

Caste and Dynamism

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Abstract: Caste emerged as a significant aspect of the Indian society with the development of the sedentary livelihood. And once the agriculture began to expand the idea of a hierarchy emerged between the one who would own the resources and the one who would work for them. And the driving force for this differentiation is the caste. But with due course of time the aspect of caste changes from an economic institution to a political institution. Hence it would be wrong to assume that caste disappears from the Indian soil with the wave of modernisation. Rather caste is still a dominant aspect of the Indian society but its momentum changes its direction with time.

Keywords: Caste, Domination, Hierarchy

The idea of caste as a social element to run the social order and maintain the hierarchy among the individuals in the society emerged once the sedentary livelihood began. On a microscopic behaviour it can be said as the caste as an weapon which helps a small element of the society to access the resources and also to maintain a hold over it.

Caste works like a social cleavage to differentiate a small mass from a huge mass in accessing wealth between as a owner and a earner. It would be more accurate to accept caste primarily as an economic phenomenon which later on became a manifestation of social element. As in the feudalism, during the medieval European world functioned with the idea of loyalty of the serf to the lord, the caste system of the oriental world based upon the concept of “pure” and “impure”. The pure caste holders are the beneficiaries of the economic resources where as the impure ones are said to have worked for these pure castes. And the whole process goes with the squeezing of labour from the lower caste to own the surplus production by the upper caste thus this gap further clubbed with certain social practices like temple entry, dinning, and social mobility and so on, these social restrictions further enhanced social hierarchy. And the economic disparity between these social groups is not enough until and unless they were deprived from imbibing education, because education makes one aware of their position in the prevailing condition and began to question the authority of the superior and gradually they left behind everything.

Prior to the advent of the colonizers. The caste remained as a functional institution without any documentation with proper survey. But once they arrived and settled they began to gain knowledge of the Indian culture and systems. As Bernard Cohn, stated on his work” Colonialism and its forms of knowledge” how the colonial rulers used knowledge to have an efficient hold over the subjects and the caste played an important role in it. Various scholars come with different interpretations with the caste and postulated various theories. Louis Dumont, a French anthropologist produced “Homo Hierarchicus”(1970), which made a systematic study of the systematic properties of the ideology of the caste system¹. Which put caste as a religious system with the principle of purity, which hierarchically graded social groups with Brahmin on the apex position with each succeeding caste ranked in accordance with the degree of purity in relation to the Brahmin.

Whereas William Wiser, in his microscopic study on North Indian village, tried to draw a parallel relationship between the feudalism and castism with an economic perspective focusing on the jajmani system, exchange of grain for the service rendered by the lower caste to the upper caste, which Wiser characterised this arrangement as a mutual exchange. ²But the later anthropologists denied to accept his views as it any sort of exchange in a hierarchical structure cannot be mutual rather coercive in nature.

Thus this changing notion of caste from a social institution to an economic institution further shift to political agenda in the later part of the colonial period and the post-colonial period with the emergence of the subaltern school of history, which throws light on the prevailing consciousness amongst the lower caste people and how their consciousness being over shadowed by the upper caste people for their own needs.

The rising political consciousness amongst the lower caste people further framed in organised political movements which tries to challenge the discriminations that they kept on facing since the centuries.

Such as Nairs of Tamil Nadu fight for the temple entry movement. Where they began with a single issue of temple entry to political issues demanding separate electorate.

The Meos/ Mewatis who has been reduced to shudra status under the Mughal reign and further colonial rulers categorized them as the criminal group.

Hence the existence of caste is universal to India throughout the times but not as a static concept. Rather caste is a dynamic concept which managed to maintain its hold till the date in the Indian society in a minimal manner. The mingling of caste and politics gave a new structure to the caste system in India.

¹ Dipankar Gupta, “continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Castes”, Economic and political weekly, 1984

² Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb eds, “Everyday life in South Asia”, Indiana university Press, Bloomington, 2002, p 168