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Impact of Casteism in Indian Politics

ANANYA BHATTACHARJEE¹

ABSTRACT

In India, the caste system developed and is prevalent since ancient times and it remains as a great thorn in the growth of Mother India. The origin of caste system could be the functional groupings, called varnas, which have their origins in the Aryan society. "According to the Rig Veda hymn, the different classes sprang from the four limbs of the Creator. The Creator's mouth became the Brahman priests, his two arms formed the Rajanya (Kshatriyas), the warriors and kings, his two thighs formed the Vaishya, landowners and merchants, and from his feet were born the Shudra (Untouchables) artisans and servants. Then, it is believed that the caste system had been adopted by the Brahmins to express their superiority. When the Aryan races swept into India, they wanted to maintain the superiority and so they maintained the caste systems. Gradually the caste system became formalized into four major groups, each with its own rules and regulations and code of conduct, which is being practiced actively, till today and is, where, in one hand preserves the history of Indian culture; deters the growth of the country on the other hand.

It is very much evident that, current structuring and formulation process of policies are dependent on the preexisting norms and structures of our society. In other words, history of culture of any land plays as the backbone to its present form. Hence, caste is one of the most prominent features of India's history, so its obvious to mention the imprint of its presence in today's political scenario.

This paper tries to throw light on the influence of caste system in present India, with correspondence to the past. How the caste system have both positive and negative impacts on the country's development and what was the actual idea while creating caste system and how it is corroding the growth of the country in the present time, are some of the questions which are tried to be answered in this particular paper.

Keywords— *Evolution of Caste System, Democracy, schedule caste, dalits*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Caste is a state of mind. It is a disease of mind. The teachings of the Hindu religion are the root cause of this disease. We practice casteism and we observe Untouchability because we are

¹ Author is a student at Amity Law School, Noida, India.

enjoined to do so by the Hindu religion. A bitter thing cannot be made sweet. The taste of anything can be changed. But poison cannot be changed into nectar.”- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

We all are human, the same species, with same needs and requirements, but still so different from another. We are so similar still possessing individual entities. Its sad to acknowledge, that despite being of the same kind, we try to segregate ourselves from one another and fight over simplest of human made issues rather than helping each other for common betterment.

There already exists a lot of challenges to mankind as a whole that are to be quenched yet, but still, people decided to fight among themselves over self made hurdles i.e. *caste*. As B.R. Ambedkar said, Casteism is a disease of mind, which blocks the development of the community as a whole.

The formation of the caste system was in itself a wrong, but it traces back to the time around 1500 BC² when there were no such thing as a democracy or equality. But the holding up of these norms till present time is something concerning. In the present era of change and development, these kind of distribution of people based on ones ancestral history is not fare. Although there are reservations made to tackle these inequalities, but it cannot guarantee the respect and social upliftment of the backward classes.

The caste has always been a sentimental topic to the people and its almost impossible to, divert their beliefs and customs that they have been following over centuries. The only accessible option for the improvement of this situation is education. It will take a long long time, but keeping in mind that the origin of caste system is an age old system, we should be patient to see a ray of change.

Caste system is not the concern, its of no harm to practice one’s own caste, but the discrimination based on another’s caste, i.e. casteism is very cruel and inhumane.

B. R. Ambedkar stated the term Dalit, a concept that is rooted in Marathi language to refer to the so- called lower caste people. The word Dalit means suppressed and exploited people. The concept has emerged from the people’s usage in Maharashtra. Dalit has come to mean things or persons who are cut, split, broken or torn asunder, scattered or crushed and destroyed. The term Dalit became popular after the emergence of Dalit Panthers movement in Maharashtra. Dalit is usually used to denote the SCs. After the emergence of Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, he use of the term Bahujan to refer the SCs, STs and OBCs gained acceptance of the people and the government. This term was first used by Buddha and then by Phule. The term

² Hindustan Times; 03-Jun-2003

Bahujan simply means majority and does not qualify the nature of the population. Hence Dalit scholar-activists like Kancha Ilaiah use the term Dalit bahujans to refer to so-called untouchables and the Other Backward Castes.³

The post-independent India while adopting her constitution put affirmative action as a part of its objective to alleviate the poverty, unemployment and the miseries of the so called untouchables (SC and ST), other backward classes and the adivasis. The castes eligible for this treatment were identified and included in the schedule for quotas and reservation in education and employment. These castes came to be known as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled tribes (STs). The other eligible castes for reservation and quotas came to be known as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Jotirao Phule was the first modern thinker to characterize the productive castes of India as 'Sudras and Ati-Sudras'. Those castes other than Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaisyas were called by him as Sudras. Ati-Sudras is the so-called untouchables and according to Phule they are the ones who predate the Varna scheme. But now many of the Sudra castes have been elevated into neo- Kshatriya category. Hence to denote the people who still languish in the drudgery of caste system had to have a word to rally all men and women from these castes and fight for their emancipation.

Need and significance of study

The aim of this paper is to study the basis of caste system in India and how it impacts the legislative bodies in formulation of laws and how the theoretical aspects vary from what is actually exercised. No doubt that the discrimination based on caste is a real thing and so there were several provisions made in the constitution combatting them, but, with time, the societal structure is changing, so the point of analysis is, is the former structure, still compatible to the modern day issues? for example, the quota for minority, SCs & STs were made to help; them get opportunity to stand on their feet by providing them with education, facilitating them to earn. But, over the time, they (well, most of them) gained their positions economically as well as socially, and still achieve advantage based on their caste. On the other hand deserving general candidates, without a very strong economical background loose opportunity because of the quota system. So the question is, does the reservations actually help bring in equality, or does it just reverses the discrimination?

Similarly, the provisions in the constitution only can guarantee legal rights and advantages for backward classes, but it cannot guarantee respect. Hence, to bring things into an equilibrium, the provisions should be revised.

³ <https://www.firstpost.com> › Living News

The right to equality is an inevitable part of everybody's life. Any violation to this should be addressed as soon as possible without any delay. It should be understood that neglecting such an issue is in a way not abiding the very basic nature of the backbone of our whole legal system, i.e. the Constitution.

Methodology

The research paper has used different forms of research design methods. The most used of them is the descriptive form. It has also used explanatory form to broadly explain everything.

The study for this topic can be done in both doctrinal and non-doctrinal method. But here, I will use only doctrinal method which will include resources from both primary and secondary sources especially articles, online journals, newspaper reports, case studies and statistics data. A comparative study has also been done between the previous provisions of different castes in the constitution to the amended and more recent provisions.

Hypothesis

- The stigma related to lower castes cannot be abolished without changing the mindset of the people
- Due to change in societal structure, the formerly made provisions of the constitutions are not fulfilling enough.
- The already existing privileges for different castes is only reversing the inequality rather than creating equality.
- Sentiments of different castes are used by different political parties for political benefit rather than actually providing solutions to the problems.

II. THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF CASTE SYSTEM

Caste in Indian society refers to a social group where membership is largely decided by birth. This caste system became fixed and hereditary with the emergence of Hinduism and its beliefs of pollution and rebirth. The Laws of Manu (Manusmitri), refer to the impurity and servility of the outcastes, while affirming the dominance and total impunity of upper castes. Those from the —lowest castes are told that their place in the caste hierarchy is due to their sins in their past life. Vivid punishments of torture and death are assigned for crimes such as gaining literacy or insulting a member of a dominant caste. Manusmitri, the most authoritative text of Hindu religion legitimizes social exclusion and introduces absolute inequality as the guiding principle of social relations. Caste still very much matters to Indian citizens even in the modern world, though one must point out that different groups of citizens have different reasons for

maintaining the system of caste.⁴ The upper castes want to keep caste alive to oppress the lower castes thereby maintaining their domination. It is very interesting to note that the lower caste groups, who are supposed to hate the caste system, also want to use their caste identity to gain benefits in the corridors of power and politics and, at the same time, they want to put a stop to the caste oppression imposed upon them by the upper castes. It is an ironical and interesting situation of the Indian society in modern India. Actually, it was meant to show that the four classes stood in relation to the social organization in the same relation as the different organs of the Primordial Man to his body. Together they had to function to give vitality to the body politic. But the caste system grown to the level of retarding the growth of an individual in the name of caste and thereby affecting the fundamental rights of an individual to live or to grow, which is the essence of democracy. How caste system affects the Democracy can broadly be classified under two headings.

- Societal Democracy
- Political Democracy

III. CASTE SYSTEM VS POLITICAL DEMOCRACY

Caste system is a bane to democracy. Castes are not equal in their status. They are standing one above another. They are jealous of one another. It is an ascending scale of hatred and descending scale of contempt. Democracy is essentially an alliance building exercise based on ideology but in our country alliance building was a criminal alliance of one particular community with other one (both stronger ones and numerically powerful one) resulting in the marginalization of the other communities. —The government, which was designed for the people, has got into the hands of the bosses and their employers, the special interests. An invisible empire has been set up above the forms of democracy⁵. Woodrow Wilson Caste becomes important in politics because politics is highly competitive. Its purpose is to gain power for certain ends. It, therefore, exploits all kinds of loyalties in the society to gain and consolidate certain political positions; organization and articulation of support are important in the above process of politics in our country. Caste is one such organization with which the people are associated. The linkage between politics and caste is thus important and in the process both interact so closely that they are transformed. Party programmes also cut across caste loyalties and members of one caste may be divided on the basis of ideological affiliations.

⁴ Jonsson, Urban (2003); “Human Rights Approach to Development Programming”, Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office, UNICEF, Nairobi.

⁵ Caste and Democracy in India – A Perspective from Below -Vivek Kumar.

There is no denying the fact that the politicisation of caste has benefited the lower castes and other backward groups, especially in the southern region of India. But the question arises: Have political parties, which mobilise different groups in the name of caste, ethnicity and religion, been able to bring about a society which is just and egalitarian? Generally speaking, the leaders of such parties have taken the advantage of the inegalitarian system but unfortunately they have failed the common people belonging to the weaker sections. These leaders, mobilising the lower and backward caste groups, have become another kind of elite keeping most of the people out of the purview of development and egalitarianism. It is important to mention here that such tendencies have afflicted the Indian society because the leaders have paid lip-service to the ideal of social democracy. The upper-caste groups have not provided sufficient space for the lower and backward caste groups. They are still trying to maintain their ideology of an unequal society, based on either caste or religion. Role of caste in elections has two dimensions.⁶ One is of the parties and candidates and the second is of the voters. The former seeks support of the voters projecting themselves as champions of particular social and economic interests, the latter while exercising their vote in favour of one party or candidate based on caste. People vote on the basis of caste and religion and do not take the merits of the candidate into consideration. Democracy itself has become a mockery owing to this evil. India is the world's largest democracy but everyday democracy fails. Even today one can't find a dalit candidate contesting in the non-dalit reserved constitution and politicians will not talk about casteless society because they want people to be divided. Every party in India is strongly backed by a caste. So they don't allow people to get united in casteless society because it difficult for minor caste party to remain in the politics. Since independence no changes has come in this. Top leaders and politicians play caste politics to sustain in power and earn wealth. No equality in the society both economically and politically. We can see this in our Tamilnadu itself, for example, In Pappapatti, nattamangalam and keeripatti in Madurai district, kottakachiyendal in virudhunagar district – Election didn't take place only because of caste problem and women candidate from lower caste becoming president is the toughest one in any constituency. We must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognises liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. It means an associated living among people without any discrimination. But caste system enforces discrimination and discrimination causes suffering, often very deep forms of inner

⁶ Dalit: The Black Untouchables in India – V.T.Rajsekhar.

⁷ Sen, Amartya (2000); "Social Exclusion: Concept, Application and Scrutiny", Office of Environment and Social Development, Asian Development Bank, Manila.

suffering. People who are thus made to suffer withdraw. As result, they also refuse to co-operate. In such circumstances, if tolerance is to have any meaning, it must be sufficiently genuine and strong enough to restore co-operation. Thus discrimination and toleration both reflect the quality of compassion, mercy and justice. If there is a perception that these qualities are missing, the legitimacy of the social organisation and the political system as whole will be under challenge. It is where Dr.Ambedkar came in and his concerns were really about the constitutional provisions for the lower class. He realized that Democracy was a broadly a majoritarian concept and cannot really be confined to electoral exercise and therefore a mere political alliance of communities which lead to political power cannot be the only objective of a democratic exercise. Instead, he felt that our institutions should be strong enough to protect the constitutional provisions made for the most marginalized communities. He felt that the lower class people did not understand much about discrimination and rights as it was thoroughly disempowered one. He also realised that communities which remain in enslavement and hunger because of various ideologies and philosophies injected in their minds and they didn't know or understand what their rights are. So, he wanted to ensure constitutional rights so that the lower caste or the oppressed do not become victim of majoritarian assertion during the elections. That is why he fought for the separate electorate in 1932 and which was awarded by the British, known as communal award. In all his life time, Dr. Ambedkar addressed the issue of the untouchables from the view point of a democratic polity and not just politics and after India got independence and Dr. Ambedkar led the drafting of the Indian constitution, Dalits got 17.5% seats reserved in parliament and state assemblies. We can see the caste system and its effect in politics in two most populous states of Uttar-Pradesh and Bihar. Both were the first one where the National parties got thoroughly marginalized and a large number of the Dalit-OBC (the Other Backward communities, artisan-peasantry) dominated the political process since 1990. But because the individual leaders and their egos became bigger than their political parties which became one man/woman show and no internal democracy in these parties which resulted in collapsing these forces.

IV. ACTS AND CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS FOR A CASTELESS SOCIETY

India has one of the best constitutions but it is rarely implemented fully. The below provisions are the results of the sincere efforts taken by the Great Indians.

- Protection of Civil Rights Act-1976
- Prevention of atrocities against SC & ST's Act -1989

Fundamental Rights – First Right is the Right to Equality

- Article 14 – Equality before law and equal protection of laws.
- Article 15 – Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth
- Article 16 – Equality of opportunity in matters of public employment.
- Article 17 – Abolition of untouchability and prohibition of its practice.
- Article 18 – Abolition of titles except military and academic.

Fundamental Duty

51A- (e), to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

Directive Principles of State Policy

- Article 38 – To promote the welfare of the people by securing a social order permeated by justice – social, economic and political – and to minimise inequalities in income, status, facilities and opportunities.
- Article 46 – To promote the educational and economic interests of SCs, STs and other weaker sections of the society and to protect them from social injustice and exploitation.
- Article 330 – Reservation of seats in Lok Sabha for SC and ST's.
- Article 332 – Reservation of Seats in State Assembly for SC and ST's.

V. MYTH AND REALITY ABOUT CASTEISM IN INDIA

The dominant lay understanding and academic point of view on caste phenomenon is that a single caste hierarchy is universally acknowledged and accepted by everyone in the caste system. To believe that there is a single caste order to which all castes from Brahman to the untouchables adhere would not match the realities. The emergence of Rajput and Gujar-Pratihara kingdoms in the medieval India and the rise of Jats from the thirteenth century onwards, the assertion of Izhavas and later of Mahars in the modern period are the example to prove this view-point. But no castes other than the Brahmins adhere to this origin story and hence there-by accept their current status in the caste hierarchy. The entire so-called untouchable and other castes have their own origin tales that are totally against the orthodox view. For example, the Kahars, a backward caste of Central Bihar claim that they are

descendants of the lunar dynasty – the moon, which are the eyes of Purusa⁸. This story tries to establish the superiority of Kahar's over and above the Brahmans and Kshatriyas by stating that they are made up of superior and finer material. In medieval India, the Bakhti movement, which was anti-caste and anti-brahmanical, lasted several centuries. This could not have been possible if the brahmanical view of caste hierarchy was accepted by all. The present day caste wars, uprisings and demands for more shares in economic and political power would not have arisen if brahmanical-textual view were accepted uncritically by all. The caste system is being viewed as a rigid hierarchy based on purity and pollution. But no caste, even those placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy do accept the upper-caste notion that their bodies are made of impure substances. No caste willingly agrees that its members are defiling and charge other castes to be polluting them. A Chamar i.e. Leather worker believes that he or she is being pushed down the caste ladder unjustly but at the same time condemns other so called untouchables to lower caste status. But at the same time every caste (jati) practices its own purity–impurity rituals. This is the story of the myth and reality about the caste system in India.⁹

VI. OVERALL POSITION OF SCHEDULE CASTE IN INDIA

According to the Census 2001, the total population of the Scheduled Castes (SC) in India is 166,635,700, which is 16.3 per cent of the total population. The population of SCs is unevenly distributed among the states in India, with nearly 60 per cent of all SC children of primary school-going age (6-10 years) residing in the following six states: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The latter five states are among the most disadvantaged states in India across most social indicators. Historically, the caste system classified people by their occupation and status. "Each caste had a specific place in the hierarchy of social status. Although in "scriptural terms" social and economic status was supposed to be separated, the economic and social status of the various castes tended to coincide". However, since the 19th century, the link between caste and occupation has become less rigid as it became easier for people to change occupations. This change has accelerated with the economic boom which has taken place in India since the early 1990s i.e. after economic reforms or liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation. There has not, however, been a corresponding fluidity in caste, as intermarriage is very rare. Privileged sections of society tend to be from upper castes while the disadvantaged sections by the so called lower castes. Caste can be seen as the institution that has been structuring and maintaining for

⁸ Social Change in Modern India – N.M.Srinivas.

⁹ Jonsson, Urban (2003); "Human Rights Approach to Development Programming", Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office, UNICEF, Nairobi.

centuries relations of power among different communities and seeks to legitimize these power relations through systematically dispensing mixes of economic and cultural assets/opportunities and deprivations to different communities. The specific structure and hierarchy related to castes is specific to various states and regions in India, with only the highest caste, the Brahmins, consistently faring better throughout the country. Not only are there differences in the names of the various castes, but also the hierarchy between them may also be different between regions. However, castes who traditionally suffered discrimination based on untouchability, which was an element of the caste system throughout India, have been identified, enumerated and incorporated in the schedule of the Constitution. The implicit criterion for inclusion in the SC list is the social and religious disability suffered by a caste on account of untouchability i.e. being at the pollution end of the social hierarchy. In defining who would be included in the Schedules, the government originally used the 1931 census report and to a large extent duplicated a list created in 1936⁴. Currently, the National Commissions for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) are vested with the responsibility of considering castes for inclusion or exclusion from the Schedule, which then needs to be ratified in Parliament. The discriminated communities are then officially designated as Scheduled Castes (SCs). Included in the SC category are communities from three different religions, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism, all having within them communities traditionally suffering from untouchability¹⁰. The Government of India's approach to historically marginalized groups draws on provisions made in the Indian Constitution, which contains explicit state obligation towards protecting and promoting social, economic, political and cultural rights. "The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation"¹¹. The Constitution mandates positive discrimination in government services, state-run, and sponsored educational institutions. Amendments to the Constitution also enabled representation of SC men and women in local governance structures.

VII. THE APPROACH OF NATIONAL COMMON MINIMUM PROGRAMME OF UPA GOVERNMENT TOWARDS THE DALIT PEOPLE:

Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (Keep Your Promise Campaign): It is a national initiative to hold the government accountable to its promise to end Poverty, Social Exclusion & Discrimination.

¹⁰ Social Problems in India – Ram Ahuja.

¹¹ Concepts in the Social Sciences :Caste – Ursula Sharma.

This campaign emerged from the consensus among human rights activists and social action groups who were part of the World Social Forum 2004 (Mumbai) on the need for a forceful, focused and concerted effort to make a difference to the fact that one fourth of the world's poor live in India and continue to experience intense deprivation from opportunities to learn, live and work in dignity. *Wada Na Todo Abhiyan* works to ensure that the concerns and aspirations of Dalits, Adivasis, denotified & nomadic tribes, women, children, youth, the differently abled and people living with HIV-AIDS are mainstreamed across programs, policies and development goals of the government. We are represented by a network of more than 900 rights action groups across 15 states of India, who have come together to link social groups and engage policy makers on issues of strategic relevance. The fifth principle of the National Common Minimum Programme of UPA speaks to provide for full equality of opportunity, particularly in education and employment for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, OBCs and religious minorities. However this does not mean that the other five principles have nothing to do with the dalits, adivasis and other minorities. Since the government accepts the principle of the Special Component Plan, the rights of the Dalits must be considered and integrated across all the basic principles. The Inter-Ministry Task Force Report highlights several provisions within the National Common Minimum Programme that have special relevance to Dalits.¹²

VIII. MEASURES TO BE TAKEN

A functioning, robust democracy requires a healthy educated, participatory followership, and an educated, morally grounded leadership. The caste system cannot be eradicated without changing the mindset of the people. The caste system is a great social evil. From time to time social reformers and thinkers have tried to eradicate this evil, but to no avail. It is a deep rooted problem which has defied all solutions so far. The problem has persisted largely because of the illiteracy and ignorance of the people. Their ignorance makes the people conservative and superstitious. Hence they do not accept any social change. They want things to continue as they are. Every measure of social reform is strongly opposed and is considered to be an attack on their religion by the religious fanatics. Therefore, if the evil of caste system is to be eradicated every possible effort should be made to educate the people and thus create a strong public opinion against the evil. School text books should be carefully revised. Lessons should be included to teach the students that the caste system is manmade. It was a system for the division of labour devised by our wise forefathers. Originally, man was not born into any caste and his

¹² Indian Caste System – C.Hayavadana Rao.

caste was determined by his learning or by the nature of work he did in life. Basically, all human beings are equal; they have the same kind of blood in their veins. The differences of upper and lower are wrong and the entirely the creation of vested interests. The similarities between the different castes should be stressed rather than the differences. In this way awareness would be created against the caste system and its hold upon society would be gradually loosened. Only education can increase the think of the people and unite people. Caste system exists only because of ignorance within the people. Education can bring next generation new bloods with new vision. By promoting Inter-caste Marriage and by providing special offers for people who does inter caste marriage can bring changes in the next generation people. Government economic policies should focus on overall development of all section of the people of our society. The issue of caste system is actually needed to be addressed as a civil rights movement rather than caste movement. It has to be broad movement for human rights and human dignity. It has to be a movement against the religious rituals and holy texts which kept them subjugated for centuries and enslaved their minds. India has adopted the liberal democratic system which is basically based on equality, liberty and justice. It also gives importance to individual initiatives to develop one's faculties. India must make efforts to implement the principles of the liberal democratic system in right earnest.

IX. CONCLUSION

India's transition to democracy is still in process and marginalized communities are its biggest asset. The democratization process will bring new leaders from the marginalized communities. People want development, people want their voices to be heard and they are not ready that someone in the name of their identity, grab power structure and use it for his/her personal gains which was widely perceived. The political leaders will have to democratize themselves and address the basic issues of the common man. It is important that the Indian people should consider the caste system as a transitional phase, not as a permanent social reality which cannot be erased. The need of the hour is that we, Indians, regardless of caste, ethnic religious and regional identities, should aim at creating an egalitarian society for the future of India and develop some universal values upon which the edifice of the idea of India can stand with pride and glory. "A person's worth is determined by his knowledge and capacity and the inherent qualities which mark his conduct in life. The four fold division of castes' says the Creator in the Bhagavad Gita, —was created by me according to the apportionment of qualities and duties. —Not birth, not sacrament, not learning, makes one Dvija (twice-born), but righteous conduct alone causes it. —Be he a Sudra or a member of any other class, says the Lord in the same epic, —he that serves as a raft on a raftless current, or helps to ford the unfordable,

deserves respect in every way. ***“The spirit of democracy is not a mechanical thing to be adjusted by abolition of forms. It requires change of heart.”*** Mahatma Gandhi.
