



THE EVOLUTION OF CASTE IN MODERN INDIA: EXPLORING ANTI-CASTE PERSPECTIVES IN CONTEMPORARY HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The concept of caste in modern-day India has evolved over the course of many centuries as a result of evolving religious, social, and political conventions. The purpose of this research is to investigate the ways in which historical stories have either supported or opposed systems that are founded on caste. The examining of the caste system is done from the viewpoint of anti-caste history. Exclusion and prejudice were later formalized as a result of the rigorous social structure of caste, which had its roots in the division of labor. In the most recent decades, anti-caste thought and the amplification of Dalit voices have been important in modern history. This has resulted in the development of new interpretations of the past that put an emphasis on agency and resistance. The article provides a detailed account of significant turning events in the struggle for caste equality. It begins with the anti-caste campaigns that were led by reformers like as Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and concludes with the constitutional eradication of untouchability. The fact that discrimination on the basis of caste continues to exist despite the existence of progressive legal frameworks and policy initiatives brings to light the need of continued academic engagement with anti-caste ideas in historical writing. If we are fortunate, the findings of this study will assist in shedding light on India's social past and present from a fresh and more critical vantage point.

Keywords: Caste, India, Anti- Caste, Histography, social, and political conventions.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of human history, the caste system that is practiced in India is one of the systems of social stratification that has persisted the longest and has been the most ubiquitous. Theological and philosophical beliefs, as well as ancient literature, were the origins of caste, which eventually evolved into a rigid social order that governed every aspect of day-to-day life. In contrast to early historical narratives, which often depicted the caste system as an unchangeable cultural norm, there has been a rising amount of attention paid to the role that current history plays in either upholding or fighting the oppressive caste system. Over the course of the last several decades, there has been a growing body of study that is anti-caste. This research has provided critical perspectives that try to undermine the predominant Brahmanical historical interpretation frameworks.

The favored class in India has a propensity to romanticize the country's social past, but the anti-caste school of thought in India's history disputes this inclination. As an alternative, it provides a forum for those who are oppressed, particularly the Dalits, and draws attention to the struggles, resistance, and accomplishments of those individuals. This strategy has the potential to be used for the purpose of promoting social justice in addition to reinventing historical studies. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and other historians have played a significant role in drawing attention to the structural cruelty of the caste system and the need of adopting a new approach to history that is more inclusive and egalitarian. The adoption of the Indian Constitution, which made the practice of untouchability illegal and emphasized the need of affirmative action, was a significant step along the path. Caste-based discrimination in contemporary India may be eliminated via the implementation of legal reforms, but these reforms alone are not sufficient.

The objective of this article is to investigate the history of anti-caste movements in relation to the evolution of caste in modern-day India. It investigates the ways in which historical literature has reflected and opposed caste notions, it examines the legacy of anti-caste groups and thinkers, and it evaluates the continuous difficulties that stand in the way of constructing a society that is free of caste. A rising collection of research demonstrates that caste is more than a historical artifact; rather, it is an active social force that impacts modern Indian culture and the way its past is addressed. This study intends to contribute to this increasing body of information by engaging in this activity.

OBJECTIVES

1. To use anti-caste history to analyze how the caste system has changed in contemporary India.
2. To examine how disadvantaged voices are highlighted and conventional caste-based interpretations are contested in modern historical narratives.

METHODOLOGY

A technique to research that is qualitative and analytical is used in this study. Secondary sources, which include historical texts, academic publications, and contemporary works on caste and anti-caste ideology, are utilized in this investigation. Based on the perspectives of Dalit academics, reformers, and anti-caste historians, the purpose of this historical study is to deconstruct the many depictions and criticisms of the caste system that have been made throughout the course of recent history. The comparison and contrast of traditional and anti-caste stories is one method that may be used to get insight into the evolution of people's perspectives on caste in modern-day India. In addition, sociological and constitutional perspectives are included into the study in order to get a deeper understanding of the ways in which historical narratives interact with contemporary caste realities.

Historical roots of caste

Caste is a social and religious structure that has strong historical origins that date back to ancient times. It has a profound influence on many aspects of Indian society, including religion and culture. It is said in the ancient texts of Hinduism, particularly the Vedas, that society is split into four varnas. These varnas are as follows: the Brahmins, who are considered to be priests and academics; the Kshatriyas, who are warlords and kings; the Vaishyas, who are merchants and farmers; and the Shudras, who are considered to be workers. In these texts, the earliest symptoms of this complex structure are seen for the first time.

Throughout the course of history, the varna system developed into a more intricate framework that included subcastes known as jatis and resulted in the formation of a number of distinct social divisions. It was the notion of birth-based purity and profession that led to the establishment of a hereditary social order, which in turn led to the rigid demarcation of these groups. Through the practice of assigning responsibilities and obligations to individuals based on their birth date, a system was maintained in which the potential for social development was severely limited, and the social position of an individual was established. Caste was a hierarchical structure that existed for centuries and became firmly established in the social environment. It had an effect on all aspects of life, from marriage to the job, and it was responsible for the stratification of society. Consequently, this indicates that religious teachings, cultural standards, and the ever-changing sociopolitical backdrop all had a part in the historical origins of the caste system, which in turn impacted the trajectory of the anticaste movement in modern India.

Caste and religion

In the course of Indian history, the caste issue has been ignored for a considerable amount of time in favor of the sectarian divide between Hindus and Muslims. The propensity to subsume caste under bigger religious and national narratives is something that has been developed by historiography that has been influenced by Hindutva and nationalist ideologies since the 1990s. Despite the fact that Gyanendra Pandey and other critical historians have shown how communalism and nationalism interact, they have not yet entirely attacked religion as a concept. This has resulted in the marginalization of events that are associated with caste, such as Ambedkar's mass conversion, and the underrepresentation of the radical interventions of Periyar and Ambedkar, who, in response to caste, reinterpreted religion through the lens of Buddhism and atheism.

The results of recent study indicate that caste mobilizations and community mobilizations have often operated together in the past. It has been shown by historians Dilip Menon and Sumit Sarkar that when individuals from lower castes began organizing, it would often lead the elite to feel uneasy. This, in turn, would result in the emergence of communal conflicts rather than caste strife. The fact that this pattern, which began with riots in the eighteenth century and continued with the tragedy in Gujarat in 2002, demonstrates how religious warfare conceals caste-based structural violence is shown by the facts. Conventional historical narratives, on the other hand, continue to present religion in a basic manner, so alienating Muslims and Hindus. These stories also ignore the ways in which caste plays a significant role in the construction of religious identities and communities.

In order for historians to make sense of caste, they need to analyze religion as a disputed and ever-changing field that is closely related to caste. Instead of confining themselves to the communalism paradigm, they need to examine religion as a field that is intricately linked to caste. To do this, it is necessary to conduct study on the many ways in which subordinate faiths and sects within the religions of Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Hinduism have fought against the impact of caste hierarchy on religious rites and ethical standards. It is possible for us to oppose reductionist narratives of religion and nationhood and to reposition caste at the center of historical inquiry by placing a focus on everyday actions, community building, and ethical self-fashioning, especially among those who are oppressed.

Caste and the body

The relationship between caste and the body throws light on the tangible component of caste, which is sometimes ignored while writing history. This aspect should be taken into consideration. The unique materiality of caste has been obfuscated by its repeated subsumption under categories such as class and race, despite the fact that it is a distinct kind of structural inequality within its own right. Through the process of colonial ethnology, caste was understood as a form of biological race, and it was connected to concepts of ethnic identity and miscegenation. This resulted in the reinforcement of caste systems and the racialization of lower castes and tribal people. On occasion, lower caste groups would purposefully turn the tables on this racialization, merging caste identity with nationalist activity. This was done in an attempt to weaken the dominance of the Brahmanical caste. Actors like as Phule focused attention to the exploitation of castes through the lens of class and resource extraction. Caste was also represented as a kind of economic inequality. Marxists and people's historians, who further conflated the two notions, believed that caste awareness was an antecedent to class consciousness before class consciousness was ever a term. But if we look at caste in two distinct ways—as a social class or as a race—we miss the target when it comes to comprehending the materiality of caste, which is a manifestation of how people live their lives on a day-to-day basis.

This is especially true when one takes into consideration the manner in which the body is used as a weapon for oppression as a result of the hierarchical structure of touch, sexuality, labor, and movement patterns. The social sciences have a tendency to see the body as "bare life," which means that it is solely examined via a biological or biographical lens. Despite this, the politics of the body are at the core of both caste discrimination and violence. It is not because they are innocent; rather, it is a premeditated attempt to employ body-centered injustice in order to garner attention beyond theoretical democratic values. Some Dalit activists have used caste as a racist metaphor on global forums for reasons that are now evident. This is not because they are innocent. In order to provide more evidence of the gendered character of the caste-body nexus, feminist academics have brought attention to the ways in which patriarchal control over women's sexuality and marriage works to maintain caste. Despite the fact that there have been significant legal and social advancements in the modern age, daily caste practices continue to maintain embodied inequalities.

Some examples of these practices include spatial segregation, labor division, and social etiquette. As opposed to seeing the importance of the body in relation to caste as a fixed and outmoded truth, historians need to view it as a site where modernity, politics, and resistance have reshaped it. Because it is the most extreme form of caste discrimination, untouchability raises unique historical concerns about its segregation from other caste practices. This segregation may have been the result of nationalist politics that isolated it as a separate problem or from the political assimilation of other castes that were considered to be of lower social status. As a result of this separation, Dalits are often among the most marginalized groups currently existing in society. Instead of being an uphill struggle against caste in general, their campaign for equality is more of a war over the lived experience of caste. This is because caste is different for different people. Caste takes on new material and corporeal forms as a consequence of historical transformations and political contestations, and these forms need to be addressed in order to have a complete understanding of caste.

Caste and nation

Under the influence of colonial modernity, which reconfigured time and the past into a cohesive narrative focused on the country as a single actor, history as it is practiced in India arose in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Since of this totalizing vision, history was required to show the past as a unified and consistent narrative. This made caste, which is a social component that significantly differentiates individuals, difficult since it posed a danger to the unity of the country. Early historians, who were mostly of the higher caste and had received their education in colonial institutions, sometimes minimized the significance of caste or portrayed it in a positive light, such as a system that maintained social cohesiveness, a reasonable division of labor, or a spiritual hierarchy. However, other historians, such as Gandhi, considered caste problems as corruptions of a varna system that was once fair. Nevertheless, by the late nineteenth century, these narratives began to fail as lower-caste groups started constructing their own counter-histories.

These counter-histories challenged the notion that caste was unchangeable and revealed it to be a contingent, historically formed social truth. Around the same time, caste-based groups came into existence and demanded political legitimacy. At the same time, nationalist movements were unsuccessful in their efforts to rally lower-caste and minority peasants. This resulted in the mainstream history being forced to accept caste as a major problem. Caste, on the other hand, was only ever included into history as a "social" term, which is separate from political categories such as the country or class. This limited the extent to which it could be politicized. Among the most significant differences that existed between Gandhi and Ambedkar was the distinction between social and political issues. Ambedkar was certain that caste should be acknowledged as a political problem that would have an impact on India's destiny. Academic disciplines that emerged after independence mirrored this division by relegating caste mostly to the field of sociology. On the other hand, history was primarily concerned with political and economic institutions, and it saw caste as a local cultural entity that existed outside of the center of the political narrative. Consequently, caste continued to be sidelined in historical narratives, and depending on the political position that was taken, it was often portrayed as either national or anti-national. This was the case with the Dravidian movement and Ambedkar's politics.

There is a dilemma that emerges over whether or not the country itself is the sole thing that can be used to completely historicize caste. Historians are increasingly emphasizing the "region" as an essential location for comprehending caste. They are demonstrating how caste histories from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Punjab, Bengal, and other states reflect fragmented national narratives. The concept that a single national identity came before caste-based regional identities has been called into question by a number of recent studies that investigate transregional and extra-national caste networks. In spite of this, a more fundamental issue has not been answered: is caste a kind of social stratification that is unique to India and serves to define the nation? As it is practiced now, caste is a product of colonial-modern fabrication, a result of orientalist rhetoric, census methods, and state administration, according to the arguments of certain historians. Caste is not an old and important component of Indian culture. This position, despite its compelling nature, has been subject to criticism since it seems to absolve pre-colonial India of the long-term injustices caused by caste and shifts responsibility onto colonialism. This approach runs the danger of obscuring the historical depth of caste oppression and undercutting modern battles against it. Contrary to popular belief, those who disagree with the colonial origin argument sometimes reify caste as an everlasting fact in India, which results in a contradiction. This deadlock, which has its origins in writing history through the country, continues to limit how caste is understood historically. This

is because the nation continues to be the dominant framework that suppresses alternative caste narratives, despite criticisms of nationalism itself.

Anti-caste movements

Indian social, political, and cultural groups have challenged the caste system. This activism is termed anti-caste. Social justice, resistance, and rejection of caste-based inequality are among these movements' greatest legacies. Modern anti-caste sentiments stem from Middle Ages Bhakti and Sufi groups. These communities challenged conventions and championed equality. These movements' saints and poets included Ravidas, Kabir, and Basava, who opposed caste and promoted spiritual equality. These groups used inclusive events and devotional poetry to help people connect with the sacred beyond caste. During colonialism, anti-caste movements changed.

Western concepts of equality and personal rights changed societal standards. Social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy helped end caste-based institutions and promote fairness. In the 19th century, Phule pushed educational reforms to promote lower castes, opposing Brahmin supremacy. The Satyashodhak Samaj, or Society of Truth Seekers, was founded to eradicate caste prejudice and promote education for everyone. Periyar vocally criticized Tamil culture's Brahmin caste structure at the start of the 20th century. He also advocated for caste eradication. He enabled the southern Indian Dravidian movement by advocating reason, dignity, and equality. His philosophy was Dravidian. Indian independence leaders incorporated anti-caste feelings into the campaign for freedom. Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar helped write India's constitution and advocated for social justice. Due to his hard campaigning, the constitution today prohibits untouchability and promotes affirmative action via Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe reservations.

By becoming Buddhist, Ambedkar and millions of his followers symbolically rejected caste-based discrimination and demanded social and spiritual equality. The decades following independence saw disadvantaged people fight systematic injustices, boosting anti-caste activities. The Maharashtra-based Dalit Panthers fought Dalit persecution via political mobilization and direct action in the 1970s. The Mandal Commission recognized in the late 20th century that affirmative action should not be restricted to Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The committee advised on OBC educational and vocational reservations. These adjustments have raised questions about socioeconomic equity and reserves' social betterment potential. India has several anti-caste groups battling longstanding prejudice and inequality. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), led by Mayawati and Kanshi Ram, and the Bhim Army, led by Chandrashekhar Azad, are two of numerous Dalit movements fighting political and social marginalization. Dalit artistic, literary, and activist expression has become a significant resistance weapon against caste-based oppression. Dalit feminists added a gendered component to the anti-caste movement.

This admits that gender and caste intersect to create oppression. Along with politics and society, anti-caste movements impact culture. Dalit art, film, and literature provide underrepresented communities a voice and challenge prevailing narratives. Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Daya Pawar are among the authors who have shown caste-based persecution and Dalit power. Although caste inequality has decreased, anti-caste groups nevertheless confront criticism and challenges. The quota system was meant to correct past wrongs, but critics say it has worsened reverse discrimination and caste-based divides. Due to the difficulty of implementing affirmative action rules in educational and professional institutions, meritocracy and other

strategies to alleviate socioeconomic inequality have been discussed. Caste dynamics in politics may also politicize caste identity for political gain, detracting from social justice problems.

Post-independence era

After independence, India's intricate caste history entered a new chapter. The country actively participated during this time to atone for past wrongs and create a more fair society. B.R. Ambedkar and other constitution writers knew caste prejudice produced systematic inequities. They sought to eliminate these discrepancies by adopting a comprehensive constitution. The 1950-ratified Indian Constitution abolished untouchability and promoted social justice while establishing India as a socialist, secular, democratic republic. Article 17 outlawed untouchability to empower historically disadvantaged populations. SCs and STs were included. Article 15(4) created affirmative action measures including public education and employment quotas. Reservations were contentious, but they provided educational and vocational opportunities to historically disenfranchised people to right past wrongs. Affirmative action helped erase caste-based societal inequality. But it also raised questions about whether caste differences would remain and whether reservations could achieve substantive equality.

After independence, major social justice groups formed. These organizations sought to remove prejudice and discrimination despite various law changes. Mayawati and Kanshi Ram revolutionized politics by advocating for Dalit rights and challenged upper caste supremacy. Kanshi Ram formed the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) to unite majoritarian Bahujans, including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, against the upper castes' societal supremacy. Uttar Pradesh's Mayawati's ascension to power was a turning point for Dalit liberation and political participation. The Mandal Commission, established in 1979 to analyze socio-economic backwardness, suggested giving behind castes preferential seats in school and administration. In the early 1990s, the Mandal Commission's proposals sparked demonstrations and controversies. Some hailed it as a move toward social fairness, while others saw it as a threat to meritocracy. The Mandal Commission found that economic weaknesses increased caste-based inequities. Despite these affirmative action policies, post-independence has been criticized and problematic. Reservations' influence on society's growth and caste identities have been questioned. Reservations' usefulness in aiding the poor is questioned. Reservations have also been plagued by corruption, the omission of the creamy layer, and underrepresentation.

Contemporary challenges and debates

As the ghost of social hierarchy haunts modern India, caste presents many issues and disputes. Caste-based discrimination persists despite constitutional protections and affirmative action programs. This prejudice may occur in the school, job, home, and relationships. Long-standing biases and attitudes in society perpetuate Dalit and other disadvantaged group discrimination, one of the most critical concerns. Educational institutions should promote social mobility and knowledge, yet caste-based discrimination prevents many from succeeding. Systemic prejudices in the workplace include Dalit discrimination in employment, promotions, and career development. Marriage is a crucial social institution

, therefore caste preconceptions may produce antagonism and contempt against inter-caste marriages. Manual scavenging, which degrades Dalits, continues despite legislative bans. This disobedience shows how law doesn't match reality. Caste-based bias might be invisible, another issue. Because of fear of

punishment or social disgrace, few people disclose this kind of bias. People who encounter several types of discrimination confront more difficult issues because caste dynamics intersect with gender and religion. Reservations for affirmative action are controversial due to their effectiveness and equity. Reserves are crucial for social equality and righting past wrongs, say proponents. Some say reservations impede meritocracy and maintain caste differences.

The "creamy layer," the idea that a more privileged sector benefits more from limitations than the rest of the population, complicates the argument. Policymakers must balance equitable opportunity for the poor with avoiding excessive benefit distribution. Never before has caste in modern India crossed the realms of technology and digital platforms, beyond the social sciences. Despite its ability to empower underprivileged people and spread skewed tales, social media has presented new obstacles. Reports of caste-based online harassment and trolling highlight a historic prejudice in the digital age. Consider how technology may support or undermine caste preconceptions and the ethical obligation of internet platforms to limit racism and hate speech.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of caste in modern India may be described as a story that is characterized by long-standing socioeconomic disparities, anti-caste interpretations, and tenacious resistance. By bringing the tales of oppressed people at the forefront of the discussion, contemporary historians are contesting the dominant narratives that have, for a long time, justified the practice of caste systems. Speech that is anti-caste is more vital than it has ever been since the caste system has changed throughout the course of history, beginning with pre-independence rationalizations and progressing through colonial codifications and post-independence modifications. In the process of chronicling India's history, historians and the general public should adopt a critical and inclusive posture in order to develop a more balanced perspective on India's past and present.

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