
CASTE SYSTEM IN MODERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

A strong political will and courage is needed to bring to an end caste-ism and with it all kinds of discriminatory attitudes, repressive laws and practices. For the prosperity of the nation and tension-free/stress-free life of common man, as suggested by First Backward class Commission's Chairman Kaka Kalelkar in mid fifties, "National solidarity in a democratic set up demands Government to recognize only two ends – the individual at one end and the nation as a whole at the other. Nothing should be encouraged to organize itself in between these two ends to the detriment of the freedom of the individual and solidarity of the nation. All communal and denominational organizations and groupings of lesser and narrower units have to be watched carefully, so that they do not jeopardize the national solidarity and do not weaken the efforts of the nation to serve the various elements in the body politic with equity. Mutual help, mutual respect and mutual trust are the touchstone, on which all communal and denominational activities will be tested."

The leaders of independent India decided that India will be democratic, socialist and secular country. According to this policy there is a separation between religion and state. Practicing untouchability or discriminating a person based on his caste is legally forbidden. Along with this law the government allows positive discrimination of the depressed classes of India.

The Indians have also become more flexible in their caste system customs. In general the urban people in India are less strict about the caste system than the rural. In cities one can see different caste people mingling with each other, while in some rural areas there is still discrimination based on castes and sometimes also on untouchability. Sometimes in villages or in the cities there are violent clashes which, are connected to caste tensions. Sometimes the high castes strike the lower castes who dare to uplift their status. Sometimes the lower caste gets back on the higher castes.

In modern India the term caste is used for Jat and also for Varna. The term, caste was used by the British who ruled India until 1947. The British who wanted to rule India efficiently made lists of Indian communities. They used two terms to describe Indian communities. Castes and Tribes. The term caste was used for Jats and also for Varnas. Tribes were those communities who lived deep in jungles, forests and mountains far away from the main population and also communities who were hard to be defined as castes for example communities who made a living from stealing or robbery. These lists, which the British made, were used later on by the Indian governments to create lists of communities who were entitled for positive discrimination.

The castes, which were the elite of the Indian society, were classified as high castes. The other communities were classified as lower castes or lower classes. The lower classes were listed in three categories. The first category is called Scheduled Castes. This category includes in it communities who were untouchables. In modern India, untouchability exists at a very low extent. The untouchables call themselves Dalit, meaning depressed. Until the late 1980s they were called Harijan, meaning children of God. This title was given to them by Mahatma Gandhi who wanted the society to accept untouchables within them.

The second category is Scheduled Tribes. This category includes in it those communities who did not accept the caste system and preferred to reside deep in the jungles, forests and mountains of India, away from the main population. The Scheduled Tribes are also called Adivasi, meaning aboriginals.

The third category is called sometimes Other Backward Classes or Backward Classes. This category includes in it castes who belong to Sudra Varna and also former untouchables who converted from Hinduism to other religions. This category also includes in it nomads and tribes who made a living from criminal acts.

According to the central government policy these three categories are entitled for positive discrimination. Sometimes these three categories are defined together as Backward Classes. 15% of India's populations are Scheduled Castes. According to central government policy 15% of the government jobs and 15% of the students admitted to universities must be from Scheduled Castes. For the Scheduled Tribes about 7.5% places are reserved which is their proportion in Indian population. The Other Backwards Classes are about 50% of India's population, but only 27% of government jobs are reserved for them.

Along with the central government, the state governments of India also follow a positive discrimination policy. Different states have different figures of communities entitled for positive discrimination based on the population of each state. Different state governments have different lists of communities entitled for positive discrimination. Sometimes a specific community is entitled for rights in a particular state but not in another state of India.

In modern India new tensions were created because of these positive discrimination policies. The high caste communities feel discriminated by the government policy to reserve positions for the Backward Classes. In many cases a large number of high caste members compete for a few places reserved for them. While the Backward Classes members do not have to compete at all because of the large number of reserved places for them compared to the candidates. Sometimes in order to fill the quota, candidates from the lower classes are accepted even though they are not suitable. Sometimes some reserved positions remain unmanned because there were few candidates from the lower classes causing more tension between the castes. Between the lower castes there are also tensions over reservation.

In the order of priority for a reserved place of the Backward Classes, candidate from the Scheduled castes is preferred over a candidate from the Scheduled Tribes who is preferred over a candidate from the other Backward Classes. As stated earlier Other Backward Classes are about 50% of India's population but only 27% of the Other Backward Classes are entitled for positive discrimination according to central government policy. Some Other Backward Classes communities are organizing politically to be recognized as Backward Classes entitled for positive discrimination.

The Scheduled Tribes who are seen as the aborigins of India got ownership and certain rights over Indian land. Many communities in India claim also to be aborigins of India and they are claiming the same rights as the Scheduled Tribes.

The caste identity has become a subject of political, social and legal interpretation. Communities who get listed as entitled for positive discrimination do not get out of this list even if their social and political conditions get better. In many cases the legal system is involved to decide if a certain person is entitled for positive discrimination.

But with all this positive discrimination policy, most of the communities who were low in the caste hierarchy remain low in the social order even today. And communities who were high in the social hierarchy remain

even today high in the social hierarchy. Most of the degrading jobs are even today done by the Dalits, while the Brahmans remain at the top of the hierarchy by being the doctors, engineers and lawyers of India

Traditionally, caste is identified by a person's last name. Recently, it has become quite common for educated people of every caste to change their last name to something neutral—representing no caste. Although you can change your name in India, it is not a permanent switch. The original caste-distinct name remains on transcripts and is required for many legal transactions, so you can never truly escape the imprint of casteism.

There are many initiatives by the government to abolish the caste system. The Indian government holds reservations for people from backward or scheduled castes (mainly the Dalits and “untouchables”) in the government and certain universities. Similar to affirmative action in the United States, these reservations hold a certain amount of seats for the representation of scheduled caste members.

But are these reservations really assisting in the eradication of the caste system? In many respects they just continue to isolate the lower castes, distinctly labelling them as a minority. Although the reservation system makes it easier for people of lower castes to get a job in government, often times, the people who are offered the seats do not have the education to make informed decisions and are resented by the educated elite. As opportunities for education and social mobility become more accessible for those of every class, the next challenge for India is the acceptance of this social mobility.

National policies and plans can not be formulated on the basis of irrational acts by a few irrational people. Also it would not be right to blame the whole system or a society for their irresponsible acts. It is not desirable to pass on comments based on half cooked information, half a truth, partial or incomplete knowledge, which could be harmful for the whole society. Many a times, irresponsible acts of some irrational and cynic persons create misunderstandings.

Quite often, caste system has been criticized as being highly discriminatory. The British rulers had condemned the Caste system strongly before the Independence. Now many political parties, many intellectuals Dalit activists and their leaders have joined them. They are born, educated and brought-up in an atmosphere, which is deeply influenced by rhymes and reasons of western societies.

NEEDS AN ANALYSIS

Blaming caste system for all discriminatory practices or suggesting bringing to an end a well established and accepted system in the name of discrimination, needs to be given a second thought. For understanding the problem, answer of the following questions with an impartial, rational, sensitive and perceptive mindset is required –

Reality is much deeper than what is seen on the surface. One should not form an opinion or take a decision without analyzing rationally the whole scenario. Many misconceptions have been spread around about caste-system of India and its nature by vested interests of certain people during the last few centuries.

DISCRIMINATION EVERYWHERE

Discrimination in one form or other exists in all the social, political and economic systems/institutions, whether it is big or small all over the world in some form or the other. It exists even within as small an institution as a family. Vulnerable individuals or weaker sections of society have always become an easy prey for discrimination. Within a family, vulnerable family members like children, old or widowed parents, poor relatives or unemployed youth become an easy prey of discrimination. And in a society, poor, illiterate and ignorant people usually become victims of exploitation.

INTOLERANCE REASON BEHIND DISCRIMINATION

USUALLY, IN EVERY SOCIETY, DIFFERENCES in behavior, character, education, language, way of life, culture, social background create a distance between two individuals or groups. Resistance to tolerate,

adapt or appreciate each other widens the distance. Some become so aggressive that they openly abuse or oppress others. In order to be one up, either they let down others or try to control their destiny by adopting discriminatory practices. And in this rat-race, stronger always wins and weaker suffers.

GROUNDS FOR DISCRIMINATION

In every society and a nation there exists numerous identities based on factors like race, class, caste, religion, gender, language or region. Craving for more power – muscle, money or political – of some individuals or groups tends people to adopt discriminatory practices. Discriminatory practices work on whims and fancies/likes and dislikes of strong persons. Controlling the destiny of others satisfies their ego and serves their interests.

CASTE SYSTEM AND BRITISH RULERS

In the past, British rulers in India, while laying foundation of democratic institutions of India, started many discriminatory practices. In order to keep balance of power and counter Brahmins hold on Indian society passed some discriminatory Acts like Act of 1919 (Minto Morely Reforms) or Communal Award of 1932. Till 1947, they kept their railway compartments, waiting rooms, parks, clubs, hotels, places of other entertainment and residences segregated.

DALIT ACTIVISTS AND CASTE SYSTEM

Dalit Activists criticize caste system vehemently and hold it responsible for keeping 750 million Hindus – dalits, tribals and other backward classes – poor, “subjugated, discriminated against and humiliated.” “Technologies for human survival were all developed by lower castes”, but “upper castes took away the fruits of their labour and invention.” “In the hearts of the oppressed castes, there is anger and hatred.” ‘Social-justice’ demands their emancipation by ending all kind of discrimination.

There are two options: “either complete equality to Dalit Bahujan communities or their conversion into other religions.” Such comments of Dalit Activists and political leaders arouse emotional sentiments of poor masses, generate venom in their heart and create a feeling of ‘otherness’.

INDIA AND ‘CASTE’ AS A ‘SYSTEM’

Caste is a very old and indigenous system, conceptualized, developed and practiced exclusively in India. It is difficult for the western world to understand its role – past or present – in Indian society or because of its complete localization and unfamiliarity to see it in its totality.

Following are the strong features of ‘caste’ as a system –

- Assimilation of different social groups without conversion– In the past, caste assimilated numerous social groups – immigrants, locals, tribal, professionals or others into its mainstream without any conversion. It assigned each incoming new group a separate caste identity and made them its integral part in due course of time.
- This way, neither it disturbed its existing internal social order nor prevented new groups to join the mainstream. It did not annihilate their faith, way of living, internal order, customs, culture or language. Instead, it gave them freedom to prosper according to their internal rhythm.
- Caste regarded as a natural institution by Hindus – Indian society regards family, extended family, Kula, Caste and religion as fundamental social institutions. An individual is a natural member of a family, which is a unit of an extended family, extended family of Kula, Kula of a tribe (Vish) – and a tribe of a Jana of Jati (Caste). Caste is second only to the family in widening a person’s social radius and in getting importance in his/her private and occupational life.
- Equal status to all within a caste – All the members within a caste enjoy equal social status vise-a-vise other castes. Caste values, beliefs, prejudices, injunctions as well as distortions of reality become an indivisible part of a person’s psyche and conscience. They share moments of joy and sorrow.

- It is a common sense that a person's relation with his own caste-members is closer than with those belonging to other castes. Internalized caste norms define an individual role in the society. A person feels good and loved, when he lives up to these norms, and anxious and guilty, when he transgresses them.
- Caste, providing social security and stability – Earlier, instead of government, elders of each caste (having sense of belonging, not a desire to exercise authority) used to take care of maintaining discipline within the caste and helped its destitute/helpless members. Caste provided to all its members social security and stability. Even as today, it does so in rural areas. Each caste still maintains its own rules, regulations, customs, and way of life and controls the conduct of its members. It encourages self-discipline, conscious, self-control, and self-direction.
- Castes as a series of vertical parallels – The key, to understand the caste system, is not in seeing it as a framework of hierarchical layers of social order, each fitting neatly below the other, as pointed out by census operations done during imperial rule, but as a series of vertical parallels. Each caste is an independent entity, with its own hierarchy, based either on a tribal identity or an occupational identity.
- Inter-dependence an integral part of caste system – In ancient and medieval India, all people living in a village or city were bound together by economic and social ties. All castes living in a local area, whether high or low, had a strong bond of mutual dependence, caring, sharing and supporting each other in fulfilling different kind of needs. There was hardly any room for any section of society to consider itself, as being placed in greater or lesser disadvantageous position with reference to another. Concept of forwards or backwards or feeling of exploitation of lower strata by upper castes was almost non-existent at that time. Industrialization and modernization have changed the scene.

CRITICS ON CASTE SYSTEM

Some people blame Caste system for its being 'discriminatory' in nature. They say, it serves the interests of "haves" and enhances the agonies of "have-nots". But it is an anomaly, that still it is only the 'have-nots', who cling more tightly to their caste identities today.

Caste system has been criticized for –

- Giving importance to birth -_Caste system has been alleged for giving rise to disparities in the society, because it gives importance to birth in determining social status of a person. But same is the position in Western world also, where wealth determines social status. Wealth is also acquired through birth. There also exists a sharp distinction between the Aristocratic/elite society and common man.

Critics claim that for centuries in the past and even at present, people born in lower castes have been suppressed or oppressed by people belonging to upper castes. Upper castes are accountable and punishable for the miseries of lower caste. They should make reparations for the sins/historical wrong done by their ancestors.

MODERN INDIA

Most of the allegations against caste system, which were there in the past, can not be justified now in modern India. Process of modernization, industrialization, spread of education and growing awareness among masses have already brought to an end slowly but steadily many of the discriminatory practices of Caste system. It has become more liberal and less restrictive in all walks of life. Castes no longer enjoy legal or religious sanctions. Expulsion from castes means little, while earlier it meant complete social ostracism. Old style of authority and power exercised by caste-elders has already diminished. Restrictions or interactions between different castes arising due to considerations for purity and pollution are fading away from public life even from rural areas. Traditional barriers on marriage, hereditary occupations and commonality are losing its importance.

REASONS FOR THE MISERIES OF DOWNTRODDEN

There are many reasons, why people do not get respite from discriminatory practices. There is no denial of the fact that with the passage of time, and for a long time, living under alien rule, caste system had developed many deformities. The system became too rigid to keep its identity continuing. Still it is not so much because of the caste-system, but because of bad politics and poor governance, that millions of people have still to suffer discrimination and exploitation in modern India. Some of the causes are as following –

Modern Indian society has been polarized on caste and communal basis into following unbridgeable sections – Upper castes, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled tribes, Other Backward Class and Minorities. Stratification of Indian society has been done in most insensitive manner for the purpose of balancing the power. It has become a bye-word for Indian politicians.

Indian society is sharply divided into two broad divisions- “haves” and “have-nots”. The most important factors responsible for disparities are present-day-politics, irrational and corrupt ways of pursuing the paternal policies of the government at central and State levels and government’s failure to address real issues.

Day in and day out, public attention is being diverted from real issues and public sentiments are aroused by floating in political world abstract issues like discrimination, social justice, affirmative action/reservations, secularism. Sectional interests are being promoted on caste basis. Real issues like mass-scale illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, inflation, deteriorated law and order situation, increasing violence or general coarsening of moral fiber of the Indian society are pushed into the background.

There is complete centralization of control systems in the hands of a few individuals, families and groups irrespective of castes or creed. They have enough money, muscle and political power plus and the support of criminals. They are flourishing day by day and control almost all the national resources. They enjoy life at cost of tax-payers. This very small section of society virtually controls the destiny of millions. They have a say in almost every walk of national life.

Aversion of people from human, moral or traditional values has aggravated the problem. The total concentration of educated people is on pursuit of money and materialistic pleasures by hook or crook. Favoritism, in-discipline, violence, corruption, and chase of materialism based on ruthless competition have given sharp rise to disparities and discrimination. It leads to cut-throat competition and creates rift amongst different groups. Political expediency and opportunism has made sectional forces more assertive/aggressive in attitude and vocal about their rights but ignores duties.

In Independent India, Governments at centre and the provinces are continuously thrusting upon the public many discriminatory/lofty/populist rules, regulations and policies in the name of helping “poor masses”. Common men especially belonging to upper castes feel threatened, helpless and suffer from discriminatory policies of the government. Protective policies and laws can neither convert an iniquitous Society into an equitable one, nor does it help in any way the vulnerable, oppressed and submerged masses.

Most of measures taken by the Governmental authorities touch the problems superficially at its periphery only. Most of the solutions pursued by the government are totally unrelated to day to day problems of common man in real life. Instead of benefiting or helping the poor, on one hand such developmental programs increase corruption, and on the other it encourages lethargy, agitation and attitude to depend on authorities for each and everything.

‘RESERVATION POLICY’ AS A TOOL TO END DISCRIMINATION

Successive governments both at the centre and provinces are trying to tackle problem of discrimination and disparity by openly favouring policies of ‘reverse discrimination’, which give more importance to distribute power on pro-rata basis by fixing quota. The sustainable development of submerged sections can be achieved by providing quality of education to everybody and making people aware of different opportunities available to them.

Reservation policy can hardly be able to bring in desired transformation in the society. In a democratic country, discrimination anywhere or in any form – be it positive or negative – is the most objectionable thing. The problem of discrimination or disparities cannot be tackled by fixing up quotas or by adopting the path of reverse discrimination or treating a few sections of society more than equals by entitling them for preferential treatment by the governmental agencies in different spheres of life.

Political leaders of various political parties desire to fix up quotas in all governmental institutions for different sections of society on pro-rata basis. Such a demand is based on negative exhortations. The government’s policy of Reservation in jobs and education has resulted in a tough competition amongst various castes to demand a lower status, so that they can also avail more concessions and facilities.

Under-currents of caste politics have made the government incapable to solve the burning national issues. It has made to maintain law and order difficult. Inter-caste and intra-caste, inter-community and intra-community and inter-tribal and intra-tribal conflicts are increasing day by day in order to get more space in the corridors of power.

A large number of educated people of so-called ‘Backward-castes’ have already entered into the corridors of power and are occupying important places, exercising authority. Dalits and Muslims are being wooed with vigor by all major national political parties. Even Naxalite groups find in Dalits an allies, as most of their action squads are formed of Harijans. No political party could dare to annoy them. All concede to their demands openly or discreetly.

CONCLUSION

It is a matter of shame that after giving so much constitutional and government protection to weaker sections, incidents of discrimination keep on increasing. Instead of over-looking the interests of the whole society or whole of the nation, it is desirable that law-implementing machinery should get tough on perpetrators of injustice. Discriminatory practices or oppression of weaker sections of society is unacceptable to the whole of humanity.

Instead of blaming an invisible institution (caste-system) for discrimination, deep wisdom and honesty of purpose is needed to find out right methods and courage to strive for it sincerely.

So-called ‘Backward castes’ need to understand the spirit of Indian Constitution and try to adapt thinking, culture and life-style of the mainstream of the nation. Otherwise, there will always be cultural rifts, both in their lives and minds, threatening the unity of the nation from time to time.

Today, when the whole world is reeling between economic depression and terrorism, people expect from the government to bring in change in economic situation and in fight against terrorism. Hate, jealousy, anxiety or fear leads to violence and give rise to wars, riots, antagonisms and class or caste conflicts.

After-effects of the great economic depression of 2008 has brought many social and economic changes and aggravated the problems for present government. The GDP growth has fallen there, business investment has dipped alarmingly. Unemployment has risen.

Therefore, Government needs to be very careful, while planning for measures – developmental or punitive – to be taken. The needs and aspirations of the people as a whole should be taken care of by the government, not of any specific section of the society.

Present atmosphere demands to resolve sensibly the differences and clashes of interests peacefully with rational thinking and understanding for each other. For a change, India needs collective nation building efforts of both the authorities and the public with a sense of justice, commitment to the nation, understanding for each other and consciousness about duties along with rights.

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