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Cast in Indian history with special reference to medieval India

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Abstract

Caste is an institution that is unique to Indian subcontinent. It dates back to arrival of Indo-Aryans on the Indian soil in around 1500 BCE. It is based upon differentiated hierarchy placing people in different social ranks and positions and assigns them specific roles and occupations. It divides Hindus into four broad classifications and numerous sub-divisions and sub-categories.

Introduction: Caste system is deeply embedded in Indian culture. It has been an integral part of Hindu society for millennia. There are numerous examples that manifest that caste system existed in ancient India as well as medieval India though with regional and temporal variations. And so is the case even today despite massive transformations the caste as an institution has undergone.

Caste is a discriminatory institution which fosters social exclusion and isolation in a variety of ways. It creates inequality in the society, social divisions and violation of civil liberties of those people who belong to lower castes. Caste is practiced widely in the Indian sub-continent with regional variations and intensity such as the variation in rural urban binary.

While social exclusion and patterns of social inequality do exist in other parts of the world, caste as an institution remains unique to Indian subcontinent which fosters untouchability, unprecedented forms of discrimination, chauvinism and intolerance.

Though caste is prevalent among Hindus-as its origin, according to many scholars, is traced to the Hindu scriptures-and many would argue that it is restricted to the Hindu community alone. But the reality is that it has permeated to other religions affecting them considerably. It has had an enormous impact on Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. This is the reason that Muslims have adopted the institution despite the fact that their religion stipulates a strict egalitarian system which tends to further communal feelings, brotherhood, sense of equality and social parity in all walks of life. Interestingly, the system has equally affected Christians and Sikhs. It has left permanent footprints on these two communities as well.

Besides, the Indian caste system has had an effect on tribal communities too despite being living in the hilly and forest terrains and a perceived geographical distance between the two. Furthermore, tribals and mainstream communities have been in constant touch with each other despite disparate geographies. This is the reason that caste system has permeated to the tribals.

Keywords: Classification, Varna system, isolation, interaction, endogamy, hierarchy, purity and pollution

Introduction

Varna and Jati in India

Interestingly, caste is an English word that was borrowed from the Portuguese 'casta' that simply means pure and original breed. This is the reason that caste is an institutional arrangement which is based on hierarchy as well the notion of purity and pollution. The idea of purity determines the caste ordering of the society. The more pure breed is granted the higher status and as the purity declines so does the ranking order.

Ancient Hindu scriptures stipulate division of Hindu society into four-fold Varna system. This is a system based on hierarchy with the Brahmins at the top and the Shudras at the lowest rung. The system classifies Hindus into four main categories - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. There is yet another category classified as the fifth category that incorporates those people who are untouchables or slaves or those one who were defeated in wars or armed conflicts. Many scholars tend to believe that the four caste groups originated from Brahma, the Hindu God of creation.

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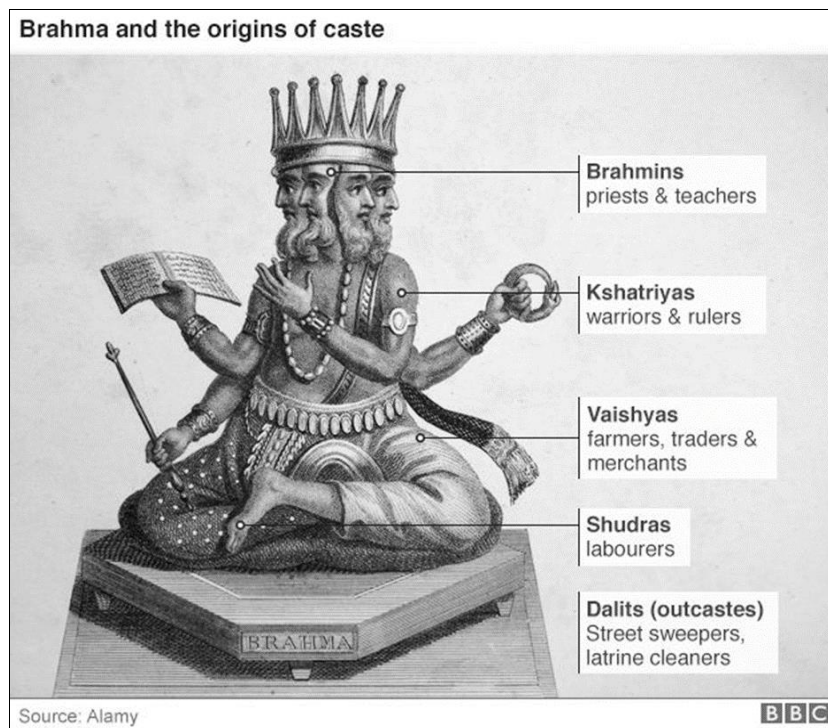


Fig 1: Brahma and the origins of caste

Jati, on the other hand, is a sub classification of the caste system. The four-fold Varna System, dividing Hindus into four main categories - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras, is divided among multitudes of sub castes running into hundreds of thousands due to extreme diversity in Indian populace.

The jury is still out about who played a crucial role in creating the caste as a social institution. It is however believed that it was the Indo-Aryans who laid the foundation for creation of the highly unequal institution which puts people into a hierarchy based on their birth and assigns them occupations accordingly. It is believed that Indo-Aryans had set foot on the Indian soil in around 1500 BC with a clear disregard with the existing local culture and sentiments pushing the local people southwards or towards forests and hilly terrains.

It is interesting to note that the caste system has stood for different things in different times. Yet another fascinating aspect is we know very little about how the institution functioned in disparate times exactly. This is in clear contrast what we know about the institution in contemporary times.

It is also noteworthy that it has been dynamic— constantly been changing and mutating itself into different settings. It is contended that caste institution, in its earliest phase, comprised of only four major classifications and not minor sub-divisions that the caste system stands for in the contemporary times. The institution of caste was starkly disparate in the late Vedic period which was marked by flexible relations and convenient occupations with flexibility of movement across categories.

In the late Vedic period, the social cleavages were not that much sharp and occupations as well as social statuses were not dependent upon one's birth into a particular family or a particular caste. Castes that are located at the lowest rung could imagine themselves into a higher category of caste by the dint of sheer diligence and firm commitment. This

flexibility became a rare commodity in the contemporary times especially after the British brought about irrevocable changes into the caste system by introducing caste census in India.

Inherent Hierarchy

As has already been mentioned, caste system is thoroughly based on hierarchy and unequal social rank and position. In theoretical understanding, for example, individuals have specified caste and particular place in caste hierarchy. But there are individuals who have achieved a distinct and outstanding position in the society; they stand in clear contrast with the other members of their caste and community. This actually indicates the fact that despite belonging to similar caste hierarchy, individuals hold different rank and positions when inter-caste distinctions are taken a note of.

Religious Sanction

It is argued that the Dharmasastras have granted sanction to the caste system. One important theory contends that the genesis of the Varna system finds its origin in the Manu-Smriti. The latter is widely considered to be the most important and authoritative book on Hindu law and dating back to at least 1,000 years before Christ was born, "acknowledges and justifies the caste system as the basis of order and regularity of society".

A more or less similar theory is enumerated in the Mahabharata.

The four-fold division of the Hindu society is mentioned in the Milindapanho along with their usual functions. It is evident from Manu that in order to protect this universe, different duties and occupations have been assigned to the different varnas by the Creator. It is noteworthy, that the institution of caste is underpinned and perpetuated by endogamy.

Caste in Medieval India

India was attacked by Mohammad Bin Qasim and later on by Mahmoud Ghazani. It is argued that both these people put the Brahmans in high esteem and gave them due recognition, respect and veneration. It is often argued that during Delhi Sultanate as well as the Mughal Empire, the Muslim rulers did not interfere into the issues of the religion and left people free to practice what they deemed fit. It is also reported that they hired people on the basis of their qualification and merit. There are exceptions but broadly they did not discriminate on the basis of religion and the caste.

It is, therefore, easy to conclude that these rulers allowed the caste institution to run and function as it was operating earlier.

Shireen Moosvi argues that after capturing Brahmanabad, the major city of Sind, Mr. Qasim held the Brahmans in high respect and assured them all possible help and assistance. They were told that they would not be subjected to any kind of restriction or prohibition. He even appointed them to the state affairs. Another example is of Mahmud of Ghazni, known for his ferocious attacks and unprecedented destruction, who put all Hindus in high respect and did not discriminate against Hindus. He freely recruited those Hindus whom he found as meritorious and able. He, Shireen Moosvi, argues recruited one person named Tilak, a son of a barbar, to the post of military, for his sheer skills and extraordinary bravery.

Until the time of Firoz Tughlaq (1351-88), Brahmans were exempted from the jizya or poll-tax on non-Muslims and the court poet Amir Khusrau (1318) lavished all possible praise on the Brahmans for their knowledge and wisdom.

Similar arguments are quoted by Satish Chandra, a renowned Indian historian on Medieval India, Chandra contends that there was considerable consolidation of the position of the Brahmans in the medieval India as they were given lands and high ranks in the state affairs. For example, the ruler of Sind as well as the rulers of Bengal and south India invited Brahmans and granted them large scale revenue-free lands to let them settle down. These Brahmans served in a variety of positions such as local revenue officials, ministers and accountants. To further value them, they were recruited into the military services and allowed to serve the state.

Then Satish Chandra quotes a number of writers who worked on Manu Smriti arguing that the Brahmans were revered by all the rulers. Some writers even contend that the ancient caste of Kshatriyas having disappeared, and the Vaishyas having sunk to the position of Shudras, the only dvija (twice born or privileged) section in society were the Brahmans!

Interestingly, during medieval India, caste system was not as rigid as it became during colonial India. Individuals and groups, according to Satish Chandra, could rise in the varna scale or social rank, and they could also fall in the hierarchy. In other words, movement across categories or social mobility was a common phenomenon.

During the same period, Hinduism was expanding rapidly incorporating its fold not only the followers of Buddha but also Jains as well as certain indigenous tribes.

Regarding marriage it was not uncommon to see inter-caste marriages taking place as marriages outside one's caste were frowned upon. But inter-caste marriages were not rare phenomenon.

Dalits enjoyed an inferior position than Shudras. The former practiced professions such as scavenging (Dalits can still be seen in this occupation), skinning dead animals, shoemakers and hunters. They were regarded as untouchables or *panchamas* or fifth category. They, according to Satish Chandra, were often forced to live outside the houses of the upper caste people. Their shadow was often considered as polluting and that is the reason they were asked to keep themselves at a distance.

In some parts of the country, the Chandals, as argues Satish Chandra, were required to hit a wooden board on a stick as they walked so that upper caste people would not come into contact with them. Sadly, some of these conditions still exist for the Dalits despite the fact they have been granted reservation by the Indian Constitutions and increased awareness exist in the society about their rights.

Colonial Impact on Caste

It is widely recognized that the British colonial administration had changed India, its polity, its culture and everything that the country stood for. One massive change, however, was precipitated in the institution of the caste system. This is the reason that it is regarded widely that the contemporary caste system is by and large a product of colonialism and British legacy more than of ancient Indian tradition.

The British, initially, wanted to comprehend the complex structure of Indian society and hence carried out intense surveys and caste census with an intention of better and effective governance. They had planned that surveys will equip them with knowledge and complexity of India socio-economic realities but it ultimately moved into a new and unexpected direction. It eventually led to strengthening of caste hierarchies and caste distinctions among the masses and sharpening of the caste differences.

One significant move was initiated by Herbert Risley in 1901 when he ordered a Caste Census aiming at collecting information on the social hierarchy and ranking system of caste. The exercise had massive impact on how people perceived the caste institution. This led people to petition the British administration to lobby for higher status in caste hierarchy. They did not shy away citing evidences from scriptures as well as historical records to prove their point. This colonial intervention in caste system proved destructive and hugely transformed the institution.

It is argued that caste system was flexible before this exercise. Soon after data was collected by the Colonial Administration, the institution turned into rigidity.

Caste in the Present

Indian Independence marked a significant milestone in the institution of caste. The Indian Government introduced laws that laid down foundation for the abolition of untouchability and rigidity of the caste system as well as discriminatory practices that were traditionally associated with caste system. India adopted its constitution on 26 November 1949 and allowed it to come into effect 26th January 1950 onwards. The Constitution, under Article 17, abolished untouchability and later on Parliament introduced several legislations such as the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 to punish those who are found guilty of indulging in the discriminatory practice.

Conclusion

Indian caste system divides the society into a hierarchy and ranks people on the basis of their birth in a society. It creates a notion of purity and pollution and subsequently fosters untouchability. It allows certain castes to reap the benefits of being in the higher social position. It keeps Shudras and Dalits at the lower rungs of the social order creating a highly unequal social structure. It keeps people like Dalits in subhuman conditions vulnerable to atrocities often committed against them by the upper castes. Despite India has made a tremendous progress in giving equality to Dalits, they are still at worst in many human development indicators. The kind of atrocities they were subjected in medieval India is no longer valid but they still have long miles to go!

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