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Diminishing Humanity in India: Developing A Caste-Ridden Mindset Towards People

ASIYA RAHMAN PUTHUPPURACKAL¹

ABSTRACT

When the Father of the Indian Constitution, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar stated that even though Equality may seem a fiction, it should be accepted as a governing principle, when Dr. Shashi Tharoor stated that he doesn't go by his caste, creed or religion, that his works speak for him, these wise words are not meant to end as titles or quotes in a research paper. India is home to over 1.4 billion Indians out of which more than 200 million are Dalits. In July 2020, a Dalit man was stripped and brutally beaten up, along with his family members in Karnataka for allegedly 'touching the motorcycle of a dominant caste man'. According to data published by the Union of India, crimes against Dalits increased by 7% since 2019. Even after the insertion of Articles 14 and 17 in the Constitution, yet today, groups of citizens in the country are relegated in the ladder of hierarchy. This prejudiced outlook towards people from subjugated categories labelled as 'lower castes' i.e., caste discrimination, poses an imminent threat to the world's largest democracy in the years to come; the need for a caste-free mindset to emerge among citizens in order to save India's constitutional democracy before it's too late must be recognized.

I. INTRODUCTION

When the Father of the Indian Constitution, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar stated that even though ***Equality may seem a fiction, it should be accepted as a governing principle***, when Dr. Shashi Tharoor stated that ***he doesn't go by his caste, creed or religion, that his works speak for him***, these wise words are not meant to end as titles or quotes in a research paper. India is home to over 1.4 billion Indians out of which more than 200 million are Dalits². In July 2020, a Dalit man was stripped and brutally beaten up, along with his family members in Karnataka for allegedly 'touching the motorcycle of a dominant caste man'². According to data published by the Union of India, crimes against Dalits increased by 7% since 2019². Even after the insertion of Articles 14 and 17 in the Constitution, yet today, groups of citizens in the country are relegated in the ladder of hierarchy. This prejudiced outlook towards people from subjugated

¹ Author is a student at Government Law College, Thiruvananthapuram, University of Kerala, Kerala, India.

² INTERNATIONAL DALIT SOLIDARITY NETWORK, <https://idsn.org/> (last visited March. 24, 2023).

categories labelled as ‘lower castes’ i.e., caste discrimination, poses an imminent threat to the world’s largest democracy in the years to come; the need for a caste-free mindset to emerge among citizens in order to save India’s constitutional democracy before it’s too late must be recognized.

Believe it or not, caste is present in the cell of every Indian citizen. Whether you reside in a village or a city is no longer a criterion to stop speaking about caste discrimination. In some areas, it is explicit and others, implicit. Imagine you’re walking on the street. Suddenly you bump upon a person who’s begging for water to quench their thirst. Remember you have a water bottle in your hand. The question is to whom you’d offer it: A man in a suit or a man in a stained shabby shirt or rags? This is to the present generation: Untouchability has not been vanquished yet; it has only changed its forms.

Have we forgotten people a while after they make headlines? Hearing this, a familiar name should pop up: ROHIT VEMULA. This name marked the death of a philosopher who blamed no one but himself graciously, describing his birth as a ‘fatal accident’. His ‘adoptive grandmother’ speaks flawless English, but his mother Radhika doesn’t.³

II. THE ORIGINAL CASTE SYSTEM AND WHAT IT BECAME LATER

There are numerous social, historical and biological theories that attempt to explain the caste system, in several contexts. But perhaps, the simplest way to analyse its origin, is based on the notions of **skill and responsibility**. Let us perceive the Actual Indian Caste System in this way:

Brahmins	Were educated and propagated spiritualism in the society. Engaged in Warfare for administering and protecting their country. Managed Trade and business. Did the Mediocre Jobs.
Kshatriyas	
Vaishyas	
Shudras	

The four tiers of the Caste hierarchy were (in descending order):

The Shudras were the people who did not take responsibility of their own lives well. They limited their responsibility to their own survival. They were incapable of accommodating their family and community. The Vaishyas’ responsibility was inclusive of themselves, their kinship

³ HINDUSTAN TIMES, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/static/rohith-vemula-an-unfinished-portrait/> (last visited May. 26, 2023).

and their community. This is why they handled trade. The modern trade spectrum differs extensively, but in ancient societies, traders stored goods that were of necessity to the community, so that these goods can be given in times of inadequacy. The Kshatriyas' responsibility extended to the entire country. They carried arms and weapons, as well as, were willing to offer their life for their country. They also handled administration and military sector. Lastly, the Brahmins, by the virtue of their title which meant 'the Divine' were educated and the spiritual propagators of the society. Their responsibility knew no bounds as spiritualism, peace, stability, were considered inevitable aspects of the ancient Indian Society. But this hierarchy was never a deliberately manufactured oppressive system since its commencement. It was based on **skill and occupational culture**.

In ancient societies, there did not exist specific or particular institutions that offered training to develop varieties of skills. Thus, your kin became the only source that could offer you skills for survival. Your profession came from your family in the absence of training centres. Thus, family structure was the sole source of professionalism and crafts.

With the passage of time, the privilege of becoming a brahmin became so by **birth**, in lieu of **aptitude**. The vision of an all-inclusive society was replaced with a society wherein, people converted **differences into ostracization**.

Your caste, which represented the skillset you possessed in a society, soon became the criteria to discriminate you, to forlorn you; make you bereft of representation and opportunities.

Every human being strongly yearns the best life possible, a life better than others. But instead of empowering and pushing ourselves to be our best versions, we have found a ruthless way of feeling superior to others: by pulling other people down. By depriving them, we confine ourselves to being the dominant and the powerful.

Today's India considerably, has several institutions that render education and powerful skills to have a prospective life. Hence the caste system, from the perspective of skill development, no longer poses as a necessity to possess that skillset as opportunities are present otherwise as well. But for the doors to be open to all, a sense of inclusiveness has to develop in individual mindsets, for if we do not do so, we end up creating processes of isolation, opportunities narrowed to the privileged.

The essential lacuna to be addressed in the Indian Democracy is not the dearth of laws in the country. It is the absence of political will and conscious effort to annihilate the malign mindset using these laws. The 'Crime in India' Report 2021 released by the National Crime Records

Bureau recorded a substantial increase in crimes against SC/ST by 1.2% and 6.4% respectively.⁴ Furthermore, it revealed shocking numbers of cases of rape against Dalit women and minors. But these crimes are reduced to nothingness in the name of their caste. Caste is a privilege to the people up in the ladder, which deems that their crime is never a crime because they are 'upper'.

Article 14⁵, India's first public, empirical and investigative repository's 2022 report unravels the gruesome darkest stories of casteism in Madhya Pradesh. A vendor revealed that whenever he sold baskets, he had to put them on the ground and his customers would pick them up, pay from a distance without touching him.⁵

The caste system implicitly holds an underlying presumption that if you belong to a lower caste, you deserve only those things which are mediocre. Your caste is the attribute that attaches your occupation. Often caste system is reduced to the topic of **Reservation Quotas**. But this policy of positive discrimination cannot be wiped out as dark realities continue to unfold. Article 14 of the Constitution of India enforces Equality before law and Equal Protection of law.⁶ But it also recognizes that law cannot be generally applied to all, that all persons, by virtue of nature or circumstances, cannot be deemed to be in the same position. Thus, it not only permits but renders reasonable classification necessary for the upliftment of the society. But the policy needs to be comprehensive; a better criterion has to be constructed such that only the deserving become the beneficiaries. As of now, the policy also accommodates people who by birth, belong to marginalised categories, but whose socio-economic conditions have actually improved.

The reality of the caste system is that it never occurred naturally. It was a deliberately constructed process of exclusion over time, to confine all the resources of privilege that enable a progressive life, to a particular group. The system itself is a source of manifestation of power and utilisation.

III. UNKNOWN REALITIES IN NUMBERS AND STORIES

The 2011-12 survey of the National Sample Survey Organisation reflects the rampant unemployment among SC's as well as the stark contrast in employment of SC's and upper castes owing to differences in human capital investment.⁷

⁴ NATIONAL CRIME RECORDS BUREAU, <https://ncrb.gov.in/> (last visited May. 26, 2023).

⁵ Sandeep Singh, *Unflagging, Unyielding Discrimination Makes Madhya Pradesh The State With India's Highest Caste-Crime Rate*, ARTICLE 14 (09 Nov. 2022), <https://article-14.com/post/unflagging-unyielding-discrimination-makes-madhya-pradesh-the-state-with-india-s-highest-caste-crime-rate-636b11cd3b64c>.

⁶INDIA CONST. art. 14.

⁷ NEWSCLICK, <https://www.newslick.in/> (last visited May. 26, 2023).

In 2012, a study conducted by Canada-based researchers revealed that inside India's top 1000 businesses, 93% of their Board Members belonged to Upper Castes who constituted only 15% of the total population⁷. And in 2019, a US-based study of 4,005 leading Indian firms found out that Dalits and other marginalised groups constituted just three out of 35,000 directorships.⁸ As of 2020, there were no Dalit Chief Justices in any High Courts of India.⁹

Well, the lack of exposure to resources and education for the subjugated is one obvious answer. It is a deliberate cycle of not thinking but following, pertaining to jobs. If you think differently, you are alienated. But this is only one side of the story. Casteism is not just a phenomenon but in addition, a way of life in many parts of the country.

Rohit Vemula's 'adoptive grandmother' had four biological children other than his mother. While her biological children consisted of a civil contractor and an engineer, she adopted Rohit's mother Radhika, made her do all household chores since her childhood, married her off to a person very elder to her at the age of 14 on the pretext that he's rich and she was not sufficiently intelligent, and then Radhika was subject to torturous domestic violence after the 'secret' of her being a Scheduled Caste was discovered by her abusive husband. All this done by a woman, who was the headmaster of a high school in Rohit's hometown, who taught adolescent girls, who in all probability should have known the legal marital age for a girl, whose daughter's intelligence was undermined and denied education.¹⁰

Between 2014 and 2021, 122 students who enrolled in Higher educational institutions under the Central government committed suicide, of which 24 came from the SC, 3 from ST and 41 from the OBC Categories respectively.¹¹

In 2016, a doctor was physically injured and mentally harassed in Tamil Nadu, after he treated an upper caste pregnant woman who falsely alleged that he removed her kidney because by caste, he was lower.¹²

In the 2023 Hindi Film Series titled '*Dahaad*' on Amazon Prime, the protagonist - Police Officer Anjali Bhaati (played by Actress Sonakshi Sinha) is initially obstructed from entering the ancestral home of the murderer, because 'everybody knows her background'. But in the climax, the valiant woman decides to retreat to her original surname 'Meghwal' (her caste name) that her father once kept hidden to avoid discrimination. This means that even after you

⁸ THE TIMES OF INDIA, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/> (last visited May. 26, 2023).

⁹ OUTLOOK, <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine> (last visited May. 26, 2023).

¹⁰ *supra* Note 3, at 1.

¹¹ THE INDIAN EXPRESS, <https://indianexpress.com/> (last visited July. 23, 2023).

¹² HINDUSTAN TIMES, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/> (last visited May. 26, 2023).

are educated and avail privileges, or a better economic status, your caste is prioritised over your competence.

Caste is never outdated. But with privileges, people tend to confine their relationships with others of the same status. So, their lifestyle is never deprived of opportunities, neither do they meet people of deprived status consciously. You are confined to a class of people that you no longer become a part of the actual struggle for validation beyond caste. Thus, we are not casteless, but rather caste-blind.

Imagine you are touched by a person labelled 'lower caste', what is the potential threat likely to arise? An earthquake, a thunderstorm or cardiac arrest or cancer? Or maybe, your body gets 'impure' by their touch and these minuscule impurities are beyond scientific or rational explanations. Remember: Take away the older generations from the streets, the elite households, the public toilets for a day, and the beauty of our motherland will be no more.

It is simply ludicrous to think that you cannot dream or travel beyond the outskirts of your village or city because you are 'lower' in the eyes of other people. Caste is not merely a criterion. It is a dark delusion imposed in the sub-consciousness of people; a state of mind. We need a future where the question 'Which caste are you?' never pops up first to decide anything. There is no equality and liberty without fraternity as stated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution. The only necessity in this world are good human beings who transcend beyond all kinds of boundaries to render service and make this world a better place. But the efforts should not only be initiated only when murders and rapes occur.

Long-term empowerment solutions are the need of the hour. Let's pray that future marriage proposals would look beyond matrimonial websites that enforce the caste hierarchy, that we'd dine with the people who render us domestic help at the same table in our homes and offer them the same plates we use, that we'd offer water in the same glass, with the same quality and quantity to a man in suit and a man in rags. A research paper cannot have red-marks because you are the son or daughter of a cleaner. Amending the words from Rohit Vemula's suicide note, *"The value of a man should not be reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. A man must be treated as a mind"*.
