

Historical Perspective of Caste System in Ancient India

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Abstract:

The Indian society is segmentally divided on the basis of caste. The status of person is dependent on the caste in which he is born. In traditional caste system, the lowest castes were at the bottom of the social ladder. They were subjected to various caste disabilities. The Dalits were also not allowed to change their caste occupation. In Indian context, 'dalits' constitute one such group. The dalits, which is a social group peculiar to India, lagged behind the rest of the society in several respects since ages. They have been discriminated in several respects and were meted out, in several cases, even inhuman treatment, by the rest of the society particularly the socially advanced groups. They have been poor, deprived of basic human rights and treated as social inferiors in the society. My paper examines the trend of continuity and change in caste system in India. The paper highlights the centripetal and centrifugal forces, which have been playing a significant role to operate this traditional concept of social hierarchy. Main focus of this paper's is the points of meaning of the term 'Dalit' and its historic past. It also includes the factors which have been playing a significant and vital role for its continuity and change in different contemporary societies in India and also focus various movements for Dalit in Ancient India.

Keywords: Dalit, Cast system, Society, Movements, Ancient India

Indian society is characterized by a high degree of structural inequality, stratification and hierarchy associated with caste, ethnicity, religion, class, other group identities and institutions of social exclusion. The inherent structure and functioning of these institutions leads to exclusion, which in turn leads to deprivation, poverty and discrimination of a substantial section of the Indian population in multiple spheres. The caste system is one of the most confusing mysteries of India. The caste system, which has existed more than 3,000 years, was developed by the Brahmin (priest) caste in order to maintain their superiority. Eventually, the caste system became formalized into four distinct classes (Varna). The Brahmins are the highest Varna and are the priests and arbiters of what is right and wrong in matters of religion and society. Below them are the Kshatriyas, who served traditionally as soldiers and administrators.¹ The Vaisyas are the artisan and commercial class, while the Sudras are the farmers and the peasants. It is said that the Brahmins come from Brahma's mouth, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaisyas from his thighs, and the Sudras from his feet. Beneath the four main castes is a fifth group, the Out Castes. They are not part of the Varna system. These Out Castes are regarded as Dalits, who have been exploited and tortured for centuries. They are now considered socially degraded members of the society. Many efforts have been made to raise their status and position in society. But the efforts made are generally directed towards alienating them from society rather than towards bringing them into the mainstream of the society. A Dalit is not considered a part of human society, but, instead, is considered something less than human. The Dalits generally perform the most menial and degrading jobs.² Caste rules hold that the Dalits pollute higher caste people with their presence. If higher caste Hindus touch an untouchable or even come within a Dalit's shadow, they must undergo a rigorous series of cleansing rituals. They considered as untouchables.

People who constitute the last category of castes in the Varnasrama are Dalits. This is the traditional definition of the term Dalit as is given by different scholars. According to the Indian Constitution the Dalits are the people coming under the

category Scheduled Castes. With slight changes, however, the term Dalit would mean not only one category of caste; it means the human who is exploited economically, socially, politically and from all the spheres of life, by the traditions of the country. By tradition would mean the Brahmanical Indian tradition prevailing in the country for centuries. The Dalits, called by different names like Dasyu, Dasa, Atisudra, Panchama, Tirukulattar, Adikarnataka, Adi Dravida, are actually the —Depressed Classes.³

The Indian Caste System is historically one of the main dimensions where people in India are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. Although this or other forms of differentiation exist in all human societies, it becomes a problem when one or more of these dimensions overlap each other and become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige. The Indian Caste System is considered a closed system of stratification, which means that a person's social status is obligated to which caste they were born into. There are limits on interaction and behavior with people from another social status. Its history is massively related to one of the prominent religions in India, Hinduism, and has been altered in many ways during the Buddhist revolution and under British rule. This paper will be exploring the various aspects of the Indian caste system related to its hierarchy, its history, and its effects on India today. Caste Structure and Characteristics Defining the word "caste" itself is harder than thought to be.

Risley defines it 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 a single homogeneous community".⁴ It can also be defined as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions. Caste name is generally associated with a specific occupation and, as mentioned before, is a closed stratification, which makes it endogamous. The Indian caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked castes called varnas. They are classified according to occupation and determine access to wealth, power, and privilege. Leadership positions in society are monopolized by a few dominant castes. The two upper castes are ritually considered as superior to the lower castes.

The Brahmins, usually priests and scholars, are at the top. Brian K. Smith, the author of *Classifying the Universe*, explains his definition of the Brahmin caste: The Brahmin class is essentially defined by its supposed priority (as the class created first by the creator god), by knowledge of the Veda, and by the monopoly this class holds on the operation of sacrifice. These traits justify the social position of the class vis-à-vis others: they are predominant because they are prior, and they claim to stand outside of the power relations that govern social life for others because of their superior knowledge and sole possession of the ultimate "weapons," sacrificial techniques. There are, however, varying "degrees" of Brahmins, such as Kanya-Kubja, Tamil, Tanjore, and others who are part of numerous villages. These sub-castes, called jatis, are very specifically endogamous, so that a Brahmin is not only restricted to marrying another Brahmin, but to marrying a woman of the same subdivision of Brahmins.⁵ Each jati is composed of a group deriving its livelihood primarily from a specific occupation. People are born into a certain caste and become members. They then acquire the appropriate occupation according to their jati. Separation of these Brahmins from others is one of several indications of social status, which include material goods, social power or influence, and social skills.

In modern India, economic competition and education are predominating, and the Brahmins occupy this position in both aspects. Following the Brahmins are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. They were the ruling class and often times collaborated with the Brahmins as they reigned over their kingdom. In ancient India, the rulers were bound by Holy Scriptures to govern their kingdoms with justice. A Hindu ruler was the protector of his subjects, and in order to protect his subjects the king needed to be an expert warrior. A Kshatriya is characterized by physical and martial strength. These qualities determined his relations with others: "the Kshatriya is charged with the protection of the higher Brahmin class with rule over and unrestricted exploitation of) the lower Vaishyas"⁶. The word 'kshatra' in Sanskrit means government, power, and dominion. Kshatriyas are considered to be bold, alert and full of fortitude, generosity, discipline and modesty. Priests and warriors were said to be "better"

than or “superior” to the other castes, and in general the Brahmans and Kshatriyas were regarded as united into a ruling class according to the populace at large.

But although the Brahmans and Kshatriyas together proclaimed to be superior to the commoners, the Brahmans never hesitated to declare their own caste as higher than the Kshatriyas. The reason of this, according to the Vedas, is that Brahmans have been characterized as being self-sufficient, whereas the Kshatriyas are dependent on priests. Thus, it is said that Brahmans can live without rulers, but rulers cannot sufficiently execute their tasks without the aid of Brahmans. Next are the Vaishyas, or merchants. A Vaishya's duty was to ensure the community's prosperity through agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. The Vaishyas were considered and expected to be weak in comparison to their rulers, and were infinitely exploitable and regenerative.⁷ These oppressions however, were usually not boycotted because this was presented as a natural state of affairs in the social realm. Later, the Shudras took over agriculture and cattle rearing while the Vaishyas became traders and merchants. However, though they were “twice-born” and economically strong because they controlled commerce,

Vaishyas were denied a high social status, for which they resented the upper castes. One expression of this resentment was their support of the anti-Brahminical sects that developed around the 6th century BC, like Buddhism and Jainism. Then come the Shudras, who are usually laborers, peasants, artisans, and servants. Shudras were thought to not have any special abilities and were considered only capable of serving as slaves to the upper three classes.⁸ Shudras enjoyed no rights or privileges, and were not permitted to perform any sacrifices or homa, read or learn the Vedas or recite the mantras (prayer rituals). They were also not allowed to enter temples and could only serve the upper three castes as a slave, barber, blacksmith or cobbler. They too supported the anti-Brahminical groups that came about. At the very bottom are those considered the “untouchables?”⁹

These individuals performed occupations that were considered unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and are considered outcastes. The Hindu law books insisted that there were only four varnas and never a fifth, which was used as a reason to not accept the tribal people of India. They were therefore not considered to be included in the ranked castes. In some cases, the untouchables could face criminal charges if they polluted certain things with their presence. For example, it was a criminal offense for a member of an excluded caste knowingly to pollute a temple by his presence¹⁰. They were also forbidden to enter the streets in which the houses of the upper castes were situated, and there were many customs and laws that kept them beyond the villages and towns. Since they were rated outside the caste system, they were destined to only in the outskirts of the village and were never an integral part of village community. Their services, however, were still essential to the health of the community and therefore still had to be part of the system in order to serve the upper caste. Caste includes three elements: repulsion, hierarchy, and hereditary specialization.

The saiva Nayanar saints and vaisnava Alvar saints of South India spread the concept of bhakti among different sections of the society irrespective of caste and sex during the period between the 7th and the 10th century. Some of these saints hailed from the lower castes and some were women. The saint poets preached bhakti in an intense emotional manner and tried to promote religious egalitarianism.¹¹ They ignored rituals and traversed the region several times singing, dancing and advocating bhakti. The Alvar and Nayanar saints used the Tamil language and not Sanskrit for preaching and composing devotional songs. Thus the movement could acquire a popular base. The South Indian bhakti saints used to criticize the Jains and Buddhists who enjoyed a privileged status at the courts of South Indian monarchs during that period. They won over many adherents of Buddhism and Jainism both of which by then became rigid and formal religions. These saint-poets simultaneously resisted the domination of the orthodox Brahmins by making bhakti accessible to all without any caste and sex discrimination.¹²

But the South Indian bhakti movement also had drawbacks. It never consciously opposed Brahmanism or the varna and caste systems at the social level. It was integrated with the caste system and the lower castes continued to suffer from myriad social disabilities. There was no elimination of Brahminical rituals such as worship of idols, recitation of the Vedic mantras and pilgrimages to sacred places in spite of the overriding stress on bhakti as the superior mode of worship. The Jains and Buddhists were its principal targets not the Brahmins. This perhaps was also the reason why the Brahman dominated temples played an

important role in the growth of South Indian bhakti movement. The ideological and social foundations of caste system were not challenged by the South Indian saint poets. As a result, the bhakti movement of the south in the long run strengthened that hierarchical system rather than weakening it. Ultimately after the movement reached its zenith in the 10th century, it was gradually incorporated by the traditional Brahmanical religion. Despite these constraints, the South Indian bhakti movement in its heyday succeeded in championing the cause of religious equality and consequently, the Brahmins had to accept the right of the low caste to preach, to have access to bhakti as a mode of worship and to have access even to the Vedas.

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