CASTE QUESTION AND THE URBAN MIND

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ABSTRACT

Discarding the theories that analyse caste from an essentialist point of view and in some kind of absolutist terms, contemporary sociologists have pointed to its changing dimensions. These changes are simultaneous with the shifts in the 'meaning and legitimacy' of caste as a total system of stratification. Sociologists have argued that it is reflected in the change in the vocabulary as well. Some have also moved a step forward to declare the 'obituary' of the system. This paper will focus on two related aspects in which shifts in 'meaning and legitimacy are evident; these are caste hierarchy and caste identity.

KEYWORDS: *Caste; Hierarchy; Identity, Varna, Jati]*

INTRODUCTION:

In an article 'Caste in Contemporary India' Beteille (2000) has pointed to a significant aspect of caste which is clearly visible among a section of educated urban population of our country. According to him, changes are taking place in the meaning and legitimacy of social relationships and social activities. He also points out that we will fail to understand the significance of those changes if we continue to think of caste in the conventional way. The observation is important, for, the significance of caste is often analysed from an essentialist point of view. It is also believed that for a long period of time caste system not only had a far-reaching influence guiding every sort of inter-human transactions and relationships, but was also a source of endogenous force which held different categories of people together. This 'total system of stratification', as has been described by Berreman (1981), was buttressed by the *karma* doctrine of Hindu philosophy, and hence, its legitimacy could have hardly been challenged. Even when some sporadic socio-religious movements tried to question its legitimacy, caste system with its overall hegemony successfully managed to marginalise those efforts.

Whether caste was a hierarchical arrangement based on the degree of purity (Dumont, 1988), or it was a discrete category marked by differences (Gupta, 2011), it was something upon which much of social honour of a parson depended. What is important is that in our traditional caste-based society, the social status of an individual was directly related to his/her caste; and according to its relative ranking that particular individual enjoyed social honour. Caste identity *was important* in such type of setup, for the reasons quite different from the reasons it *is important* for a person living in an urban area today. Beteille (2000) rightly says that caste has not 'disappeared'; it is rather being manifested in new forms with new meanings. Thus Beteille has directed our attention to a right issue. Obviously it is not in tune with the essentialist position that focuses on the essential features of caste system putting it into a static frame work. This paper would try to point out two related aspects in which the 'shift in the meaning' is clearly evident. These are caste hierarchy and caste identity.

Some sociologists have argued that in course of time caste has ceased to be a *system* as it *was* in traditional India. Srinivas (2003) in an article 'An Obituary on Caste as System' shows how discrete units of

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caste are being emerged obliterating what may be called a system that were believed to be existed in the past. Beteille (2012) observes that this is kind of change is highly reflected in the day to day use of the term 'jati' instead of 'varna' in today's discourses. Today in almost every form of communication we use the term 'jati' not 'varna'. But this was not the case always. In traditional vocabulary the term 'varna' was more commonly used to denote caste system. To Beteille (*ibid*.: 8) 'the *term jati* refers more to the units that constituted the system …than to the system as a whole'. This change in vocabulary corresponds to the changes in the nature of caste itself. But my point here is that this has not automatically shattered the hierarchical nature of caste which is directly linked to the amount of prestige given to a particular caste by the society as such. I shall try to point out how in course of time the irrelevance of caste identity in an urban situation has eroded the significance traditional hierarchy in urban Bengal and vice versa.

CASTE HIERARCHY: PRACTICAL RELEVANCE CONTEXTUALISED

Castes are generally viewed as 'status groups' having some sort of homogeneity among its members in terms of social prestige, ritual purity and occupational skills. These homogeneous groups could maintain their group boundaries generation after generation because entry to these groups was exclusively hereditary. Naturally the hierarchical structure of caste remained in tact for a long period of time. This is not to say that caste hierarchy was invariant; rather there were enough ambiguities and confusions regarding the hierarchy found in one village and the hierarchy found in another. But so far as a particular village was concerned there was more or less stable and well-defined ranking of castes.

The real onslaught on caste system, however, came with the economic changes and its consequent urbanisation thanks to British rule. As a corollary what Beteille (2012) calls the 'consciousness of caste' also started changing. The overall impact was tremendous. During the latter half of nineteenth century we find lower caste movements like that of the Namasudras of Eastern Bengal and Rajbangshis of Northern Bengal against the exploitative and hierarchical nature of caste system. These movements were different from earlier movements against caste system (like the Bhakti Movement) in that these were not mere socio-religious movements, but were grounded on a secular logic, that touched not only its adherents but also appealed to a wide range of population cutting across caste, religious or other divisions. Brahminical ascendancy and the legitimacy of the notion of purity on which the hierarchy was founded were severely questioned by the elites also gradually by the common people who were started incorporating the new value system mostly injected by the British. For obvious reasons these changes were first evident in urban areas.

Social environment in urban areas is quite different from that of the rural areas; and to adjust with its dynamism urban people develops a kind of mental foundation which is equally different from that of its rural counterparts. Let us now look at the psychological foundation the urban people rest upon. We are indebted to Georg Simmel, who beautifully showed the 'essentially intellectualistic character of the mental life' of the urban people (Simmel, 2012). The urban mind, according to his analysis, is stratified into two distinct levels. The upper level or strata is the locus of reason – impersonal and rational. The lower one, or the core, is characterised by irrationality, emotionality and sensitivity. The urban people deal with the rapid social changes from the upper strata of the mind and keep the inner core undisturbed and emotionally stable. For the same reason hundreds of people whom an urban people meet everyday are dealt with sheer impersonality from the upper strata. If caste is a 'state of mind', then it is impossible for an urbanite to take it into account when he or she interacts with different unknown people every day in an urban area.

It is therefore not a 'bourgeois dream' as has been described by Nicholas Dirks (2002) that caste would disappear from every sphere of life 'when it entered the city'. Rather the fact is that caste both as 'mode of action' and 'ideological system of thought' (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994) is becoming irrelevant in almost every sphere of life except a few like marriage and worship. Berreman (1981) has rightly observed that caste system 'is not well suited to complex, rapidly changing urban-industrial organization.' The homogeneous nature of a particular caste is seriously threatened in an urban environment which is characterised by openness, diversity and dynamism. Occupational differentiation, emphasis on individual

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freedom, and scope for greater mobility ultimately sever the link between caste and occupation. Naturally the traditional homogeneous groups themselves became differentiated in terms of property and power in an urban area and thus new and competitive hierarchies emerged cutting across the old one. These class hierarchies are less clear and less defined than the old and locally well-accepted caste rankings.

      All these happened along with a change in the value system. Emphasis on universality, individuality and achievement go hand in hand with urban state of affairs. This is no surprise that ultimately the class hierarchy, having no primordial orientation, wins over the old system. But there is always some resistance, as has been analysed by Bhardwaj (1995), which 'arises from the imposition of the modernistic system with different values and emphasis.' The degree of orientation to the past may vary, but it is inevitable. And this is the answer to the question raised by many regarding the existence of caste in at least some domains of life despite multifaceted ideological, social and economic attacks on it. I doubt whether it could be called 'resilience of caste system' at all. Take for example, among the vast majority of the sweeper class, one will easily find the presence of so called low castes. Caste elements can also be found in our day to day use of common terminologies, like *goala* (milkman)*, munchi* (cobbler) etc. but these are merely the legacies; we today rarely count one's caste in order to put him or her into a frame of reference for further interactions. Caste per se is not our primary consideration today. We often conventionally use these terms to denote a particular category (like milkman or cobbler) not to mean his or her caste as such. The changes in the sense such terms are used these days are not insignificant.

      We shall come to another interesting point now. Social differentiation and growing complexity of urban life give rise to diverse interests which traditional caste groups do not represent and therefore can not fulfill. People, in order to cope up with the convolutions of urban life, come together and form different associations. Caste distinctions in these *open* and *secular* associations are not only ignored but also seem simply irrelevant. Some one can argue that the number of caste associations is increasing in the cities. But I think most of these new caste associations represent economic or some other *secular* interests of a particular caste but hardly strengthen 'caste' as an *institution*. Caste identities in these cases provide some material benefits. The same can be said of the caste based political mobilisations which create temporary caste-sentiments but do not ultimately reinstate caste structure in any way on the basis of old values and practices. Thus inevitability and preponderance of modern organisations undermine the significance of caste hierarchy or caste as such.

CASTE IDENTITY: THE FADING VERACITY

      When a society moves from status to contract along with endless diversification of familial, occupational, lingual and religious backgrounds, 'identity' of an individual becomes more complex and, sometimes, confusing. In a simple type of society caste or kinship provides the fundamental source of identity of an individual. But for obvious reasons such type of ties has no meaning and use in an urban setting. So there are reasons to believe that 'caste identity tends to languish with the progress in education, urbanization and the development of an orientation toward individual achievement and modern status symbol' (Kolenda, 1997).

      There has visibly been a shift in basic orientation – a shift from what is called ascription to achievement. This has affected, I think, the effectiveness of caste identity in two ways. Firstly, being absolutely hereditary, caste has lost much of its significance. Today the success and failure of an individual is measured purely in material terms – by his/her occupational status, educational level or material possession. In an urban area a little qualified Brahmin does in no way enjoy a better position than a so-called university professor (whatever be his/her caste status). Therefore the caste identity plays no role as social interactions in these contexts take place on different grounds.

      Secondly, social honour does not automatically come to an individual from his/her caste position today as it did in the past. Naturally except some few occasions like marriage, worship etc. caste position does not matter at all. The irrelevance of caste identity in other important spheres of life ultimately reduces the significance of caste as such. It is true that in our country some groups always make use of their caste

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identity in an assertive way in order to get some constitutional facilities but it is very limited in scope as it is purely instrumental.

Now the question is why does till now caste identity seem important in such cases like marriage and worship? In fact during marriage, if it is negotiated, the guardians of both sides want security in selecting somebody from their own group. Conventionally it is caste in case of the Bengali Hindus. It is imagined that people of the same caste at least have some cultural similarity, in the wider sense, which is comfortable for all concerned – for the bride and her family or for the groom and others. When all other information (regarding occupation, family background, habits etc) about the *other* party is unknown caste similarity, being the only similarity, acts as a useful criterion to start the negotiation. This is not to say that traditional ethos of caste does not exist in some conservative minds. My point here is that to a vast majority the earlier hegemony of caste system has been dismantled. So, when some conservative guardians bring caste differences to fore during negotiation they are widely ridiculed and criticised.

In case of religion too, anyone can notice, a very few persons till now believe in the sanctity of the Brahmin in the sense that they can mediate between man and God or Goddess. Here again people find security in tradition.[i] Moreover religion itself is conservative. Though the educated urban people do not have belief in the sacrosanct power of the Brahmins, they never invite a non-Brahmin priest even if he has enough knowledge and capability to perform what a Brahmin does at the time of worship. The reason is that there is a direct association between religion and custom, or, in a wider sense, religion and tradition. People when perform some religious practices just follow the convention and do not judge these from a rational point of view. Therefore no one expects that they would take the risk of experiments while surrendering themselves to the ultimate power. So it can safely be assumed that religion would be the last shelter of caste, at least in its symbolic form, even in an urban setup.

It is true that there are evidences of some stray incidences of caste discrimination and caste violence in contemporary Bengal (Ghosh, 2001). But the whole-hearted condemnations these events received from every corner remind us of the virtual demise of the hegemonic reign of caste system. Ghosh (*ibid*.) has rightly said 'Both at the state level and in the popular imagination caste discrimination is not a major public issue in West Bengal.'

In *Caste, Politics and the Raj: Bengal 1872-1937* Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (1990) wrongly observes that not only the 'expected *collapse*' of caste system under the British rule did not take place, as it was anticipated by the nineteenth century Bengali intellectuals, but also caste was invigorated. He tries to find out the cause:

Even in the third decade of the twentieth century more than ninety-nine per cent of the Bengali Hindus mentioned their caste status when the census enumerators knocked at their doors. This was mainly because the so called leveling influences of the colonial rule, instead of pulling out the individuals from the primordial social aggregates, had in fact to a rejuvenation of such social ties (Bandyopadhay, 1990: 11-12).

This 'rejuvenation', however, in his opinion, gave rise to different caste associations. Though Bandyopadhyay (*ibid*.) has rightly pointed to the changes in the 'ritual content' of caste over time, he believes that caste identity as a criterion for social and political mobilisation became important as the 'horizontal solidarity', particularly among the lower castes, was necessary to fight against all sorts of inequalities. This position is almost similar to that of Gupta (2004: xiii), who, analysing the 'phenomenology of caste' declares that today 'castes are proud of their identity, regardless of where textual traditions place them on the purity-pollution hierarchy'.

These arguments try to establish what Gupta calls the 'trump of identity' overlooking the overall diminishing legitimacy of *jatibyabastha* throughout the country. I have already argued that as these associations represent some strategic and practical interests of its members and have little concern over resuscitating the traditional caste norms, practices and organisation, caste *per se* therefore remains bereft of attention. Could it really be called   trump of identity?

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CONCLUSION: A NOTE FROM HISTORY

Jati, a transformed version of *varna,* has traversed a long way of history, since its creation, to be sufficiently rigidified to penetrate almost every sphere of Hindu social life. Gupta (2001) analyses from a pan-Indian perspective that the features of caste system, as distinct and unique form of stratification, were crystallised from the seventh to the twelfth century A. D. Interestingly when *jatibyabastha* in other parts of the country was being consolidated in an unprecedented degree, Bengal witnessed a quite different and opposite process. From the eighth to twelfth century Buddhism became popular in this region thanks to the Pal dynasty (eighth to twelfth century A. D.). The founder of this religion Gautama Buddha himself was not a Brahmin and its precepts were, in fact, a challenge to orthodox Brahminism. Other Buddhist dynasties of that period like the Kamboja (tenth century A. D.) and Chandra (tenth – eleventh century A.D.) also had contributed to the process in different ways (Bandyopadhyay, 1990). The existence of Jainism also had a negative impact on caste system. Srinivas (2003: 458) has made this point clear:

Both Buddhism and Jainism in their origins were protest movements against not only the Brahminical claims to superiority but also against the Brahminical predilection to perform elaborate sacrifices involving killing of animals, in the course of propitiating their many gods. Buddhism emphasized the importance of right thoughts and conduct (the eightfold path) while Jainism made non-killing ('ahimsa') central to the faith. Both were non-theistic sects, and both anti-brahmin.

So there are historical reasons behind the fact that caste rigidity in Bengal has been less stern and less rigid throughout in comparison with others parts of the country. Only during the Sen and Barman dynasty (eleventh to thirteenth century) ascendancy of Brahminism and the resurgence and consolidation of caste system changed the scenario. Muslim conquest of Bengal in the thirteenth century again was a real spank on caste discrimination and caste rigidity (Bandyopadhyay, 1990). Thus much before the initiation of the process of restructuring of Indian society on a western model, the seeds of the demise of caste as a *system* were sown here. As a result, with the passage time, this institution has become more and more insignificant in Hindu social life. Undue emphasis in contemporary discourses on the continuing existence caste, either as a system of hierarchy or as a source of identity, putting it in a what Gupta (2004: ix) says 'timeless, unchanging analytical frame' debar us from analysing its practical irrelevance as 'a mode of action' today.

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