

CASTE SYSTEM IN MODERN INDIA

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Abstract - Every country has some roots in society, so that one group can be discriminated against another group. These roots represent some kind of constraints such as social, political and economic status. Historically, India is a diverse country with number of different castes, religions, creeds, cultures and languages etc. The caste system refers to the rules and restriction governing social intercourse and activity for each group based on their economic status, practice of occupations and social status. The main focus of this paper is to understand the continuity and change in the caste system in modern India.

Keywords- Caste system, caste based discrimination, stratification, occupation mobility

Introduction-

The Indian caste system is historically one of the major aspects where people in India are socially differentiated by class, religion, region, tribe, gender and languages. In spite of this or other forms of differentiate are present in all human societies, it creates a problem when one or more of these dimensions overlap each other and uneven access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige. (Anand, 2020). The Indian caste system is an institution that perpetuates the socio-economic inequalities and limit human functions by unequal dispersions in resource endowments, unequal access to productive resources opportunities and unequal rewards to resource contribution (Bapuji and Chrispal, 2018). Caste system is not absolutely rigid but flexibility is considerably less than its rigidity. Caste has been made and remade over a long period of time. The flexibility of caste existed and remained due to India's remarkable cultural diversity and physical environment and the diversity of its states and political system. The caste system has brought a sequence of complex but intelligible changes in Indian life by changes in religion, state power and material environment (Sharma, 2012).

Objective-

The main objective of this paper is to understand the continuity and change in the caste system in modern India.

Review of literature-

Bharati (2001) the study found that due to positive discrimination, a section of the Scheduled Castes had improved their situation, but most of them were still barren. In rural areas, a majority

of the SC population were lived in slum areas with unhygienic, pathetic and poor conditions.

Kijima (2006) the study showed that the disparities in living standard between SCs/STs and non-SC/ST were not only due to SC/ST households were possessed less human and physical capital, but also differences in characteristics and structure contributed to the overall disparities. The differences in the living standard between scheduled and non-scheduled were also due to the geographical location and lower returns.

Jodhka (2008) the study found that most of SCs/STs were landless and asset less. Besides the economic disabilities they also faced discrimination and prejudice in daily life. The study also found that most of industries in India had been concentrated in the few hands which were associated to the upper castes and top jobs were always kept within the family.

Deshpande (2010) the study observed that from the beginning, caste system played an important role in shaping the occupations as well as values of Indian society. Further, this system led to the discrimination, segregation, violence and inequality in society. Mobility of occupations or caste was restricted.

Desai and Dubey (2011) the study showed that caste disparity did not end with the development. Lower castes people had fewer likely to own land, had fewer years of education, had small household size, and had less consumption expenditure which resulted in lower access to nutrition and lower social network. Further, this process led to unequal access to productive resources. **Goli et al. (2014)** the study found that despite more than six decades of welfare policies and major political mobilization, movement in the lower castes was very low in the state (UP), the enormous inequalities in terms of critical socio-economic indicators like landholdings, higher education and wealth distribution and multi-dimensional poverty among castes still persist in the state.

Kumar et al. (2017) the study observed that the discrimination in caste system was prevailed in many social activities including eating, practicing occupations and social status. The castesystem hurdled in both horizontal and vertical social mobility and forced anyone to continue the traditional occupation against his or her will and capacity.

Bapuji and Chrispal (2018) the study showed that caste system created and perpetuated socio-economic inequalities by influencing uneven distribution of resource endowments, uneven access to productive resources and opportunities and uneven rewards to resources. These three factors of inequality feed from and reinforce each other.

Caste Structure and Properties-

Resley defines cast as “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine,

professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming single homogenous community”. The Indian caste system is a categorization of people into four hierarchically ordered castes called Varnas. They are categorized by occupation and have access to wealth, power and privilege determined (Anand. A, 2020). Caste system is classified into earlier four later five distincts according to Varnas- Brahmin (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishya (agriculture and traders) and Sudras (those engaged in menial jobs), and those doing the most disgusting menial jobs- the Ati Sudras or former untouchable. However the operative category that determines the contemporary code is the Jati. The Jatis are also castes and share the basic properties of the Varnas. But the Jati system is more complicated, it is estimated that the number of jatis are between 2000-3000 in India (Deshpande, 2000). Both of these are the same hereditary categories and also follow the same social code like marriage, occupation and so forth (Deshpande, 2001).

VARNA SYSTEM



At present, according to the Indian constitution, India's population is divided into four categories- Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Forward Castes (FCs).

Origin and History-

The origin of the Indian caste system has many different theories behind it, few of them are religious rest are biological. According to the Rig Veda (the ancient Hindu book), the religious theories describe the primal man, Purush devastated himself to make human society and the different pieces of his body made the four different Varnas. The Brahmins emerged from his head, they are considered the intelligent and the most powerful Varna due to their wisdom and

education, which they represent the brain. The Kashatriyas emerged from his hands, they are considered the warrior caste, which they represent strength. The Vaishyas emerged from his thighs, they are considered the farmers and merchants and the Shudras emerged from his feet, they are considered the labourers and servants. Another religious theory says that the Varnas were formed from the body organs from the Brahma, in Hinduism, who are the creator of the world. The biological theory says that all existing things inherit three one of three categories of qualities. Varna represents the various shades of texture or color and mental temper. There are three Gunas: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Sattva is white, which represents the characteristics related to wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness and other positive qualities. Rajas is red which represents the qualities such as passion, pride and valor. Tamas is black, which represents the dullness, stupidity, lack of creativity and other negative qualities. Historically, however, it is believed that the caste system emerged in India with the arrival of the Aryans around 1500 BC. Of the many cultures that flourished in India, the Indo-Aryan culture has not the earliest literacy record. However, they include the first mention and continuing history of the factors that make up the caste system (Anand, 2020).

Socio-Economic Inequality-

Inequality in social and economic development is interrelated to each other. People who are socially excluded people are economically marginalized and economically marginalized remain socially excluded; this vicious circle passes from one generation to next. There exist many dimensions of economic and social inequalities in society (Kurian, 2007). Generally, inequality can be break down into two categories vertical inequality and horizontal inequality. Vertical inequality means inequality between individuals on the basis of economic parameters like inequality in the level of income, and wealth etc. and horizontal inequality means inequality between various homogenous groups of population. These homogenous groups can be categorized by culture, gender, religious, racial and geographic location etc. Horizontal inequality means inequality in opportunities and outcomes in socio-economic, political and cultural aspects on the basis of these social groups (Stewart et al, 2005).

Inequality is an important feature of these caste groups. These inequalities are not only in the aspects of consumption and wealth but also in the outcome of human development. Caste also plays a vital role in determining the choices of people in occupation, education, place of residence and income (Kumar et al. 2009). The Brahmins who are occupying the top position in the caste hierarchy are the most privileged with all the rights; and as we move from Brahmins to lower caste, rights decrease in a graded manner. The kshatriyas who are next to Brahmins have fewer rights than the Brahmins, but have more rights than the three castes below them. The vaishyas have fewer rights than Brahmins and kshatriyas but more than shudras and untouchables.

According to the caste system, untouchables have no right to property, education and civil rights except for compulsory services for the four castes above them. Thus unique feature of caste system is that it involves limiting the entitlements of economic and social rights from the top to the bottom of the caste hierarchy. It also means that every caste except Brahmins, suffers from the loss of certain rights (Thorat and Madheswaran, 2018).

Changing perspective of the Caste System in Modern India-

The caste system has always been resilient and dynamic by its inconsistencies and contradictions on the one hand, on the other hand due to its interpenetration into economy, polity and culture. Caste has involved people, so it has acquired a meta-legal approval. Caste has never been a simple ritual hierarchy as it has involved the entire matrix of socio-economic and political relation. It has been argued that the caste system needs to be reconceptualized. Caste is no more an easy system of idea and value. It is more important to see the role of caste system as well as the actual behavior of the people. Caste has become a subject of interpretation rather than substantialization. Caste is becoming more of a state of mind of a person. Contemporary changes have reshaped the caste system (Sharma, 2012).

However, there is different perspective by different scholars about caste practice. Some scholars believe that caste based discrimination has been found to be weakening indifferent spheres of the Indian economy, as the people leave their traditional occupations and take up jobs which are free from caste in nature. The other factors such as increasing urbanization, economic growth, mechanization and commercialization have led to weakening the roots of the caste system (Tagade et al. 2016). Today, caste has become more relaxed relationship. There is more food sharing between castes and overeat in local restaurants where castes are less likely to be differentiated. One of the biggest changes that have taken place in India is the commercial business among men (and women later on). Earlier, most men didn't back down from the occupation associated with their caste, such as blacksmithing and potter making. However, now many have adopted new occupations that are not related to their caste, such as governments jobs, teaching, retail, services and machine repair etc. wealth and power in the village are now less intertwined with caste than before and land ownership has become more diverse (Anand,2020). At the same time, the idea of purity and pollution are caused by lower castes has reduced at a good amount. Endogamy is still implemented in families, but not as strictly as before. A female's status is still significantly associated with male status, but the awareness of education and equality for women has spread widely across India. In rural areas, getting out of caste, access to particular occupation and resources is still difficult and slow for the lower castes, but in urban areas, cast is now less significant part of the daily life (Deshpande, 2010).

On contrary, some scholars have different perspective, they have found the evidence of caste based discrimination still present in both economic and non-economic spheres, however, now it is not as explicit as it was in the past (Tagade et al. 2016). Although, caste has been outlawed in India, caste has become a means for challenging for access to resources and power in modern India. Such as educational opportunities, occupation and improvement in life chances etc (Deshpande, 2010). The caste hierarchy has not yet changed, as the bottom line of the economy is still dominated by marginalised sections of the society (Awasthi et al. 2015).

Findings and Conclusion-

The caste system has played an important role in shaping the occupations and roles as well as values of Indian society. The stratification of the caste system is responsible from centuries to continuing down a long road of unfortunate discrimination, segregation, violence and inequality. Even after the so many years of independence, Indian continues to be in the grip of caste system. It is the backbone of the purity or impurity and discrimination. It influences the daily lives and beliefs of Indian people. Historically, India has been surviving as a nation for centuries, with closed groups divided by castes, creeds, religions and languages. Mobility of occupation or caste was rarely witnessed. It can be seen that caste continues to play a crucial role in the dynamic of social, economic and political interactions.

However, the present Indian society is moving from its closed system to a state of change and progress, which is marked by the assertion of human soul. The numerous movements and policies are challenging the injustices associated with the caste system and give courage to individual to be more civil towards other caste members. Many of the lower castes have benefitted greatly from the partial abolition of the caste system. India should be applauded for its continuous efforts to eradicate this system of stratification from its culture. However, it is important to see the importance of caste system, how it has affected the quality of life and social mobility in Indian today.

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