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CASTEISM IN THE SIKH COMMUNITY



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Short Profile

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ABSTRACT:

Casteism is an essential constituent of socio-political discourse in India. Hierarchical social structures in Hindu society were based on the principle of division of labour but latter on the four-fold division of Hindu society gave birth to social injustice, discriminations and violation of human dignity of weaker sections of society. Sikhism repudiated the Varnashrama Dharma theory and severely condemned the caste based discriminations and ill-treatment with subaltern sections of society. Sikh Gurus emphasised on unity of

humankind and urged their followers to rise above parochial and man-made caste divisions. However, during the Misal period, caste considerations gradually began to creep in the Sikh society. British rule in India had further widened the social divisions among various sections of Sikh society. After the independence, the politicisation of institution of caste within the Sikh society created mutual suspicion, apprehensions and caste conflicts in the Sikh society. Today Sikhs are moving away from the teachings of Sikh Gurus and are excessively engrossed in caste considerations. Casteism among Sikhs has damaged the spirit of Sikhism and image of Sikh community at the national and international level.

KEYWORDS

Casteism, socio-political, Hierarchical social structures.

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INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND:

Caste system is an essential characteristic of the Indian society. It is the inseparable part of Hindu social order. It has been justified in the ancient Hindu religious texts. It was created with view to assign the function to a person to whom he is best suited. In the beginning, the aptitude of an individual had decided his role in the society. This kind of division of labour was based on the belief that a person cannot perform the all functions in the efficient manners. He should be assigned a duty in accordance with his intrinsic skills and aptitude. This would be advantageous for a person as well as for the society. So long, this system was confined to the division of labour and performance of the social roles, this system was sustained and justified. However, with passage of time the shortcomings of this system began to come on the surface and created an inequitable social order. People began to take pride of taking birth in the upper caste groups and started to look down upon the people belonging to lower caste groups. The man made social divisions gave birth to the social discriminations, inequalities and social injustice. Brahmans and Kashtriya

were in the dominant position and they exploited the Vaishyas and Shudras. The untouchables were compared to animals. They were ill-treated in the society and were forced to remain at the periphery. They were confined to serve the people of upper three-caste group's viz., Brahmans, Kashtriyas and Vaishyas. They faced the horrible social humiliation and were denied the civil liberties. The humiliation, exploitation and social degradation of lower sections for the centuries has created the undemocratic, unfair and elitist socio-political and economic structures. Feudalism, casteism and frequent foreign invasions further deteriorated the social status of lower caste people and perpetuated their inferior position in the social, economic, religious and political spheres.

REPUDIATION OF CASTE SYSTEM IN SIKHISM:

Guru Nanak and his successors Sikh Gurus raised the strong voice against caste ridden and exploitative Hindu social order. They disapproved the caste system and strived for the casteless society. They repudiated the Varnashrama Dharma and four fold division of Hindu society. They severely criticised the Brahmans for their false claim of divine origin and higher status. They condemned Hindu priestly class for their discriminatory attitudes towards downtrodden masses. Brahmans misinterpreted the ancient sacred religious texts and tried to dominate the lower strata's of society.

Sikh Gurus pleaded the case of subaltern people and contributed lot to uplift their socio-economic and political status. Sikh Gurus established the various socio-religious institutions to promote the spirit of social equality. Guru Nanak established the institution of Dharmsal (Sikh Gurdwara) and provided an opportunity to people of all castes to visit the Gurdwaras to seek the socio-spiritual salvation. He provided the equal freedom of faith and worship to the downtrodden. He pleaded that there should be no restriction on their entry in the Sikh Gurdwaras. He opened the closed doors of spiritual salvation for the lower caste groups. This was indeed a revolutionary step in the sense that at that time there were restrictions on the lower caste people to enter in the Hindu temples. Guru Nanak gave them a right to participate in the religious activities. Guru Nanak also established the institution of Sangat (holy religious congregation) and Langar (common kitchen) to promote social harmony and to uplift the social status of deprived sections of society. Guru Amar Das, third Sikh Guru, introduced Manji system, appointed twenty two persons of all castes, and authorised them to spread

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the message of Sikhism. He disapproved the priestly rights of Brahmins. Guru Ram Das, fourth Sikh Guru built the Harmandir Sahib (presently known as the Golden Temple) in Amritsar in the sixteenth century. There are four doors of this temple, which indicates the liberal, egalitarian and democratic vision of Guru Ram Das. He allowed the entry of people belonging to all four castes. People of all castes, colours, creeds, races etc are cheerfully welcomed in this temple. Guru Arjan Dev, fifth Sikh Guru, compiled the holy Sikh Scripture i.e. Sri Guru Granth Sahib . He rejected the claims of Brahmins that sacred texts should be in Sanskrit only. Guru Arjan compiled the divine hymns of Sikh Gurus, Hindu Bhagats and Sufi saints in the vernacular language i.e. Punjabi in Gurmukhi script. He included the divine hymns of low caste Hindu Bhagats and eliminated the social barriers to inculcate the sense of equality among people.

Guru Gobind Singh, tenth Sikh Guru, created the Khalsa Panth in 1699. His Khalsa Panth is a prototype of a casteless society. He gave an opportunity to people belonging to various caste groups to get rid from the age-old social discriminations and ill effects of Hindu caste system . The Brahmins and Kashtriyas were not very enthusiastic to follow his teachings because they were already in the dominant position and not prepared to lose their special privileges. The large numbers of weaker and underprivileged masses were converted to Sikhism and became integral members of Khalsa society and get equal status and rights. The creation of Khalsa Panth was a revolutionary step in the direction of creating the egalitarian, free and fair society in which caste distinctions were eliminated. Among first five beloved of Guru Gobind Singh at the time of creation of the Khalsa Panth, four were belonged to lower castes. Guru Sahib protected the dignity of poor and demoralized people. They were given equal status in the Sikh socio-religious institutions and community affairs. He empowered, trained and motivated them to fight against the foreign rulers, invaders, religious bigotry, social injustice and social prejudices. He rejected the exclusive rights of Kashtriyas to raise arms. He gave a sword to those marginalized sections of society who were mere spectators or victims of wars. In a way he eliminated the long-standing artificial and hierarchical compartmentalization of caste based occupations and unjust division of labour. He inculcated the spirit of nationalism and self-confidence especially among those who were pushed to periphery by the upper caste groups.

Casteism among Sikhs during the Misal Period:

Soon after the end of Guru Period, during the Misal period, the Sikh community experienced the emergence of the ill effects of caste system among Sikhs. Though the Sikhism rejected the age-old Hindu caste system , yet the Sikhs started to uphold their old caste ties and practice the caste rituals. In fact, they forget the teachings of their revered Gurus and eternal message of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. They fought bravely, laid supreme sacrifices to seek the temporal authority, and established small Sikh kingdoms and eventually they established a huge Sikh empire under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Despite their unparalleled and exemplary achievements in political sphere, they began to suffer the socio-ethical degeneration because they had deviated from the fundamental Sikh ethos. They moved away from the Sikhi (Sikh way of life). The immediate loss to the spirit of Sikhism can be traced in the terms of casteism among Sikhs. In either the need or lust of temporal power, they forget the Supreme authority i. e. Infinite Reality. Within the hundred years after the death of Guru Gobind Singh, Sikhs found themselves divided because of caste distinctions. Those who embrace the Sikhism to eliminate their long-standing caste stigmas and to seek equal status, some of them got the dominant position in

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the Sikh community. People left the Hindu social order in the search of social justice and eradication of caste based discriminations. In the initial years, the majority of converts to Sikhism were from the lower strata's of the society. They came in the Sikh fold with this expectation that they will get parity and equal rights in socio-economic affairs of Sikhism. However, the majority of dominant caste groups denied them equal status in the various spheres of life. Sikhs began to respond against the Brahmans and Kashtriya due to their discriminatory attitude towards lower caste groups. Newly emerged dominant caste groups within the Sikh community began to behave like the members of the Hindu higher caste groups. They became prejudiced and began to hate to marginalised sections of society. Their changed socio-economic status transformed their mental outlook and they started to think and behave on caste pattern.

Casteism among Sikhs during British Rule in India:

The fall of Sikh empire and annexation of Punjab to British India in 1849 further widened the gulf among Sikhs belonging to various caste groups. In Punjab, British government adopted the divide and rule policy and they encouraged the caste consciousness and promoted caste distinctions in the society. They divided people based on caste, class, region, behaviour pattern, occupation etc. They tried to intervene in the Sikh religious affairs by patronising the Mahants in the Sikh Gurdwaras. Mahants were inclined to Hinduism and they revived the casteism especially among upper and dominant caste groups of Sikh community. They focused on performance of Hindu religious rituals in the Sikh temples. They discriminated with lower strata of Sikh community in the Sikh socio-religious matters. After the end of Sikh Raj, the dominant Sikhs were neither conscious nor they were willing to protest against the revival of Hindu practices and caste distinctions among Sikhs. They were not in the position to comprehend the plight of downtrodden within the Sikh community. British government passed the Land Alienation Act in 1900 and established the monopoly of rural based Jat Sikhs in the sphere of agriculture and allied activities. They debarred the non-Jat and subaltern Sikhs from agriculture. This Act had altered the traditional socio-economic and political structures. The artificial compartmentalization of various occupations had ill effects on Sikh community.

People who were living together for the centuries now look towards each other as competitor, rival and enemy. This Act divided the members of Sikh community on the caste basis as well as created the huge gap between the rural and urban-based Sikhs and promoted animosity among Jat Sikhs and Khatri and Aroras Sikhs. In the changed scenario, the lower status of downtrodden Sikhs was remained intact. British government gave the higher status to the members of certain caste groups and preferred them in their army. The member of the dominant caste groups were in turn rewarded with large chunk of lands, which further elevated their socio-economic status and resulted in the ever-widening economic gap among members of Sikh community. This caste-based politics of British government was later on brought the socio-cultural, economic and political antagonism among various caste groups.

Casteism and Sikh Politics:

In the twentieth century, Sikh community entered in era of electoral politics. The compulsions of electoral politics and democracy created the new socio-political, cultural and economic scenario in the Punjab. After independence, the Sikh leadership was shifted to Malwa based Jat Sikhs from urban

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based Khatri and non-Jat Sikhs of Majha region of Punjab. The political parties got this opportunity to exploit the caste factor in Punjab to seek the political power by hook and crook. Presently, Shiromani Akali Dal (B) backed by SGPC is keen to serve the interests of rural based agricultural people especially Jat Sikhs. Congress (I) has the considerable vote bank among Dalits and BJP is interested in catering the needs of urban based Hindu trading class. The politicisation of caste and political polarisation based on casteism in Punjab has created the new political equations. The battle lines are clearly demarcated among the various caste groups. Political culture and political socialization of people is determined by the caste affiliations. In the present scenario, scheduled castes and urban based non Jat Sikhs feel alienated and neglected. They believed that in Punjab economically prosperous and politically influential Jat Sikh community dominates all the major political parties and power centres.

Dalit Sikhs also felt betrayed and disheartened by the activities of those political parties, which came in to existence in the name of dalit emancipation. They feel disturbed, ignored, and drop their faith in Sikh institutions. They raised serious objections on widening economic gap and social injustice in Punjab. There exists a close linkage between religion, caste and politics in the Punjab. The majority of Dalit Sikhs still face the social discriminations, economic disparities, and injustice in the religious and political spheres. Presently, Sikh social, political, religious, cultural and even educational institutions are not free from the caste considerations. At the time of policy formulation, execution of decisions, recruitment and social interactions casteism has deeply penetrated in the attitudes and behaviour of Sikhs. In the Punjab, in Sikh Gurdwaras, scheduled castes are discriminated by the local Gurdwaras management committees dominated by dominant caste groups. Their faith in the Sikh religious institutions and Sikh leadership has been badly shaken. They find that Sikh Gurdwaras and rural politics are being dominated by the petty caste considerations. Their lower social status and inferior economic position have created the several hindrances in their social, economic and political mobilization.

In the Punjab, social discriminations with dalit Sikhs are not same in the different geographic regions in the Punjab. In the Majha and Malwa region, they are still marginalized and face the various kinds of discriminations due to the lack of political awareness and lower economic position. Their main source of livelihood comes from agricultural activities. In agricultural sector, their dependence on dominant castes remains intact and perpetuates their inferior status. Whereas in the Doaba region in Punjab, the large number of Dalit Sikhs have migrated to the various countries. Over the years, in this region their socio-economic status has been reasonably elevated. Political consciousness and political participation among the Dalits have increased in the recent times. Dalits began to demand the equal share in the policymaking and power politics. They are not ready to remain submissive and being dominated by Jat Sikh people in the villages.

Deravad, Casteism and Sikhs:

Today in Punjab, there exists a close relationship between Dears and Dalit assertion in Punjab politics. In the Punjab, schedule castes have a considerable size. Despite their large number in Punjab, their socio-economic interests were largely ignored and they were politically marginalized. They failed to register their voice of protest at the decision-making level despite the fact that there are considerable number of seats in Punjab Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha in Punjab are reserve for them. They are still being pushed to periphery and remained away from the power centres. Under these circumstances, they took the shelter of various Deras. Identity crisis, socio-economic immobility,

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and urge to confront the exploitation by the dominant caste groups inspire and encourage them to look forward to Deras for political direction and support. In the recent years, Punjab witnessed the mushroom growth of various socio-religious Deras. The emergence of Deravad in Punjab has brought the far-reaching changes in social, religious and political spheres. The most interesting aspect of these Dears is that the majority of their followers belong to the schedule castes. The chiefs of these Dears give them socio-political and religious platform to raise their voice against the dominant caste groups. In the recent past, a close linkage has been developed between Deravad and several caste conflicts. In Punjab at present, deravad is an offshoot of dalit assertion and displeasure among Dalits with the prevailing socio-political conditions. Ironically, at present people are giving the deliberate and unwarranted preference to their caste distinctions in their social-political thought process.

CONCLUSION:

Sikhi (Sikh way of life) demands from a person to remain humble, compassionate, respectful and caring towards others. It is hostile to spirit of Sikh religious beliefs if any Sikh starts to discriminate with others, and acts in arrogance and considers himself as superior to others on basis of caste. There is immense need for a true Sikh to broaden his mind and to rise above the casteism. If people continue to live with their pride of their caste and humiliate the vulnerable sections of society then they should be mentally prepared that they will have to face the revulsion, wrath and opposition of oppressed sections of society. Those who are in dominant positions and those who are struggling for centre of power must refrain from caste based arrogance and social antagonism, they must strive for social harmony, cooperation and mutual respect otherwise the outcome of the prevailing caste struggle within Sikh community would be disastrous for them as well as for the Sikh fraternity. Sikhs must realize that if they still believe in casteism then they have no moral right to be called a Sikh of Guru Nanak because a true Sikh cannot have social prejudices and discriminatory attitudes towards depressed people.

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