Therefore, according to him, only untouchability has to be removed and then caste system will be purified because for him, it was the duty aspect rather than ranking aspect which provided a functional legitimacy to the Varna system. The word 'Dalit' came to light in the 1930s though it is not known who exactly used the word and when. This term was found in a Marathi daily "Dalit Bandu" which was founded in 1930. The word was also used by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar during the same period in his Marathi writings and speeches. The 'untouchables' who were driven away from caste system are now reasserting themselves as Dalits to protect their interests and fight for justified rights in all walks of life. Meanwhile, the people who are out of caste system, civilization and social life came to be known as Aboriginal or Adivasis. At present these social groups are also expressing their identity as Schedule Tribes (STs) and fighting along with Dalits, also known as Scheduled Castes (SCs), for self-respect and social justice in India. Besides, the Backward Classes (BCs) are also on the race with the marginalized communities on the one hand and with the upper castes on the other hand, so as to secure their rights and opportunities in the society. (John C. B. Webster 1999).

### ***Changing Scenario of Caste System***

Now it can be seen in the modern age, some of the agricultural castes of the sudras assumed certain processes of social change viz., sanskritisation and westernization. In order to elevate their social status and cultural in the social order, the dominant castes tried to try to be like the upper castes and lead such a life style. As a result they were recognized as dominant, if not forward castes. These sudra-dominant castes in turn led to some powerful anti-Brahmin movements in some parts of India. They have successfully established their supremacy in place of Brahmins during this period. However, the non-agrarian majority sudras had remained as serving castes. This definition of Sanskritisation has been given by M. N. Srinivas in his book "Social Change in Modern India" published in 1971.

### ***Conclusion***

Since ancient times, we have been categorizing different aspects of caste. Caste has had significant role in shaping the occupations and roles as well as values of Indian society. However, there is a special glimpse of caste in rural area. The caste system is undergoing prominent changes – specifically with regards to its traditional ability to structure power and

authority within communities. In a promptly varying society, caste remains an important factor in the socio-political life of changing rural communities. Financial change, political practicality, competitiveness, restructuring of ritual status and mobility, the introduction of new mass media, and the rising spirit of consumerism have all created a new social environment within the village that is quite different from the past. If one is to understand village society today, one must examine the complex interplay between all of these socio-structural and psycho-cultural forces within village life.

Even after independence, Indians continue to be in the grasp of caste perception. Work has been divided and each had his selected task since birth, and heredity of occupation was a rule that played a big role in the economics of urban and rural life. Flexibility of profession or caste was controlled, and an individual leaving the occupation of his ancestors in order to follow his or her own path was rarely witnessed. However, the relationship between caste and hereditary occupations has become less significant now, and there are fewer restrictions on social interaction among castes, especially in urban areas. The present Indian society is moving from its closed systems towards a state of change and progression marked by the assertion of the human spirit irrespective of castes and creeds. Several movements stimulating the injustices related with the caste system have encouraged individuals in India to be more civil towards other castes members. Many of the lower castes have gained a lot from the partial elimination of the caste system, and India should be applauded for its constant effort to eradicate this system of stratification from its culture. It is, however, important to look at the importance of how caste status has affected the quality of life and social mobility in India today.

We can't change caste but at some extent we can eradicate casteism from our society. It is usually said that the eradication of caste is an unsociable as well as unchangeable reality. As long as caste performs the function of a welfare state in India and provides for the common bonds of kinship ties, political groups and alliances it can be assured of a continued existence in modern India. Caste will not wither away as long as its social acceptance and functional utility is being appreciated and made use of. A resilient inspiration is needed to sweep down this social evil of discrimination out of casteism from our society in order to perceive a strong nation on its progressive and as an ideological country.

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