

CASTE vs. CASTEISM: Origin and Evolution

Caste is derived from a Portuguese term 'Casta' which means race or family. Caste is primarily a Hindu phenomenon which was commonly practiced in almost all religions of India. MacIver rightly believed that feudal system promotes caste and India is the glaring example of it. There are two schools of thought regarding the nature of caste. One school strongly believes that caste is based on functional specialization as was practised in early Vedic period. The second school contends that caste is determined by birth based on kinship and hereditary law. The *varna* system elaborated four orders: *Brahman* exhibiting wisdom, *kshatriya* having spirit and energy, *vaishya* predominantly business-oriented and *shudras* performing lower limb jobs. The untouchables, however, were not included in the order, and were called *atishudras*. These *varna* ranks were based on karma. But with the passage of time, Brahmans established their hegemony and gradually started exploiting the weaker castes and converted the karma principle into kinship. The British administration transformed the caste system into class order by introducing capitalist form of production in India. In colonial India two types of caste conflict were identified:

1. Backward caste peasants and upper caste zamindars; and
2. Conflict between *dalits* and upper caste Hindus. The caste-class symmetry followed a similar pattern even in post independent India.

CASTE: Definition and Meaning

Andrian. C Meyers rightly said that caste means different things to different people. Caste has assumed new role and function under the impact of modern forces and demands.¹⁶

Norman D. Palmer truly assessed that caste is losing its importance as a social factor and gaining importance as a political factor.

A.L. Kroeber defines caste as "an endogamous and hereditary sub-division of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem in comparison with other such sub-division."

A caste system can be said to exist when a society is composed of birth-ascribed, hierarchically ordered and culturally distinct groups.

It has been observed that, "caste is a system of stratification in which mobility, movement up and down the status ladder, at least ideally may not occur."

M.N. Srinivas as defines caste "as a hereditary endogamous, usually localized group, having a traditional association with an occupation and particular

position in the hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed, by concepts of pollution and purity and generally maximum commensality occurs within the caste."

"Every Hindu necessarily belongs to the caste of his parents, and in the caste he inevitably remains. No accumulation of wealth and no exercise of talents can alter his caste status, and marriage outside his caste is prohibited and severely discouraged."¹⁷

CASTE IN INDIAN POLITY

In India, caste is the central fact of social structure. It originally referred to the distinction between *Arya* and *Dasa* (slave). It is an endogamous kinship group known as '*Jati*', linked by marriage and lineage, and for the most part locally identifiable. It has experienced many changes because of the changing socio-economic forces in India.

Caste is a social custom, which all our great preachers and reformers have tried to abolish. The Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission movement and the Theosophical movement, significantly contributed towards the end of caste division. Mahatma Gandhi was not only against the removal of untouchability but also against the caste system itself. The British Administration in India brought about a radical change by instituting a new principle of justice, which emphasized that all men are equal before the eyes of law. In the post-Independence period there have been many attempts to break the hold of the caste system. There have been legislative measures to outlaw untouchability and grant franchise to all regardless of caste considerations. Baba B.R. Ambedkar took up the cause of weaker sections of the society. Around 17.5% seats were reserved for dalits in Parliament and assemblies. The constitution of India incorporates protection and safeguards for SCs, STs and other backward castes. The forces of urbanization and industrialization have also contributed substantially to undermine the caste system by facilitating closer contact and collaboration between different castes. 'Sanskritization', which denotes that a status group aspiring to upward mobility in the system of social stratification, tends to emulate the lifestyle of higher castes, and seeks its acceptance within the great tradition of Sanskrit norms and the *varna* system.¹⁸ This tendency among the backward castes, says Srinivas, is responsible for the continuity of the traditional structure of caste. Another concept that Srinivas uses is that of 'dominant caste'. He calls a caste dominant if it preponderates numerically over other castes, and also when it wields preponderant economic and political power.¹⁹ But Srinivas makes an important point when he says that even a large and powerful caste group can be 'dominant' only if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low. The 'intermediate castes' such as the Jats in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana, and the *Kurmies*, *Koeries* and *Yadavas* in Bihar (who once formed a Triveni Sangh), aspire for a dominant position not only in the villages, but also in recruitment to various elective and

bureaucratic posts. These intermediate castes, in the process of their upward mobility, have emerged as rivals of the upper castes.

The scheduled castes, untouchables or *Harijan* (term not in practice today) still find it difficult to become a 'dominant caste'. Some outcastes in Bihar, such as *Dumadix* and *Domez*, endowed with physical strength and traditionally in the service of landlords as musclemen, often clash with members of intermediate and upper castes. It is true that the caste system has been strengthened rather than weakened by the introduction of adult franchise and representative politics in India. According to a Report by Human Rights Watch—Dalits and indigenous peoples, known as scheduled tribes or *adivasis* continue to face discrimination, exclusion and acts of communal violence. Laws and policies adopted by Indian government provide a strong basis for protection, but are not being faithfully implemented by the local authorities.

There is another point of view, which holds that social stratification is undergoing a change as other elements of status, such as power and class are coming to the fore. Under the influence of modernization, secularization and democratization, caste is being replaced by social circles, social networks, political factions or factional alignments, pressure groups and even socio-economic classes. Andre Beteille argues that with the changes in the criteria of status in Indian society, there has occurred 'transformation from closed status groups based on caste to more open ones which accommodate other components as well.'²⁰

According to a third perspective, caste has assumed new functions, such as the provision of educational, welfare and employment facilities, and other economic benefits for its members. But it is to be emphasized that caste functions today more as a political group than as a social or economic group. Hence, the phenomenon of 'politicization of castes' must assume a special significance in any discussion of caste-politics interaction. Rudolph and Rudolph, for instance, point out that caste is a medium of political mobilization, and an instrument of political education.²¹ The non-Brahmin movement led by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule in Maharashtra, and by Ramaswamy Periyar in Tamil Nadu are glaring examples of caste consciousness and its liberating impact. Caste played a significant role in 'no-rent campaigns' in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. These campaigns aimed at remitting the rent in years of scarcity or drought as well as reducing the cesses imposed upon the cultivators by the landlords or zamindars. Caste mobility movements mainly aimed for self-respect which formed an integral part of the campaign against social and economic exploitation.²²

The Marxian interpretation is very different from other anthropologists. He talks of two castes—haves and have-nots. He blends caste and class into one frame. If we consider from Marxian angle then we find that caste carnage in Pipri, Kansara, Narainpura Belchi, Gonda and Lakshmanpur bathe can be termed as class violence as it depicts the clash between landless and land owners. Deeper study proves that it is a battle of deprivation and unfair distribution of resources.

COMMUNALISM IN INDIAN POLITICS

Bipin Chandra in his famous work *Communalism in Modern India* observes: "the concept of communalism is based on the belief that religious distinction is the most important and fundamental distinction, and this distinction overrides all other distinctions. Since Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are different religious entities; their social, economic, cultural and political interests are also dissimilar and divergent. As such, the loss of one religious group is the gain of another group and *vice-versa*. If a particular community seeks to better its social and economic situation, it is doing at the expense of other."³⁰

It is an established fact that communal seeds in India were sown, nurtured and promoted by the British imperialism as a deliberate design to foster divide and rule policy. The type of politics approved, tolerated and encouraged by the British imperialism was only 'communal politics' as opposed to secular and

national politics. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan wanted and also demanded to have a parallel socio religious reforms movement for Muslims along with Hindus, which was spear headed by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. This can be viewed as the initial mode of communal politics. The year 1857 witnessed the first war of independence which organized communal frenzy when rumour spread like a wild fire that the cartridges are greased with the fat of cows and pigs. Mangal Pandey's revolt added fuel to the fire. Lord Curzon played a nasty role in aggravating dissension by mooted the idea of partition of Bengal on communal basis in 1905. He got a setback by the Hindu-Muslim unity, but at least succeeded in creating cleavage. In 1906, Muslim league was formed as a challenge to Indian national congress, which was dubbed as a Hindu body. Though Jinnah was not in favour of its formation, but later played pivotal role in it. Morley-Minto Reforms Act of 1909 created separate communal franchise, which widened the gap between the two. Situation grew from bad to worse till Mahatma Gandhi arrived in India. He tried to rejuvenate the relationship, but it proved to be transitory. The intermittent events strengthened separatist tendency, and finally in 1940, Two Nation theory emerged. The appeasement policy of political leaders created a sharp divide. Mountbatten plan finally created Pakistan on 14 August 1947, thereby piercing a sword of communalism into the soul of secularism of Akhand Bharat (One India-United India). It was followed by a civil war and annihilation. It was considered to be the end of communal conflicts, but later proved to be wrong. The hypothesis was tested and was disapproved. In post-independent India, makers of the Indian Constitution were quite apprehensive of religious tensions. Hence, they incorporated religious freedom in the third chapter of Indian Constitution dealing with fundamental rights, running from Articles 25-28. India was declared a secular state where religion was made an individual affair and the state had no official religion of its own. This seemed not fairly good enough to bring communal harmony. Rising trend was witnessed in riots between the two, taking the form of a clash between Majority (Hindus) and Macro minority (Muslims). Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister made a controversial 42nd constitutional amendment in the year 1976, by adding the term 'Secular' in the Preamble of the Indian Constitution. The pertinent question is whether such formulations can change the mindset of people or it is just a political gimmick? Unfortunately, the alien rule taught our leaders to exploit caste and community for their own vested interests.

Communalism in post-partition India struck stronger roots in medium-sized towns like Jabalpur, Jamshedpur, Aligarh, Moradabad, Ahmedabad, Godhra, Bhivandi, Bhagalpur, Kota, Muzaffarnagar and similar other places. Factors playing vital role are the following:

Muslim Marginalization

During the British rule in India, Muslims were economically and educationally

more backward as compared with the Hindus. It was hoped that after independence when equal opportunities had been provided to all, the Muslims in India will also take fullest advantage of that. But even now the percentage of Muslims going to educational, technical, medical and other professional institutions is much less than their population. The result is that they are educationally as well as economically backward. This economic disparity between the two communities is creating wide gap and many misunderstanding; one community feeling that it is being constantly exploited by the other or that the richness of one is only at the cost of other.³¹ Today Muslims constitute second largest religious community in India and second largest Muslim minority in the world. Thus they are called as 'macro minority' Still a sense of insecurity prevails which aggravates the antagonism between the two communities. A feeling of economic backwardness and a discontent that the benefits of modernization in terms of government's jobs, business and education opportunities, etc., have not been enjoyed by the Muslims promote separatist tendencies among them.³²