

Modernization and the Caste Structure of the Indian Diaspora in Mauritius

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People of Indian origin in Mauritius had gone to the land which had no original inhabitants. People from France, Africa, China and India had gone to Mauritius at different phases of time as per the requirement of the Mauritian State. The first migration of Indians to Mauritius was in seventeenth century mostly of slaves. But the large scale migration of Indians was in the 19th century after the abolition of the slavery in 1883 AD. Indentured labour went to Mauritius to work in the sugar plantation. Initially Indians went for a short period of five years. After the completion of indenture, some returned to India but majority stayed back and made Mauritius their home. Some of those who stayed back moved to the villages and recreated their society on the patterns of the life they left behind in India. People from different regions, different castes and different occupations came together. Representations of almost all the castes could be found but at the level of pan-Indian *Varna* system. A complete representation of all *jatis* which are the operational unit of caste system were not present. Therefore, a complete caste system, akin to the Indian caste system could not be replicated. Still a quasi-caste system that shaped did provide some affinity to the people and generated the similar response as was the case in India. The influence of the modernizing factors brought about changes both in the caste structure and the caste system of the Indo-Mauritians. The article attempts to analyse the impact of modernizing factors on the caste structure of the Indo-Mauritians.

Introduction:

Student Encyclopedia of Sociology (1983: 244) defines “modernization as an interactive processes of economic growth and social change whereby historical and contemporary under-developed societies are thought to become developed and achieve modernity.” Technology, education, universal adult franchise urbanization and industrialization some factors and institutions that have modernizing influence on the society consequently bringing about profound perceptible changes in their structure. Globalization and intensification of interactions between peoples and states did not leave any community untouched. Mauritian society was no exception. Majority of Mauritians were Hindus (67%) and observed Hindu tradition that they brought with them. The Hindu traditions in Mauritius remained frozen in time and space unlike the traditions in India that had their own course of evolution. The perception of Indo-Mauritians was that they are religion-bound and deeply entrenched in the Hindu philosophy. Being soaked in tradition it was believed that they are not amenable to change. Also, the Hindu caste system has always been assumed to be static with no or little mobility between the different castes categories. But some scholars (Srinivas 1998; Barber 1968) insist that mobility within the Hindu caste stratification has always existed. May be the extent of mobility fluctuated in different times and places. The indisputable written evidences are perhaps lacking, but there is abundant examples available that show mobility of caste groups (See Alexander 1968).

The Impact of the Modernizing Factors:

In Mauritius, Hindu Indian community experienced several changes. The geographical mobility from India to Mauritius brought different people into closer proximity that began to dilute the concept of purity and

pollution, the very basis of the caste system. Later the formation of village communities from disparate groups on the pan-Indian *Varna* structure further debilitated the hierarchical character of Hindu society. The traditional caste callings could not be practiced and people had to take up jobs for which they went to Mauritius. This became another source of major challenge to the caste structure. The interactions with the other ethnic communities like English, French, Chinese and Africans also impacted the caste organization. Apart these early influences, the modernizing factors played a major role in transforming the caste structure.

Westernization had a massive influence on the Indo-Mauritians. The cultural contact with the west opened up a whole new paradigm of technology, food, life style and above all an alternative world view. Singh (1986: 86) says that the “western impact had developed the scientific and technological world-view based on rationalism, equality and freedom” that almost contrasted the traditional caste system. The new cultural structures that arose, like education, urbanization, industrialization, led to the formation of ‘new middle classes’ which acquired education and obtained white-collar jobs. The power of education was so enormous that the western values inculcated gave rise to social and cultural reform movements that initiated the process of modernization.

The content of modern education is rationalistic, liberal and with scientific world-view. It is achievement-oriented rather than ascriptive. Formal education had existed in Mauritius from very early on, but was only for the privileged sections of the Mauritian society. Most Indian immigrants were not educated and the training they imparted to their children was at the vernacular schools mostly imparting religious and philosophical content. Reddi (1989:3) observes that “Indian merchants and labourers preferred vernacular education and for several decades the majority of Indians remained untouched by the western education. The minority who attended schools in the rural areas was the offspring’s of sirdars, job contractors and small planters.”

Ramgoolam (166) says that, “one of the main reasons for the lack of enthusiasm about education was economic as working class children had to work to supplement the family income... Another important reason was cultural, a well-grounded fear that colonial education would denigrate their own culture and language.” The anxiety of alienation and distancing from their culture, tradition and identity discouraged the children from availing the western education. The realisation of the power of education for their emancipation, forced the Bisoodoyal brothers (‘Basdeo, Sugriva and Sookdeo’) to open training schools where free education was given. The opening of the government schools by the colonials brought a large number of children in its fold. Then on Ramgoolam (166) says, “education was seen as the symbol of a new status, an “instrument of class appropriation”... Education broke old rigid occupational roles which had confined the Indians to agricultural fields.” Free and universal education revolutionized the society. Its impact was felt in all the fields: social, economic and political. Education metamorphosed the Mauritian society and it contained elements of transition from tradition to modernity.

Besides education, modernization in Mauritius was facilitated by the growth of a universalistic legal system, industrialization, urbanization and secularization. In Mauritius traditional legal system was prejudicial and discriminatory. Initially the legal system was not same for all. On 12th March, 1968, the new constitution made Mauritius a sovereign democratic state. Mathur (1990: 73) opines that, “Constitutional reforms were initiated to bridge the gap between the ruling elite and the masses and to ensure the Government is responsive to the demands of the governed.” This gave a big boost for safeguarding the fundamental rights and freedom of all individuals. Hazareesing (1975: 143) notes that, “the statute book now contains comprehensive legislation in the field of labour, education and Health, aiming at the social and economic advancement of the masses.” These legislations became tools of modernizing Mauritius.

As a result of enactment of the legislation many evil social customs of Indo-Mauritians were legally abolished. Caste endogamy though not like the one existing in India slowly began to weaken and discrimination was on its way out due to modernization. Boodhoo (1993: 651) says that “in fact socially speaking, casteism is practically non-existent, it only raises its head in matters of politics” or marriage. The more desirable change

is in the status of women. Women enjoy equal status as do men. Hindu girls and boys were earlier treated differently. The change in legislation and the social reform movements like the Arya Samaj movement in Mauritius led a campaign for the emancipation of women. The awareness generated and support provided helped to improve the status of women in the society. The practice of other social evils like 'dowry, sati and child marriages' became obsolete. Thus the new legal system based on the principles emphasizing humanistic values become a major force of change in Mauritius.

The composition of the Council of Government was not representative of the whole population. Teelock (2001: 334) writes that "the governor chose only those who were of European descent and ignored members of the 'Free' (Coloured) population who qualified for these posts." The constitutional change of 1885 entitled people to vote by secret ballot for the first time for the representatives of the Legislative Council but the right to vote was granted to only male British subjects says Mathur (1984). He further notes that "the Indians were debarred indirectly from the vote as it required the elector should know technical English (1984: 332)." Then in 1959 'Universal suffrage' was introduced that made the society more inclusive.

Industrialization hastened the process of breaking down of traditional society and created a demand for a new occupational structure that would make for more efficient production. Some of the major social changes that accompanied the process of industrialization in Mauritius were a gradual shift from ascriptive criteria to achievement; an emphasis on individual rather than traditional collectivity; a rational, secular orientation rather than religious approach; change from extended to nuclear family structure; increased social and geographical mobility; and diversification of occupational rules. These changes liberated Indo-Mauritians from traditional role of agricultural labour and prepared them for diverse roles in the industrialisation process. Hence industrialisation became a force that was both sustaining and aiding the modernization.

Industrialisation sets in urbanization whereby rural population is expected to decrease in proportion due to shifting to the urban centres. Urbanization has a visible modernizing impact on the mannerism, dress and food habits. Those Indo-Mauritians were living in the closer proximity to other castes and other ethnic groups in the urban centres experienced their noticeable influence. Two opposing dynamics have been observed in their attitude. One is the shrinking of caste distances and at the same time reassertion of caste identities. The expression of which is seen when diverse groups of people jointly participate in the secular activities indicate the fading of the distances between castes. At the same time, celebration of religious festivals by the individual caste groups reinforced the caste identities and caste distance. Thus, urbanization is providing a dynamic setting in which not only social acculturation and social change take place but at same time caste-specific practices is finding space. The simultaneous existence of diverse groups of people in the same neighbourhood makes it profoundly different from living in caste-neighborhoods. Nagpaul (1996:38) opines that, "urban heterogeneity is promoting freedom from kinship groups." Therefore, it becomes easier to compromise with the traditional mode of living and observing traditional ways of life. Then the use of modern transport, banking and modern education created a broad platform for furthering the ongoing process of modernization.

People started to move out of their traditional callings and began to work in industries and offices which resulted in inter-mixing of various caste, religious and ethnic groups. The influence of other groups diluted the traditional patterns of religious worship, traditional ways of celebrating festivals, the strongly rooted 'ideas of purity and pollution', the rigid caste hierarchy, etc. In the process of adaptation to continuously changing social milieu in Mauritius and reasonably reduced relevance of traditional life style resulted in secularization. Secularization, in turn, further weakened and is weakening the existing religious and traditional institutions. It must be emphasised that though the importance of these very traditional practices are fading in daily life, they remain important in the life cycle rituals, birth and death.

Nagpaul (1996:37) says "secularization is more marked in towns and cities and among the urban and educated groups, is helping to diminish the force of those beliefs, customs and traditions which are either in conflict with the general urban culture or which have become dysfunctional in the context of contemporary life." Many

traditional beliefs have been either modified or completely ignored such as the ideas relating to 'pollution/purity', status of women, caste hierarchy, ascriptive occupations, education of girls and popular sacrifices. Brahmins are called upon less frequently for prayers and ceremonies and in times of illness and misfortune.

Modernization has changed the food habits and mode of eating. Commensality, that is, restrictions of eating food with other caste people, related to the ideas of 'pollution and purity' has totally disappeared. There is no caste bar on inter-dining. Even food habits show a substantial influence of other communities especially French and Chinese. More number of younger Indo-Mauritian are non-vegetarians as compared to their parents' generations. At the same time all dietary restrictions are observed during religious ceremonies. In public transport systems such as buses and ferries, no segregation on caste or communal lines is observed.

Caste identifications never had the same centrality in daily life in Mauritius that it had in India and what lingering importance it had is probably on a decline said Bowman (1991:65). Indians who came to Mauritius were drawn from all castes, but many used their new homes to change their names and upgrade their caste identity. Burton (1967: 40) says that, "the caste hierarchy, insofar as it exists in Mauritius, is not a hierarchy of corporate groups or of occupational groups, but a hierarchy of prestige labels valued at the upper end, disvalued at the lower end and largely ignored in the middle."

Perhaps the caste system may be regulating the conducts of the people to some extent but caste membership no longer controls all interpersonal relationship especially in large town and cities. Social segregation based on the caste identities has dissipated. With the emergence of occupational diversity, hereditary occupation have not been able to survive. Industrialization and factory work has influenced interpersonal relationship, cosmopolitans have modified the traditional caste loyalties, the urban freedom and spatial mobility have led to the breakdown of the fetters of traditions in general and traditional form of socialization and social control in particular. The new opportunities like educational, economic, and political – are relatively caste free and achievement-oriented. The social, political and economic significance of the caste system is dying and now is left with limited customary significance. A series of changes that the caste system is undergoing, are the gradual breakdown of the restrictions on non-vegetarian food, drinking and working together.

Concluding Remarks:

Modernization has not resulted in the complete replacement of traditional ways of life. The customary ways are undergoing considerable changes. The new patterns of life is combination of both old and new in varying degrees are taking shape. More emphasis is on greater degree of individuality, rationality, adaptive attitudes, occupational achievement, and secondary forms of relationship. This trend constitutes the basis of modernization. Once the traditional hereditary nature of caste occupations has been significantly affected, occupational mobility increases affecting not only the caste system but the socio-economic position of all classes. In industrial towns in Mauritius, new occupations have emerged which either do not fit into the traditional caste hierarchy or the employers set aside caste considerations in hiring people or the employees set aside caste while taking different occupations. Current trends in four areas – housing patterns, emigration, caste identification and broad economic issues, particularly social mobility and the division of labour, show that all these areas serve to limit communal claims. It is giving way to an 'open' class system on the ruins of ceremonial caste organisation. Therefore, modernization has debilitated the traditional caste structure and dissipated the caste identities of Indo-Mauritians. Indo-Mauritian identity is transforming to form a more common Mauritian national identity.

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