

An Analysis of the Caste System in India: Historical, Social and Contemporary Context

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ABSTRACT

The caste system remains a foundational element shaping the social, economic, and political fabric of society. Its origins can be traced to the early formation of village and community structures, where it evolved as an integral component influencing hierarchical organization and social stratification.

This paper reflects on the origin, definition, nature, and scope of the caste system in India, tracing its historical development and enduring influence on Indian society. It explores the fundamental characteristics that define the caste structure and its role in shaping social interactions and hierarchies. Furthermore, the study critically analyzes key theoretical perspectives on caste as proposed by eminent scholars and thinkers, including M.N. Srinivas, G.S. Ghurye, B.R. Ambedkar, and Ram Manohar Lohia, highlighting their contributions to understanding the complexities and dynamics of caste in the Indian context.

Keywords: Caste, Sanskritization, Westernization, Jajmani System

INTRODUCTION

In Hindu society- the caste system, the joint family culture and the village community are the major strong pillars. Caste system tends to be the major attribute as it has deep roots with the social, economic and political traits of the society. From the emergence of village and community structure the caste system has developed with it.

The Hindu philosophy expresses caste system with the four varnas i.e known as “Chaturvarnas”. It is a Sanskrit word which means four types of color. They are- Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The untouchables are placed lowest in our Caste group. The work performed by this group is considered unclean and polluted. Scavenging and skinning dead animals were part of their work. They are not considered to be the part of the ranked castes.

Objectives

Following are the main objectives of the paper-

- Origin of caste system along with its definition nature and scope of caste system in India
- Main characteristics of caste system in India
- Theories of Caste given by M.N Srinivas, G.S. Ghurye, Ambedkar and Lohia
- Changing role and modern trends of caste system in contemporary context

Origin and Structure of Caste

“The word ‘Caste’ has its roots in Spanish word Casta which means 'breed, race, strain or a complex of hereditary qualities. The Portuguese applied this term to the classes of people in India, known by the name of 'jati'. The English word ‘Caste’ is an adjustment of the original term Casta” (Ketkar, 1999: 12).

Definition on caste system-

The term caste has been defined in many forms. Eminent sociologists have given their interpretations on the term caste. Some definitions are-

G.S.Ghurye defines “Castes are small and complete social worlds in themselves marked off definitely from one another though subsisting within the larger society.”

MacIver explains “When status is wholly predetermined so that men are born to their lot without any hope of change in it, then the class takes the extreme form of caste.”

A.W.Green mentions “Caste is a system of stratification in in which mobility, movement up and down in the status ladder, at least ideally, may not occur.”

Definition on the origin of caste system have also been given by western scholars. Herbert Risley has expressed caste system with racial differences whereas Nesfield and Ibbeston mentioned occupational factors were the cause for caste system. Abbe Dubois focused on the Brahmins for creation of caste system. J.H.Hutton relates with the theory and idea in ‘Mana’ as the source of caste. Some very important theories are discussed below.

Traditional Theory

From the Vedic literature, Brahmins are the creator of caste system. For the better functioning of the society different castes were created. Every caste was allotted with a particular nature of work so that the society can function in a systematic pattern. It is explained in the ‘Purushasukta’ hymn of the Rig Veda that the Brahmins were born from mouth and are considered as the Supreme Being. Kshatriya came from arms, the Vaishyas are from things and the Sudras are from the feet of the creator. Origins of the caste are from different parts of the body, which symbolizes that each caste has its own service towards the society. The Brahmins were supreme being so their duty was to serve the society with their speech and teaching skills. Kshatriya were supposed to protect the society as the warriors, the Vaishyas are the traders and look after the socioeconomic conditions of the society. The Sudras who were born out of feet had to serve the rest of the three castes. The principle of ‘Karma’ and ‘Dharma’ is also a part of the caste system.

Occupational Theory

Sharma (2004:184) in his book explains about distribution of occupations in the caste system among Indian Hindu society on the basis of an individual birth. He has mentioned that, “the occupational theory introduced and pounded by Nesfield who mention that occupation is major base of the caste system. Several occupations measured in the higher status while others measured as a lower status and the result of this caste was emerged. According to occupational theory, that ancient Indian Brahmins not only comes as Purohits but Kshatriyas also take to this charge. People those who carried out functions of the Purohits considered superior from all those do not carry out the functions of Purohits called inferior in the society”. According to Nesfield, "function and function alone is responsible for the origin of Caste Structure in India." With different functions several sub-castes such as- Barhai, Bhangi, Chamar, Garadia, Kahar, Lohar, Nai, Patwa, Sonar, Tamboli, Teli, etc. came into existence.

Castes were acknowledged on the basis of predetermined occupation. People who are involved in noble occupations, like teaching and preaching the people, warfare in the battle field, trade and commerce etc. belong to the superior castes. The rest of the people were considered as inferior castes, that is the Sudras. To support this theory, Nesfield gave an illustration that the group working in metals are considered higher than basket makers.

Political Theory

It is believed that caste the Brahmins have initiated the caste system so that they could remain at the top of the

social hierarchy ladder. Ghurye mentions that “caste is the Brahminic child of Indo-Aryans culture cradled in the land of Ganges and hence transferred to other parts of India by Brahminic prospectors”. The brahmins have further included spiritual merit theory of king, in which the priest acquires the support of the leader of the particular territory.

The Theory of Mana

Theory of ‘Mana’ in the structure of castes is developed by J.H.Hutton. He mentioned that ‘Mana’ is a supernatural power which can do good and bad to anyone. It is considered by the tribal that Mana can be an object, place or even an individual. The tribal consider it a mystical power which can be connected or transmitted to anybody through contact or social intercourse. “Mana” is believed as a taboo which is being observed by the tribal community. This taboo system is developed to restrict the community to commit any kind of mistake. Taboos are compulsory for the whole community to observe in order to keep themselves away from the wrath of Mana of other community. So interactions, inter-marriages, etc. with other tribes are abstained. Hutton cited that Mana principles are found in other religions also. In Buddhism, it is appeared as ‘Iddhi’, ‘Kudrat’ is the term used by the Islam and ‘Shakti’ is known in Hinduism.

Racial Theory of Caste

Herbert Risley developed the racial theory of caste system. Other scholars like Ghurye, Majumdar, Westermarck had also supported this theory. It is believed that caste system emerged due to conflict of cultures and the involvement of races. India was conquered by the Aryans in placing themselves as a superior race over the non-Aryans. The Aryans ruled over the non Aryans as they had superior look like- fair in complexion, had good physical structure and well built body like warriors. Hence, the Aryans dominated the inhabitants as inferior and continued their ideas and ceremonial purity on everyone. There was inter caste marriage between Aryan’s men with non- Aryan women, on the other hand they refused to marry their daughters to the non-Aryans. During the Aryans rule the Chandals were given the lowest place in the society. The unequal relation between superior and inferior caste was accountable for the beginning of caste system in India.

Characteristics of Caste

The following are the major attributes of Caste which is explained below-

1. Hereditary: Caste is based on hereditary. It is ascribed status not on achieved values. Purity and impurity of occupation categorises the rank in the caste system. Thus a hierarchy is maintained in the society.
2. Segmentation of the society: Caste system has made the society into different segments. In each segment the society cares for their own caste groups and remains associated with their own caste groups.
3. Hierarchy: Caste system is always characterised by a hierarchical order and different caste according to their rank are placed in a ladder. In this ladder the Brahmins have the top position and come under pure caste whereas the impure caste is ranked at the bottom.
4. Commensality: Upper castes cannot share their food and drink with other lower caste, and sharing of hukka is also prohibited. Therefore, Brahmins are not supposed to take food from any other caste. Only raw and uncooked food can be accepted by the Brahmins.
5. Endogamy: Marriage can be done only within the same caste. Marrying outside the caste is strictly prohibited by the society. But the impacts of westernisation people are going beyond their own caste and are marrying outside of their caste.
6. Purity and pollution: This is an eminent feature of the caste system where a person is observed from its work, dialect, activities, as well as eating habits. The upper castes are considered pure and less polluted than other caste people. Those who consume liquor, meat, take left-over food from upper caste and those who work in menial jobs belong to the impure caste.

7. Occupation: Every caste is allotted with a particular occupation. The Brahmins are superior among all so they are given the privileged work of priesthood and teaching, Kshatriyas belongs to the warrior groups so they are associated with the defense and maintenance of society. Vaishyas are engaged in business and socio economic conditions of the society and Shudras are engaged in serving the rest of the caste, etc.
8. Restriction on performing social and religious privileges: In many instances the impure caste are controlled to perform a few privileged activities. Entering into the temple premises was prohibited. Restrictions were made on using of literary language, wearing of gold ornaments was not allowed and using of umbrella was not permitted.
9. Constrain on speech, custom and dress: Every caste has their different life approach, customs, traditions, wearing of clothes and way of speaking. Only the higher caste can use literally words, and local languages were used by the low caste.
10. Caste Panchayat: Conflicts of the villagers and neighbouring villages are resolved by the caste panchayats. People solve their grievances at the caste panchayats only.

Theories of Caste (M.N Srinivas, G.S. Ghurye, Ambedkar and Lohia)

M.N.Srinivas View

Srinivas view on caste is attributional which analyses caste through its attributes. He mentioned few attributes to understand the caste system. To Srinivas hierarchy is the core and the main essence of caste system. Division of society in hierarchical manner represents the caste system. However, he points out that in society a rank adds status to a community. Like Brahmins are positioned at the higher rank and the untouchables remain at the bottom. He also finds the relation between caste and occupation goes hand in hand. Caste is known by their occupation and many derive their name from the occupation Lohar, Sonar, Kumhar, Teli etc. But these days certain caste names are objectionable as the law has been passed by the Honorable Supreme Court. The caste community cannot always be referred to by that particular name. Srinivas understands caste as a segmentary division. For him each caste is divided into sub castes which are the units of endogamy groups who shared same work experiences, follow same festivals and familiar culture, and follow the rules and norms that are set by the village panchayat.

G. S. Ghurye's View

Ghurye (1961:1) says that, "caste is not permitted to contract marriage with a person of another caste or to undertake an occupation neither other than ancestral nor for the same person to undertake more than one, except if he is of the Caste of Philosophers, when permission is given on account of dignity". In Hindu society the importance of caste is an integral part as it is an indicator of social status. Ghurye (1961: 253) further identifies; "caste as social grouping by characterizing few features of the caste system. Caste distributes the society into segments, while maintaining a hierarchy among the group of people by maintaining restrictions on food and social intercourse among and between people. The civil and religious privileges and disabilities of different sections are strictly maintained. Restriction on the choice of occupation and marriages prevail on the basis of caste system. Besides, it is true that Hindu society is distributed into large number of castes and sub-castes, based on the Varna system. Thus, it stands not only segmented but fragmented based on the idea of high and low, superior and inferior, pure and impure, touchable and untouchable". However, Ghurye relates the foundation of caste system with race. He has linked caste system with Brahmanic system. This has resulted in the structuring of castes and sub-castes. In this regard, he adds, "the various factors that characterize caste society were the result in the first instance of the attempts on the part of the upholders of Brahminic civilization to exclude the aboriginals and the Sudras from religious and social communication with themselves."(Wani,313)

Dr. B.R.Ambedkar

In Ambedkar's book(1946: 69) "Who were the Shudras?" which is also mentioned in Rigveda's Verse (Sloka), where it is said that; "No.12, Hymn No.90, known as 'PurushSukta' of 10th Mandal which says that all Varnas are produced from different parts of the body of the God. The Almighty God, in above Verse No.12 of the Rigveda said that the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra were produced by Him respectively from His mouth, arms, thighs and the feet". The divine theory of Varnas system explains the origin of four varnas. The Brahmans are superior among the rest of the caste. From different body parts of the Lord (Mouth, Arms, Things and Feet) castes has originated.

Ambedkar gave priority to the firmness of the caste system as one of the important features. The four classes are diverse and have uneven status and one comes after the other in the hierarchy ladder. "In the scheme of Manu, the Brahmin occupies at the uppermost rank followed by the Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Class persist everywhere and no society exists without them even a free social order will not be able to get rid of the classes completely. A free social order, however, aims to prevent isolation and exclusiveness because both make the members of the class inimical towards one another".(Ambedkar, 1978: 113).

Ram Manohar Lohia

Ram Manohar Lohia study on caste system is based on the division of labour. In his view caste system exists with hereditary. According to him, "the caste system crushes the human spirit and individual freedom of low castes. For this reason, he suggested special opportunity to be provided to the backward classes. He argued that preferential opportunities should be provided to scheduled caste and other backward sections of the society. Lohia pointed out that backward class consists of women, Harijans, Shudras, Adivasis, depressed Muslims,..... High caste, English education and wealth are the main criteria of India's ruling class therefore, Lohia suggested that preference should be given to these backward classes in the matters of land distribution, employment, and educational opportunities" (Nath, 2002: 216).

He quotes Marx by mentioning that "there is division of labour in the society and people get associated with an occupation. Division of labour leads to specialisation in labour. Large number of branches of production also emerges. People, therefore enter in exchange relationship with other societies" (Marx, 1867: 353).

Changing role of caste in modern India

It is not easy to make a concrete view about the potential outlook of the caste system in this changing time. This is factual that the restrictions on marriage, food habits, lifestyle, behavior pattern, etc., based on the caste system are ending. All this change is possible because of the impact of western education and western culture. In future there will be continuous change in the caste system or it may even change more than we accepted.

Brief highlights on the changing role of caste in India are listed below-

- **Sanskritization:** A practice in which the lower caste can adopt the behaviour guide, life approach of high caste and claim membership in that high caste. Srinivas writes, "Sanskritization is a process by which a lower caste or tribe or any other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a higher or more often twice-born caste." There is no structural change but there is positional change in Sanskritization.
- **Westernisation:** The influence of westernisation has made a severe transformation in the caste system. People have adapted the western style of life, language, dressing style, and behavioural pattern. Westernization has brought more rational outlook in all the fields whether it is in the field of science and technology or any other area of interest. Basically in urban areas Westernisation has changed the structure and functions of the society to a next level.
- **Modernisation:** This has influenced the caste system in a broader way. It has made the caste system more flexible. Modernisation itself is a wider theory than westernization. Any society can modernise

themselves without taking up to western principles. It is a process that retains a scientific outlook along with rational attitude.

- **Dominant Caste:** During 20th century the phenomenon dominant caste has emerged. In recent times this is found both in higher and lower caste. The caste groups that have large land holding, have undergone advanced education and have political influence come under dominant caste.
- **Industrialisation and urbanization:** These two concepts have changed the caste structure. As towns are growing at a faster rate people are also migrating to different places without any restriction. There is liberty in choosing an occupation. There is no strict caste rather it is found that people communicating in restaurants, parks, using are public transport etc. Infact, there has been a flexible approach adopted by every individual.
- **Democratic decentralization:** The structure of the village panchayat has changed. It has created an equal platform for both upper and lower caste people. However, this structure has given a valid perspective for backward castes to prioritise themselves.
- **Caste and politics:** Caste politics is there from ancient times. The Brahmans in early times rule all the rest castes but at present time caste is linked with politics because it plays the role of vote bank. The link of caste with politics has empowered the lower castes.
- **Caste and economy:** It is believed in traditional society that caste economy is functional due to the service exchange among different caste group which is otherwise known as jajmani system. It is a system where services are exchanged between different communities.

Caste system has undergone many changes due to the influence of new socio-economic conditions of our society. In cities and towns people are no more bound with the rigidity of caste norms. But in marriage ceremonies this caste system still prevails. But still it has also changed to a great extent. Endogamy is practiced in our Indian society. On the other hand, many people have undergone for inter-caste marriage and inter-religious marriages too.

Let us sum up

In this paper we have discussed about the caste system in India, its origin, various definitions given by eminent sociologists. Also, we learned about the characteristics of caste system and changing role of caste system in contemporary India. The unit focuses upon the theories of Caste given by M.N Srinivas, G.S. Ghurye, Ambedkar and Lohia.

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