



Review Of Research



HEGEMONIC STUDY OF THE CASTE STRUCTURE IN INDIA

Jagtap Somanath Kisan
B D Kale Mahavidyalaya Ghodegaon ,
Tal- Ambegaon, Dist-Pune.

ABSTRACT :

The caste system in India has remained one of the core points in the academic discussion in India. It has been discussed with reference to the liberal ideas, propagated by thinkers like Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. He has pointed out its origin in the formation of the varna system and its codification in Manusmriti. Even he has compared the caste system with the class structure in the west, as propagated by Karl Marx. Had he done this with reference to Antonio Gramsci, he would have come up with different understanding of the caste system. The present paper aims at analyzing the caste system in association with the socio-political term, hegemony, discussed by Antonio Gramsci.

KEYWORDS: Hegemony, Unconscious, Marxism, Varna System and Caste .

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist and political thinker, who is well known for his contribution to the Communist Party of Italy. He was born (1891) in Sardinia, Italy in a poor family. He couldn't continue his education because

of the financial problems. He had to work hard to support his family during his schooling. He went to Turin, one of the industrial cities in Italy, where he was influenced by the trade unions. Later, he became the founder member and president of Communist Party of Italy and was in contact with Russian communist leaders like Stalin. Due to the rise of fascism or Mussolini in Italy, communist suffered a setback as Mussolini with the help of some upper class

people, got hold of political power. He arrested most of the communist leaders including Antonio Gramsci. He was released conditionally as he was suffering some severe physical problems. He died in 1937 just after his release from the prison. The aforesaid biographical information seems to be leaning towards his understanding of the socio-political term, hegemony. He looks like attaching its apprehension to his life as a communist worker in Italy. Apart from this biographical data of Gramsci, which may seem insignificant, he is famous for reinterpretation of the term hegemony. The term hegemony, though, it is used by Vladimir Lenin, who has used it to mean the power at the hands of the workers or the socialists. One



should move from general to specific that is from the lexical meaning to implied meaning to have the primary knowledge of the term. The dictionary meaning of the word 'hegemony' is "control by one country, organization etc, over other countries/organizations." This meaning doesn't tell us what Gramsci meant by this term. It is Antonio Gramsci who explained it very sharply and differently. He used it to mean "domination of the one state within a confederation is now generally understood to mean domination by consent¹". The ruling class doesn't always rule the people forcefully as it requires the great power and energy. In spite of wasting its energy for controlling the people, it makes such an atmosphere which falsely proves beneficial for the oppressed class.

Karl Marx has emphasized economism in his writing. His understanding of social structure seems to be limited to economic factors only. Antonio Gramsci, like Louis Althusser modified Marx and in spite of focusing on only economical structure of the society, he threw light on the cultural aspects of the people. Economy can not be the only factor which determines the structure of the society. There are other factors too which decide the future of the class. He considered culture, intellect, race etc as the decisive factors. That is why the scholars from other disciplines have also applied the term hegemony for the complete understanding of the discipline. As far as post colonialism is concerned, scholars like Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, etc utilized it during their careers. In 'Empire Writes Back', Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin referred hegemony to strengthen their stands. This text is regarded as a reliable material of post-colonialism. While studying feminism also we come across the term hegemony, especially in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's writings, as she considers herself as 'Para-disciplinary, ethical philosopher'. Above explanation of the term hegemony is satisfactory, though not complete but it may explain the complexities of the Indian society.

The present paper aims at associating the idea of hegemony with the caste structure in India. The word, caste has its origin in Portuguese language which means a socio-cultural class. The caste structure seems to be one of the features of India. Some people support it as means to hold the society together, while some other believes it to be an oppressive mechanism. Those who consider it as an oppressive mechanism are in favour of dismantling the caste system. The destruction of the caste system has been the aim of thinkers like Jotiba Phule and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. They do not seem to be influenced by what Gramsci has said because Jotiba Phule precedes him chronologically and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, though his contemporary has nor referred him in his writing. In spite of all these things, thoughts they propose and Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony seems to be similar as far as the liberation of the oppressed is concerned.

Indian society was divided into four *varnas*, based on their occupations, assigned to them by the oppressive mechanism. The top most in the hierarchy was *Brahmin*. The people belonging this *varna* used to perform religious rituals. It was dominant class of the society. It had control over all the means of the productions indirectly as they could ask anyone to do anything they wanted in the name of religion. The second in hierarchy was *Kshatriya*. This *varna* was supposed to look after the administration as a ruling class. Their duty was to protect the people from foreign as well as internal invasion. Though they had immense power, they were indirectly directed by *Brahmins* as it was codified in the religious scriptures that it is the duty of *Kshatriya* to protect religion from other religious invasion and maintain the religious order. Apart from these two *varnas*, *Vaisya* and *Shudra* were third and fourth in the hierarchy.

Vaisya is a class of the merchants who were busy with their trade. They couldn't oppose the brutality of the kings as they were looking for getting concessions from them. *Shudra*, lowest castes in the society, had to do menial work to support their families. They were not allowed to enter public places. They were deprived of the basic human rights such as to have potable water as well as the right to life. A place, far away from the village or town like ghettos, was their homes. Thus the upper *varnas* was the supreme class in Indian Society. They would function as mediators between people and the God.

In the context of the caste structure, ideas of Marx can't explain the cause of lower caste people's exploitation by the upper castes. In this case, economy didn't decide the structure of Indian society. It is the caste which determines the class of the people. Shudras were exploited because of their castes. Therefore

one should not only consider economism of the Marx but also the thoughts of Gramsci, to solve the riddle of Indian society, because Gramsci has fought for the prevalent workers' class and their rights. According to him the people are crushed not just because of unequal distribution of the means of the production but because of race, religion, caste etc. they belong to. The use of the term 'hegemony' to understand Indian society may be useful because it may answer some unanswered questions of casteism in India.

Every ruling class produces the material which justifies their power over the other classes of the society. After crushing Buddhism, The upper *varnas* were thinking of codifying their supreme power to get the consent from every part of the society for their superiority over other classes and *Manusmriti* performed the role of the codification which has fixed it. It was considered as a holy book to be used for administration of the state. Thus, they succeeded in inserting their selfish ideas into administration through religious scriptures. People were compelled to obey the rules of *Manusmriti*. Later on people also started to regard this book ideal and they began to blame their fortune and their castes and not *Manusmriti*. Thus they started to rule the people with their consents.

Language is the main factor to rule any country or a social class. The Buddhist scriptures were destroyed which were in Pali language that could be understood by all the people irrespective of caste and gender. The dominant *varnas* produced religious material into Sanskrit, a language, understood by the caste in power only. Thus the words of the upper castes person were considered as the words from the god because people couldn't study Sanskrit language because they were not allowed to do so. Therefore, lower caste communities believed the words of the upper *varnas*, and the upper *varnas* took the advantage of their ignorance of Sanskrit language. They could do anything in the name of god and the lower *varna*, *Shudra* people didn't dare to oppose the commands of the upper castes.

Thus, the upper *varnas* had been ruling Indian society with their consents. Gramsci's idea, 'hegemony' is helpful to have complete understanding of the caste structure. It gives us various angles to look at the castes structure and its impact on Indian society. The upper *varnas* were in minority. In spite of this, they could rule other *varnas* because they participated in their exploitation and permitted it unconsciously.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Ambedkar, B.R. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Nagpur: Samyak Prakashan, 2007.
- Das, Veena. *Structure and Cognition: Aspects of Hindu Caste and Ritual*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Ghurye, G.S. *Caste and Class in India*, Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1950.
- Husain, Iqbal. *Karl Marx on India*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2016.
- Ives, Peter. *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci (Reading Gramsci)*, London: Pluto Press, 2004.
- Ketkar, S.V. *History of Caste in India*, New York: Taylor and Carpenter, 1909.
- Morris, Rosalind. *Can the Subaltern Speak? – Reflections on the History of an Idea*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.