



Caste Discrimination and Social Change in India

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Abstract: The origin and traces of the caste system and discrimination on its basis can be traced back to the ancient period of India. Social changes have taken place to a great extent due to the practice of caste discrimination in India. We find roots of caste and racial system with the arrival of Aryans in India. The society got divided into two segments, i.e., Dasayas and Dasuyas, i.e., original inhabitants and the Aryans. During the Vedic period we find the existence of caste system reflected in the Varna system, i.e., Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Sudras. It was based on the type of profession one adopted in his life, and a person could change profession, i.e., a warrior could become a priest, or a priest could become a ruler. With the passage of time during the ancient period, one more class in the society emerged, i.e., Chandals. They were treated as untouchables, and they did not find any place in the Varnas system. The social injustice on the basis of caste system and discrimination has affected the Indian society of Hinduism to a great extent. It has affected the unity and communal harmony among different sections of the Indian society, especially Hinduism. Only privileged classes were given the education and honored jobs. It led to the deplorable condition of the masses, which belonged to lower strata of society. Ultimately these sections of the society were ignored and became socially and economically backward. During modern times the British Govt. tried to encash every possible opportunity to make their rule lasting and stable by divide and rule policy. After 1857 the British government designed the army on the basis of caste, religion and regional basis. Many social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotiba Phule, Swami Vivekananda and other social reformers tried to reform caste system in India by promoting education among the Sudras and Dalits. Dr. B.R Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution, also tried to bring the socially and economically weaker section of the society at par with the other privileged sections of the society by spreading education and awareness among them. Special provisions have been made in the constitution for their social and economic upliftment through the reservation system. There has been a great change in social and economic status of the deprived sections of Indian society. But, their social and economic status has not improved to the desired level. We often come across through electronic and other media cases of discrimination and atrocities committed on the people based on the Caste system.

Keywords: *Aryan, Dasayas & Dasuyas, Chandal, Kumaon, Gorkha.*



1. INTRODUCTON

The concept of caste system was evolved with recognition of variation in human nature and plan to fit this variation in a graded structure according to the needs of the society. It was a scheme of cooperation and synthesis to ensure solution of the dichotomy of the individual and community. Caste system, based on Varna system and racial discrimination has been playing a vital role in the India since the ancient time. Both these factors have been running parallel and simultaneously. While the first factor the caste discrimination has led to the second i.e., social change in India. Therefore, one characteristic cannot be studied in absence of other because one is the cause and second is the result. By turning over the pages of history from ancient period to the modern times we find social change in Indian History.

According to Rigveda, Mahabharata and the Pali Canon there are references of casteless society. It was age of Satya yuga, there was only one caste of deva (gods) or Brahmins. There was no place for individual enterprise. The tribe had to work collectively. Distribution was collective and equal. The one caste society is mythised version of tribal Herd bound by ties of kinship and tribal discipline. In course of time human labour was replaced by animal labour. Man became a booty of plunder like animal and articles of use. With it started the slavery system two caste society i.e., Deva (gods) and Asura (demons), Arya and das, master and slave. Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya were given status as per their importance. Fourth was Sudra varna or Dasya. Purushsukta of Righved gives mythical story of four castes from mouth, arms, thie, and feet of lord Brahma .

In the beginning the professions as per varnas were not strictly hereditary. A kshatriya could excel in philosophical pursuits and become a Brahmin e.g., as per Vedic literature Vishwamitra was a Kshatriya but became a Brahmin by acquiring Brahminical knowledge and virtues. Similarly as per Satpata Brahminna , Raja Janaka was a Brahmin but became king of Videha by his qualities and Valor it shows interchangeable character of society . In Matsya Purana, Brahmins were descendants of sage Bhrgu but became founders of kingdoms. Raja Janak ploughed, which was symbolic for agriculture production and progress. Balrama, the brother of Lord Krishna was known as Haldar i.e., the wielder of plough shows the importance of agriculture and proves that no profession was considered inferior at that time. The Vaishya and Sudhras could improve their status provided they possessed necessary talent and virtues. One could be demoted from a higher to a lower caste if he did not pursue the high requisite standards as referred in Aiterya Brahminna and Puranas. Later on, caste and vocation were strictly fixed and became hereditary according to smritis scheme. A set of class rules were framed for division and synthesis.

But the lawgivers gave it inflexible and rigid character. The Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Jatakas stories show that the first Varna i.e., Brahminna enjoyed dignity, position, wealth and power. The Brahmins enjoyed revenue of villages or the tax-free land grants called Brahmadeya. All of them were not well versed with Vedic studies or religion. These lands were cultivated with the help of wage earners and slaves. With the rigidity in caste structure and flow of charity on high scale caused deviation and corruption on large scale. In post Buddhist period statecraft and military occupation was not confined to classes or group e.g., Sarvanana's were Brahmins.

Guptas were Vaishya and the Nandas were Shudhra. Vaishyas were the most numerous



classes. Some of them climbed to the highest ring of economic Ladder. Some small peasants, hawkers and petty officials also found place among the Vaisayas. The Sudras had a perceptible class character. They were mainly slaves working for wages. Originally from the theory i.e., right of strong over the weak. As servants of the upper castes, they were integral part of Aryan society. Mlechchas were also degraded class. They were the outside of Aryan society.

Shudras were treated inferior in the caste ridden society. Inter dining and marriages with Shudras was prohibited. Even in Sastras like manusmriti, the Varna system has been greatly emphasized and explained. According to it Brahmans have been born from the mouth of Purusha, Kashatriyas from arms, Vaishya from his thighs and Sudhras from feet . We find references of caste even during the medieval india. Foreign travellers and historians have referred caste-based society in India and discrimination on the basis of caste system. Many merits and demerits of caste system has been discussed.

As one passes from earlier to latter smritis through manu, Vishnu Yajna etc. one finds caste mixed complexity and multiplicity in violation of Sastras. Caste ramification and interwoven and sub castes emerged. Inter caste marriage took place new crafts and vocation rose. The progeny of mixed marriage was given new name caste and a new profession. The legists opposed but of no use. Even Kautliya recognised such amorous union and such wedlock and rape are legal wedlock. It further led to increase of ramification of caste system

Social injustice on the basis of caste system and discrimination has affected the Indian society of Hinduism to a great extent. It has affected the unity and communal harmony among different sections of the Indian society especially the Hinduism. As some privileged classes were given the education and ultimately honored jobs leading to the deplorable condition of the masses, which belonged to lower strata of society. Ultimately these sections of the society were ignored and became socially and economically backward. During the modern times the British government tried to encash every possible opportunity to make their rule lasting and stable by divide and rule policy. After 1857 i.e., 1st war of Indian Independence the British rulers made every possible effort to design even the army on the basis of caste and racial analogy e.g. Kumaon , Gorkha, Sikh and Jat regiments.

Even during the sultanate period social structure of India and especially the Hinduism remained unchanged and did not bring about revolutionary change in caste system of India. It remained undisturbed. The caste Panchayats existed during the sultanate period. Balban believed in racial and caste distinction. He did not like a low born person and never gave a high post to a low born Hindu or Muslim.

There was no change in Hindu social system and caste-based structure of Hindu society during medieval period of India. The Brahmans enjoyed high status, looking after the temples, headed the religious ceremonies and acted as literary class as teachers. The state did not interfere in their activities. The Kashtrayas acted as rajas i.e., the ruling class. The Vaishyas acted in trades, banking and commercial activities and were well off. The sudras and the lower classes continued to suffer from disabilities as before. Islam did not attach any stigma to untouchably and conversion offered opportunity of emancipation. Profession went by caste and the caste panchayats regulated their internal affairs.



Caste and class

Differences in wealth also led to change in status but could not free a person from birth and blood. The Brahmans and Kshatriyas who remained faithful to their profession commanded extreme influence due to their caste. When a Brahman or Kshatriya skipped down to adopt profession of trade and commerce, he still retained his social status. The Vaishya although amassing wealth descended to the level of commerce and Sudhra

Jainism does not condemn the Varans system but believes that a man is born as low due to sins committed by him during his previous birth. But could attain salvation by his good deeds and pious virtues in his life.

Buddhism did not discriminate on the basis of caste and creed and paid equal respect to the people from all classes. Its belief in equality of men brought many people to its folds due to its Ashtangika Marga and principles of Buddha sangh and dhamma. The low caste and sudharas who were treated as low born and untouchables and were not given the right of sacred thread and tittle of divaja i.e., double born, readily accepted Buddhism with an indicative of social change.

Bhakti movement

Bhakti movement in India reduced the rigidity of caste and the sects and led to social harmony. The Bakhti cult weakened the distinctions of high and low birth. They were anti ritualistic and ignored the age-old restrictions of caste and creed. They attached little importance to them. Ramananda a Bhakti saint also ignored the traditional barriers of caste and creed made his disciples like Kabir who was a weaver, Ravidass a cobbler, Dhanna a jaat ,Sena a barber and Pipa a Rajput.

Kabir worshiped formless God i.e., Nirgun. He sharply condemned the caste system and religious distinctions and taught universal brotherhood of man. Dadu Dayal discarded the caste and creed system. Guru Nanak Dev Ji was a preacher of casteless society. Eknatha a Maharashtra saint had great sympathy for men of low caste and was opposed to caste distinctions

Social Reforms

Many social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Rao, Jyotiba phulle and Swami Vivekanand tried to do away with the caste system in India by promoting education among the sudras and Dalits. Baba Bheema Rao Ambedkar the great literary personality and, the architect of Indian constitution also tried to bring the socially and economically weaker section of the society at par with the other privileged sections of the society by spreading education and awareness among them. Ramakrishana mission was started in 1897 by Swami vivekanand. He was a great social reformer who fought for equality among different sections of society irrespective of caste creed and colour.

Arya Samaj was founded by Sawami Dayanand Saraswat in 1875. He rejected the caste system and authority or superiorty of the Brahmans. He denounced untouchability and held that the study of Vedas and other scriptures should be open to all. Caste was given an ethical occupational interpretation like that of Buddha. The social work of Arya Samaj was courageous and praise worthy.

Arya Samaj started Sudhi movement to bring back the Hinds who had embraced other religions.



Most of the converttees who had adopted these religions belonged to the lower caste who were economically and socially backward and did not enjoy due honor in Hindu society. Suddhi movement for reconversion of those Hindus was started.

Maharaja Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir was a great secular ruler and a social reformer. He was a true lover of justice for untouchables. He ordered for the entry of lower castes into temples and on the wells. He was greatly impressed by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the round table conference and pledged to work for the welfare of downtrodden section of the society and for their education and upliftment through welfare measures.

Mahatama Gandhi was also a social reformer. He used the term Harijana for the Dalits and acted for the welfare for lower caste hindus and untouchables. He concentrated attention on disabilities faced by them. But his approach differed from the early reformers who thought that the solution of outcaste lay in the destruction of caste system.

Education

Indigenous Hindu schools of higher education institutions known as, Pathshalas, during medieval period excluded the students from the lower castes i.e., untouchables. The missionaries' elementary schools played a great role for the humblest strata of society including the untouchables. After Woods Dispatch in 1854 primary schools emerged in place of indigenous schools. These schools readily accepted the entry of low caste students and female students.

British Attitude towards Cast Discrimination:

Indian social system is frozen into castes since ancient period of India. Mr. Rapson observed that "all governments were obliged to recognize an infinite variety among the governed social customs and religious beliefs." It was warned by L. Abee Dubois that "the day Govt. interferes with religious and civil usages of Hindus, would be last day of existence as political power." The British Govt. did not involve much in social reforms in Hindu society because its involvement in social evils like Sati system and infanticide system etc. had earned a great criticism from the Indians. Therefore, it kept itself aloof from involving in social reforms in the caste system. The British government considered that one of the causes for the revolt of 1857 was their interference in the social set up of India.

2. CONCLUSION

The Constitution of India has referred these economically and socially backward classes as scheduled classes and special provisions have been made in the constitution for them. social and economic upliftment through reservation system. During the post-Independence period due to the efforts of the govt. there has been a change in social and economic status of these deprived sections of the Indian society through education and awareness but their social and economic status has not improved to the desired level. Many times, we come across through electronic and printed media the cases of discrimination and atrocities committed on the people on the basis of Caste discrimination.

Some people believing in ancient culture and civilisation want to bring back past glories of India. So far as preservation of old art and architecture is concerned, it carries weight but the



old pattern of society cannot be repeated because it cannot help in the modern times of competing world with traditional technology. we cannot ignore the fact that ancient Indian society was marked by social injustice. The condition of shudras and untouchables was really shocking. Revival of old way of life would again lead to inequalities which had plagued the Indian society. The caste system and sectarianism hinder the integration and development of a country on democratic lines. Caste barriers and prejudices don't allow even the educated people with a free mind. We can find cause for roots of caste system in India. Therefore, in modern and competitive age the study of caste discrimination and social change is most important topic to given serious thought before it leads our nation from a progressive nation to a backward country.

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