

# Impact of Caste System in Indian Democracy

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**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.

**Keywords**—Evolution of Caste System, Democracy

## 1. 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. 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 there by 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

## 2. Caste System Vs Societal Democracy

"The roots of democracy lie not in the form of Government, Parliamentary or otherwise. A democracy is more than a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living. The roots of democracy are to be searched in the social relationship, in the terms of associated life between people who form a society."

**Dr. Ambedkar**

Caste is the most confused knot of all social problems. Indian society is cast ridden. Religion is just a belief and it can change anytime in the life, but caste is a constant factor which don't change even when religion changes. It doesn't change when occupation changes or social status changes. That is Caste remains constant. It is like a omega value simply a mere constant don't change in any situation.

Caste system does not allow for upward mobility in society. If a person's family comes from the lower economic strata, in a society based on a caste system, that person would need to remain within that restricted level. Caste system affects the society by making the people more exposed to prejudice, stereotyping and other things. These differences in rankings often cause disputes within the society. Caste system is filled with inequality and injustice. The people of one caste don't like to mix with others. This division of society into so many religions, castes and sub-castes comes in the way of the unity and integrity of the Indian nation.

Caste System is the only reason behind women slavery. It encourages child marriage and opposes remarriage. Women are treated only as sex machine. In many castes',

women are not allowed to study, work outside or speak their mind. Caste system is the reason behind the lower status of women in some of the communities. No caste in India respect women rights and their feelings. An Indian cannot eat or marry with an Indian simply because he or she does not belong to his or her caste. An Indian simply cannot touch an Indian because he or she does belong to his or her caste.

Caste System is the precursor of Communal Violence by continuously suppressing a section of people. It forces lower caste people to take weapons in their hand. Naxalite, maoist etc movements are just an aggression of lower caste people on economic inequality. Limited choice of occupations, which is enforced within a caste as well as by other castes. A caste might follow more than one traditional occupation but its members would nonetheless be constrained to that range Restrictions on dietary and social interactions that define who could consume what and accept from whom. As with marriage arrangements, these restrictions apply at sub-caste level, not merely at the caste level. Physical segregation is there in many parts of the country. These are accompanied by limitations on movement and access, including to religious and educational areas and to basic facilities such as supplies of water.

Since caste is an age old system which is followed traditionally, people find it difficult to accept the new ideal and scientific principles. Caste system discriminates people and it violates all human rights norms on which UN instruments are founded. In its application, Caste has led to sub-human treatment of a vast population. Presently, India's Dalits constitute around 17% of the population. With other minorities, such as tribal peoples, Sikhs and Muslims, minorities in India constitute roughly 85%; the overwhelming majority. To this day, the level of violence against Dalits and other 'lower' Castes is atrocious. Social degradation perpetuated under the Caste system has very few parallels in human history. Such treatment continues to this day. Discrimination is extended to all aspects of life: whether in employment, education, health, land holding, security, and all aspects of women's rights. The psychological effects on 'inferior' Castes constitute gross human rights abuse and a continuing cruelty and thereby affecting the democracy.

We have to remember and recollect the fact that the Indian society does not consist of individuals. It consists of innumerable collection of castes, which are exclusive in their life and have no common experience to share and have no bond of sympathy. The existence of caste system is a standing denial of the existence of those ideals of society and therefore of democracy.

### **3. 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 democracy."

**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.

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. 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 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.

#### **4. Acts & 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

#### **5. 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.

#### **6. 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.

#### **7. 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.

## 8. Measures to be taken

“A functioning, robust democracy requires a healthy educated, participatory followership, and an educated, morally grounded leadership.” **Chinua Achebe**

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 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.

## 9. Conclusion

“As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy.”

**Abraham Lincoln**

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**

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