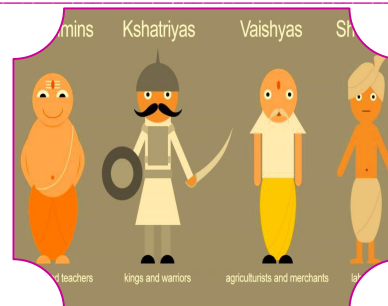




FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR PERSISTENCE OF CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

Nukala Sridhar

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science,
Osmania University, Hyderabad, Telangana.



ABSTRACT

Caste system has been unique to Indian sub continent. It has been existing in India since ages. Many social reformers like Ambedkar, Jyothi ba Phule, Ramaswamy Naicker tried to reform, if not, annihilate the caste system but their efforts bore no fruits. This can be partly due to low social development in the country and primarily because Indian are deeply religious. However, lot has changed in twenty first century, but still caste system has strong hold in the country. This paper mainly aims to illustrate the factors responsible for persistence of caste system in India. For example Ascriptive in nature; The Urge for Domination; Theory of Karma and Hegemony; Societal Pressure; Not highlighted at the International level; Initial, Constitutional approval led to its Perpetuation; Politicization of caste; Indian administration controlled by Brahmins; Media; Religious conversions, no solution.

KEYWORDS: Hegemony, Domination, Politicization of Caste, Constitution, Indian Administration, Media.

INTRODUCTION :

Castes in India, needs no introduction, it is what race to western world. If the virus of color or race divided the social fabric of the west, bacteria of caste division has fragmented Indian society. It is inextricably interlinked with Indian society and can be considered as way of life, for most of the Indians.

Caste is an “endogamous and hereditary sub division of ethnic group occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with such other divisions”. [1]

It is unique institution to Indian sub continent, in the sense; it legitimizes and enforces practice of discrimination against people born in subordinated castes (i.e. Shudras and Untouchables). These Practice of discriminations is humiliating, exclusionary and exploitative. It is pertinent to look at some basic facets of Caste system in India, before discussing factors responsible for its existence.

The Features of Caste System in India:

1. Caste is determined by Birth. One is born into caste of his parents. It is not a matter of choice. One cannot leave it nor can one choose to join it.
2. Caste system imposes strict rules on marriage. Men/Women from any caste are allowed to marriage Men/Women from their own caste. i.e. endogamy (marriage within caste).
3. Caste system also involves restriction on social interaction like on food, food sharing and social interaction, what kind of food they may or may not eat, with whom they can share food and come about.
4. It also involves restriction on Occupation. A person born in a particular caste is allowed to carry on their parents occupation. i.e. hereditary. Others member could not enter into it.
5. Caste system is hierarchal. It involves large number of sub castes and every caste has a hierarchy of rank and status. Every person has a caste and every caste has rank in the system.
6. Caste involves sub castes and further sub divisions. Hence, it referred as segmental organization.

There is a misconception that Caste is waning in urban areas and strictly followed in Rural Areas. Although, strictness is not same as in rural areas, urban areas do follow Caste system. Both in Rural and Urban areas 1, 2, 5, 6 are still followed. Whereas 3, 4 are changing with Dalits being educated and using constitutional safeguards for their own upliftment, but still faces discrimination in some or other forms.

History in Brief:

The roots of the Caste system can be traced back to later vedic period. But, during this period society was divided into four fold division and it was primarily based on occupation rather than birth. Movement across the categories seem not only possible, but quite common. However, Post Later Vedic period, it became very rigid institution during Gupta age, added to this Britishers had institutionalized caste system by including caste in Census and in hierarchy, Moreover Indian government extended this caste perpetuation by accepting Mandal report in 1991. Even though various reformers tried to reform caste system, if not annihilate, from time to time. Caste system has survived against all odds levied against it and continues to prevalent in Indian society.

Ascriptive in Nature

Unlike, the west, Individual is not free in Indian society, he/she is born into a community and inherent all the customs/traditions/beliefs of that community. It means individual fate is decided by his birth. He/She holds enormous amount of attachment towards customs and traditions of their community. Because of this ascriptive nature, they become emotional, when someone tried to reform their age old practices and beliefs. The Caste system which is based on purity-pollution and custom of endogamy has been passed from one generation to another generation, similar to that of parents passing on their wealth to their children. This also makes young generation narrow minded and they remain as obstacle in the path of reformation of caste system in India.

The Urge for Domination

Castes in India are based on hierarchy and everyone in the system has stakes to maintain it. There is an inherent urge to dominate among all the sections in the caste system.[2] Ambedkar called it as, "infection of imitation". The top most caste want to dominate other three, the second want to dominate third and fourth. Similarly, the third want to dominate fourth. Unfortunately, this urge for domination exists within, Shurdas or Untouchables, although they experienced humiliation at the upper caste in similar manner. They try to control and dominate, if necessary, vulnerable and most oppressed in their caste too. This urge for domination within their caste makes, Dalits unable to realize, in Marxian term, CLASS IN ITSELF and eventually transforming itself into CLASS FOR ITSELF.

Theory of Karma and Hegemony

No system will be ever succeeded unless and until it is accepted by all the parties involved in it. Capitalist system in the West has been surviving, because it created, what Gramscian called as "Hegemony". He says, "The Capitalist system has made their ideas as COMMON SENSE of the people and created legitimacy through civil society".

Similarly, the Brahmins in India have created their hegemony to sustain caste system in India through "Theory of Karma", which also have a religious sanctity, found in Hindu scriptures.* They say, One is born in subordinated caste because of his wrong deeds in the past birth. Any defiance to the caste system would enhance sentence, which also means another recycle of rebirth as Untouchable or Shurdas. Brahmins have enslaved the minds of subordinated caste with is false notion.

Otherwise, how a system which is based on graded inequality, a system in which there is ascending scale of respect and descending scale of contempt, a system which is based on birth and not on worth, could ever survive so many years, despite best efforts by many great social reformers in different periods of time.

Societal Pressure

Indians are dualistic in nature; they are rational at school and superstitious at home. On one hand they understand the scientific principle like they way in which this world has been formed etc. on other hand they practice all superstitious belief, even though they knew they are wrong.

As said by Lord Byron, "Those who will not reason are bigots, those who cannot reason are fools, those who dare not, are slaves". Most of the Indians belong to the third category. They are fearful to break the age old beliefs, for the simple reason, Man is a social animal and he/she doesn't want be a bigot in the eyes of his community.

This societal pressure leads to all kinds of social evils in the society like excommunication-out casting caste members for breaching caste principles, honor killing-in which the family member become the perpetuator, to restore the honor of the family. Supreme court of India said, "there is nothing honor in honor killing and in Bachan Singh, S.C. considered honor Killing as rarest of the rare to award Capital Punishment". Even though when the all religions in general, Hinduism in particular, preaches about love, peace, Indians are entangled in this caste system and are unable to come out of it.

Not highlighted at the International level

United nations have passed many resolutions condemning racial discrimination, religious fundamentalism, wars etc. but, caste system in India have found no resonance in International platform and it have escaped from International scrutiny. The main reason for this is, many sociologist from India has projected caste as cultural inheritance from the past and cannot be compared caste with race. They advocate "sovereignty principle" of nations and says World community should not interfere with the internal matter of the country. With this the caste system is perpetuating in India without condemnation from outside world.

Initial, Constitutional Approval led to its Perpetuation

Indian Constitution is one of the first documents to establish political equality among all its citizens, irrespective of caste, sex etc. It also provides positive discrimination to bring disadvantages groups on par with the main stream society. Following the liberal tradition, Indian constitution has accorded many fundamental rights to all citizens in the country. This includes Right against discrimination based on caste, creed and sex (Article 15). By doing so, founding father thought to eliminate caste from the system. However, at the same the time they have provided reservation based on caste. Although, the constitution envisaged reservation should be only for ten years. With continuous constitutional amendment they have extended up to 2020 and will continued do so... Supreme court of India said, "Caste reservation are only enabling polices and cannot continue indefinitely, if they do, it defeat the whole process".

Politicization of Caste

Along with constitutional sanctions, the caste reservation has been politicized in India. No political party in power is willing to talk about removal of caste reservation, with fear of losing their potential vote bank and eventually loosing power. Parties have also started to mobilize people on Caste. Rajini Kothari has said, "Caste mobilization has made India most successful democracy among third world countries". There have been Political parties, Pressure groups based on Caste. With caste became one of the top most priority in electoral politics, it is unlikely to eliminated, by a system which formed by caste itself.

Indian Administration controlled by Brahmins

If caste system has to be eliminated from Indian Society, there has to be a great deal of work done by Indian Administration. However, it is unrealistic to expect a system which is mostly dominated by

Brahmins in each and every field, to work for annihilation of caste. This is evident if we look the statistics, According to CSDS study, 47% of all Supreme Court Chief Justice between 1950 and 2000 were Brahmins. During same period, 40% of the Associate justices in the High Courts and lower courts were Brahmins. The Backward classes Commission, in a 2007 report, said that 37.17 percent of the Indian Bureaucracy was made up of Brahmins. Most of them occupied the top posts.[3]

Media

"A lie will become truth, when said by many". This is true in case of media. It directly appeals to the personal emotions and alter people's attitude towards particular persons/things etc. Untouchables could have gained some respect or Caste system would have receded at least in twenty-first century, had media worked for above mentioned things. Unfortunately, Dalits didn't own media. i.e. Print or electronic, to put forth their own ideas or at least to make their voice hear to the government. In India, most of the news print and news television channels are owned by Brahmins and Vaishya's and hardly anyone is owned by Dalits.

Religious Conversions, no solution

Most of the untouchables, even today, in India tried to escape from the clutches imposed on them by the rigid caste system in Hinduism by embracing other religions. Many untouchables converted into Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism. Except Buddhism, Caste system has penetrated into other religions also. Elites in these religions have showed discrimination based on caste, and subjected to them same harassment that they faced in Hinduism. Hence, religious conversion also didn't help Untouchables to escape from caste system and live a life with dignity.

Hence, there is no single factor but multiple factor for existence of caste in present day society although the causes origin of caste is not co terminus with persistence of caste in the present day society.

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