



Article : Caste System in Modern India

Author : Mahabir Singh Bhati and Amritpal Kaur Bhati

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar found the rigidity of the caste system most illogical. According to him, Hinduism is not a missionary and organized religion like, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism. It lacks the feeling of fraternity that exists in these religions. The root cause of inequality exists not because of economic backwardness but due to social ostracism of a bulk of the population in the country. Hindu caste system is based on division of labour. It is determined by their birth. The Hindu caste system favoured the unity of the first three varnas and separates the fourth varna, i.e. the shudras from the rest and assign them all kinds of menial jobs to them and deprive them of status, money, freedom, equality and a decent way of living. The caste system is affected by a process of graded inequality. All castes are not on par. They are one above the other. Castes are all individual entities.

Concept of Caste

Caste can be viewed both as a unit and as a system. It can also be looked upon as a structural phenomenon as well as a cultural phenomenon. As a unit, caste can be defined as a 'closed rank status group', that is, a group in which the status of the members, their occupation, the field of mate-selection, and interaction with others is fixed. As a system, it refers to interrelated statuses and patterned interaction among castes in terms of collectivity of restrictions, namely, restrictions on change of membership, occupation, marriage and commensal relations. In viewing caste as a system, there is a presupposition that no caste can exist in isolation and that each caste is closely involved with other castes in the network of economic, political and ritual relationships. The 'closed rank group' features of caste also explains its structure. As a cultural phenomenon caste may be viewed as a "set of values, beliefs and practices". Most of the scholars have viewed caste as solidarity and not as a set of values and attitudes.

Definitions:-

According to **Bougle**

He explained “caste as hereditarily specialized and hierarchically arranged groups”.

According to **Kroeber**

He defined caste as “an endogamous and hereditary sub-division of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with other such sub-divisions”.

According to **Opler Morris**

“Caste is hereditary and endogamous. It regulates social intercourse, is graded in rank, and has an assembly or governing body which regulates its internal affairs”.

Caste and Varna

Many people confuse caste. The inter changeability of these terms has created confusion in the sociological analysis of the institution of caste. Caste and varna are two separate concepts. It was Senart who for the first time brought to the attention of the world the fact that a caste and a varna are not identical. The peculiarity of the Hindu theory of social organization is its reference to Varnashram organization. Though the varna organization and the ashram organization are two separate organizations, yet they go together as they refer to the problems of nurture and nature of man. Ashram organization refers to the conduct of an individual in the world (nurture) in different stages of his life and varna organization refers to the work that an individual would undertake in the society according to his nature.

In the Rig Veda (written in about 4000B.C.), only two varnas have been mentioned: Arya varna and Das varna. However, in the same Veda, there is a description of the division of society into three orders: Brahama (Priest), Kshatra (Warrior) and Vis (Common People). There is no mention of the fourth order, that is Sudras, though there is a reference to groups despised by the Aryans, like Ayogya, Chandal and Nishad, etc.. These four orders ultimately became four varnas. Initially, the Sudras were not considered as untouchables. Srinivas (1962) has also maintained that the people of this fourth order were no untouchables but to this group belonged to peasants, labourers and servants. Sudras were employed not only as domestic servants but also as cooks. There was nothing like higher and lower varna in the Vedic period. The division of society into four varnas (or four

orders or classes) was based on the division of labour. Brahamins acted as priests, Kshatriyas as rulers and fighters, Vaishyas as traders, and Sudras as a servile class. Each varna worshipped different deities and followed different rituals. This difference was because each group had to achieve different object according to its occupational role. Brahmins wanted maximum holy luster for which they worshiped Agni (fire) and recited Gayatri Mantras; Kshatriyas wanted physical strength (Viryam) for which they worshipped Indra and recited Trishtubh mantras; and Vaishyas wanted cattle -wealth (Pasavah) for which they worshipped Visvedevas and recited jagati mantras. But there were no restrictions on the matrimonial alliances or on the commensal or social relations or even on the change of membership from one to the other varna. Later on, however, as we pass from the vedic (4000-1000), to the Brahamanic (230 B.C. to 700 A.D.) period, the four varnas came to be arranged hierarchically, with Brahmins at the top and Sudras at the bottom.

According to one viewpoint, this distinction and hierarchical arrangement had probably something to do with colour difference. Varna means 'colour' and it was in this sense that the word seems to have been employed in constringing the Arya and the Dasa, referring to their fair and dark colours respectively. The colour-connotation of the word was so strong that later on when the classes came to be regularly described as varnas, four different colours were assigned to the four classes, by which their members were supposed to be distinguished. The colour associated with the Brahmin is White, with Kshatriya Red, with Vaishya Yellow, and with Sudra Black. Hutton (1966) believes that it is possible that this colour distinction is in some way associated with race. But according to Hocart (1950), the colour has ritual and not a racial significance.

The Lingayat movement started by a Brahmin Vasava in south in South India also preached against superiority of Brahmins, abolition of idol-worship and giving up of the caste system. All these attacks, however, did not succeed in removing the rigidity of the caste system in this period, though some structural features of caste were definitely affected.

Major Changes in the Caste System

Though the changed structure of caste in the contemporary India has been analysed separately and the following outcomes in caste functioning may be pointed out in the present times:-

- Caste system is not in the process of abolition but is making adequate adjustment with modern changes.
- The religious basis of caste has cramped.
- Old social practices imposing restrictions of varied types have dwindled. Caste no longer restricts newly valued individual freedom.
- Caste no longer determines the occupational career of an individual, though his social status continues to be dependent on his caste membership.
- Serious efforts are being made to grant equality to the out-castes and the backward castes which had suffered because of the restrictions imposed by the caste system.
- Inter-caste strifes are increasing. However, these are more for achieving power than on grounds of ritual status.
- Casteism not only continues to prevail in community life but in a way it has increased.
- The jajmani system in a village has weakened affecting inter-caste relations.
- The dominance of a caste in a village no longer depends upon its ritual status.
- Caste and politics have come to affect each other.
- On the one hand, some caste organizations have strengthened while on the other hand, a large number of castes have lost their group solidarity and a sense of responsibility.
- Caste no longer acts as a barrier to social progress and to nation's development. India is on the move in spite of the caste system.

Functions of Caste

The functional necessity of stratification of a society into different groups (whether classes or castes) is the requirement faced by any society of placing and motivating individuals in the social structure. As a functioning mechanism, a society concerns itself with motivation at two levels: to distribute its members in social positions and to induce them to perform the duties attached to these

positions. The Indian system of stratification ascribes a fixed status to individuals which determines their rights and duties.

- Caste determines the membership of the community that is a particular caste cannot increase its membership except by means of an increase in the births within the caste.
- Secondly in the caste system assigns social status and preferential treatment to each caste in relationship to other castes. For example the Barber (Nai) caste in a caste hierarchy in one village may have the fifth position but in another village it may have the sixth position and in yet another fourth position.
- Thirdly the caste system enables the members of a caste to remain united as one group. Benefiting from this unity a caste is able to raise its position in the society.
- Lastly caste transmits culture, (skill, knowledge and behaviour) and the benefits and advances, achieved in man's struggle to control environment, from generation to generation. In this context caste acts as an occupational guild in which form it can effectively influences the actions of individual or of corporate bodies outside its own membership.
- The caste system provides for functions necessary to social life, and ranging from education to scavenging or service of the most menial type.
- Caste performs the genetic function of the maintaining balance in the sex ratio. India is a country in which males always out number females.
- The caste acts as a political stabilizer, that is, it keeps political order free from change.
- Caste integrates society, that is, it combines various groups, institutions and sub system into whole. Hutton has said that one important function of caste perhaps the most important of all its functions, and the one which above all other makes caste in India a unique institution, or has been, to integrate Indian society, to weld into one community the various completing, if not incompatible, groups composing it. The functions which it has performed and still performs for the Indian society as a whole are not found elsewhere.

Demerits of the Caste System

The analysis of the structure of the caste system has raised the question of its dysfunctional and functional aspects. The important demerits of the caste system have been described as follows:-

- **It acts as a barrier to social progress**

Durkheim has suggested that the function of division of labour is to give and individual more freedom because it substitutes mechanical economy with an organic economy. The caste system created the division of labour which denied freedom to an individual. In the rigid caste system, occupation was determined by the ascribed status instead of contract, and transition from ascribed status to contract, according to Henry Maine, is an essential feature of political progress. The caste system did not make such transition possible.

Some say that the twentieth century, India has made an industrial progress but it is not because of the caste system; rather it is in spite of the caste system. Industrialisation and technological changes are linked with political system, economic system and the value (or caste) system. The caste system was a barrier in our progress and modernization. People followed the crafts and skills transmitted to them by their ancestors. Introducing change was considered a sin. The carpenter would use the age-old adze but not the saw; even in sawing wood, he would use age-old method and not the modern machinery. So was the case with weaver, blacksmith, goldsmith and even cultivator. Caste thus does no compromises (Sherring). P.N. Bose too has pointed out that caste system has acted essentially to impose that attitude of mind needed to raise men from savagery but to stop them half way on the road to progress.

- **It thwarts political unity**

According to Bougle patriotism for the Hindus consists of attachment to the caste system. Therefore, they are unable to unite except in the very culture pattern that divides them. Why are Hindus attached to caste so much? This is because caste has a religious sanction which prescribes that perfection can only be attained by a man who does not deviate from the duties of caste. In Gita, it has been emphasized

that one's own duty, though defective, is better than another's duty well performed. Manu code is that abeyance of custom and performance of duty is transcendent laws. Observance of caste duties is considered as Dharma in Hinduism. It is a moral obligation. Thus, the social practices of caste are inextricably tied up with religion and their sanction is reinforced by the doctrine of Karma. Sherring has stated: "With many Hindus, the highest form of religious observance is the complete fulfillment of the claims of caste; and most of them conceive breach of caste discipline as a sin rather than violation of moral law. Thus, so long people give more importance to their caste; the national unity is bound to suffer."

- **It acts as a screen and justification for persistent anti-social conduct**

We have a story in which a fisherman justified his sin against the fish by an appeal to the practice of his caste. In another case, an identical argument is pleaded by a butcher for practicing his hereditary trade. Precisely, the same justification has been used by many criminal castes to justify their behavior towards their fellowmen. For example, the thugs (swindlers) strangled their victims to the honour of their goddess Bhavani as well as to enrichment of their pockets. They considered that their victims were killed by God, with them as his agents, their appointed job being to kill travellers (Sleeman, J.L., *Thug or a Million Murders*, 1939). According to Abbe Dubois, people of Kallan caste regard their profession of robber, without disguise, as their birth-right and conceive their calling no way discreditable to themselves or their tribe, as having legitimately descended to them by way of inheritance. So, far from shrinking at the appellation, if one of them be asked who he is, he will coolly answer that he is a robber.

- **It is responsible for the status of women**

Caste imposes many restrictions on women; for example, on education, on participation in religious discussion, on participation in politics, and so forth. It insists on the marriage even if widowed in infancy.

- **It is responsible for the low status and unjust treatment of outcastes and low castes people.**

The upper caste people have deprived the low caste people of human rights and privileges. They command servile (like slaves) obedience from all the groups at the bottom and give them subordinate position. In fact, it is in the treatment of the untouchable castes that the working of the caste system is most open to criticism. A Cobbler (Mochi) gets the low status only because he tans the leather and deals with the dead body of animals. A toddy-drawer's low status is because he washes the dirty clothes. The caste system treats all these castes as outcastes, so much so that even their contact is supposed to involve pollution. Their low position is the result of prejudices and taboos. These people have meekly resigned themselves to their fate. Ross has said that orthodox Hinduism with its promises of rewards in future births for caste conformity in this birth was truly 'the opiate of the people', dulling the senses of the oppressed to their terrible degradation and lulling them into silent acquiescence.

CONCLUSION:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was opinion that the caste system had been rooted in the Hindu Society. The Hindu society was rigidly divided into four varnas. Shudras who are presently known as dalits, backward class and Scheduled Castes were isolated and completely alienated from the main stream of Hindu society. Since Ambedkar was a dalit experienced humiliation and alienation from his childhood. He stood against the contemporary social order and decided to revolt against prevailing caste rigidity in order to secure social justice and equality. Ambedkar stressed that an inequitable society was incapable of sustaining human values conducive to uninterrupted growth and development. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar wanted assimilation and integration of human values. He emphasized for inter-religion and inter-caste marriages in order to achieve unity, fraternity, social coherence and brotherhood are essential features of national integrity and social solidarity. He wanted to prevent the inevitable class struggle due to disparities and diversities. He wanted to reconstruct the Hindu society and make it adjustable democratic values.

Periyar advocates a strongly social concern for equality and justice. He often repeated three aspects of a man, good behaviour, integrity and truth. This ethical

bias formed a positive alternative to the popular religious attitude and accounts for the personal appeal to the public. Periyar wanted to eradicate the caste system. The anti-caste propaganda of Periyar, generally three concrete lines of action emerge:-

- The abolition of untouchability leading to the Temple entry
- The admission of Harijan to priesthood and
- The claim of communal representation and outcomes for full rights in all respects of social life for depressed and backward classes.

At the social level, castes continue to be important in terms in determining the style of living as well as the rank positions of groups (caste) in which marriages are to be settled. Though the old ritual and occupational functions of castes are rapidly disappearing, yet caste endogamy is still preserved and the idea of the structures sanctity has been retained and adapted to the needs of modern social indexing. It is also to be noted the elites of India are overwhelmingly of high caste origins whereas the lower and menial classes display a precisely opposite juxtaposition of castes.

It may thus conclude that the caste system will continue to be a reality in the years and decades to come. The aspects of caste that are most useful to the potential striver for position and power in the modern occupational order are nepotism and casteism.

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