Theories of Origin and Changes in Indian Caste System

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In that Country the laws of religion, the laws of the land, and the laws of honour, are all united and consolidated in one, and bind a man eternally to the rules of what is called his caste. Edmund Burke (Dirks, 1950)

Nothing has been more common in human history than discrimination against different groups, whether different by race, religion, caste or in innumerable other ways. Moreover, this discrimination has itself been unequal-more fierce against some groups than others and more pervasive at some periods of history than in others. Thomas Sowell (Thakrar, 2001)

Abstract: Unique social institution called caste which divided the Indian society into various segments having their own respective rules which govern their behavior, customs and rituals. Splitting up of society on the basis of caste is strict in the sense that an individual inherits the social position of the caste in which he is born and as a rule retains it. The caste system forms the noteworthy basis of pre-modern Indian social structure. But most importantly, its features have changed partially and also have undergone comprehensive changes. This paper focuses on various theories and changes under which caste has passed through since British rule.

Key words: Caste System, Traditional, Hereditary, Change, Membership

I. Introduction

Each society is segregated in one way or the other and the chance of nonexistence of any segregation in any society is almost very remote. The noticeable marks of this segregation are special rights for some groups and disabilities on others (Ghurye, 1957). Historically, one of the most complex systems of segregation, and what later became a system of discrimination, has been that of caste in India. It is in India alone that the caste system seems to have developed to a point that it still manages to retain importance in the contemporary social organization of India (Thakrar, 2001). Among the topics that have captivated and divided scholars of south Asia, Caste is most likely the most debatable. Defined by many specialists as a system of highly stratified social hierarchy that distinguishes India from all other societies, Caste has achieved much the same connotation in social, political and academic debates as race in the United States, class in Britain and faction in Italy. It has thus been extensively thought of as the overriding fact of life in the subcontinent, and for some, as the very foundation or essence of south Asian civilization (Bayly, 2008). Not only Indian society is diversified but countries like Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka etc. are also diversified on the lines of social institution similar to that of caste in India. The Indian caste system got sprouted out of the four fold Varna system has withstood the onslaughts of time and continues to exist even at present (Rao, 2004).

Caste is a system that is integrated within a structure and organization; it is based on endogamy, hierarchy and communal restrictions, characterized by the widespread purity- pollution dichotomy and graded inequality. It also prescribes the pattern of group relations that may bind the inter-acting individuals in routine life. The groups in the caste system are exhaustive, exclusive and discrete. This means that every person is a member of a group and of only one group. The membership is determined by birth not by selection. Each person is a member of such a group (endogamous) by virtue of his birth into it; he may marry only within it; his or her children will also belong to that group. Each and every member of a caste is expected to act according to its attributes and each member shares his caste status in the social hierarchical group in India. Complication, stringency and embellishment characterize the nature of the caste system. Sharing out of labour is the essence of casteism (Devaraj, 2005).

II. Meaning of the word Caste

Originally the word “Caste” emerged from the Spanish word “Casta” which means ‘breed, race, strain or a complex of hereditary qualities (Bhushan & Sachdev, 1999). The word “Casta” itself is derived from the Latin word “Castus” which means ‘pure’ (Rao, 2004). The Portuguese applied the word caste to the classes of people in India, known by the name of ‘jati.’ The English word ‘Caste’ is an adjustment of the original term ‘Casta’
(Bhushan & Sachdev, 1999). According to Henry Maine “Castes started as natural division of occupational classes and eventually upon receiving the religious sanction became solidified into the existing caste system. The caste system comes into being when it becomes an integral part of religious dogma which divides the people into superior and inferior groups with different responsibilities, functions and standards of living.”

III. Theories of the Origin of Caste System

Origin of the caste system is one of the complicated issues in sociological debates. It is not easy to say in clear-cut terms the accurate way in which the caste system originated. In spite of controversies prevailing over the issue of the origin of the caste system, some of the scholars have propounded their own theories regarding it. These theories differ from one another. There is no similarity between these. Besides this, no one theory appropriately explains the origin of the caste system. The present study considers only the important theories which are mentioned below.

Occupational Theory

Regarding the origin of caste system Nesfield developed a theory known as occupation theory. This theory explains the connectivity between the caste on one side and the occupation on the other side. The occupation theory states that the origin of caste system can be found in the nature and quality of work performed by different groups of people in the society. According to this theory if a particular group follows a hereditary occupation it evolves into a caste in course of time. Occupation theory makes a clear cut distinction between different occupations based upon the idea of relative purity and impurity. According to this theory the division of society into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra was in point of fact based on occupations and emerged as the caste system regulating a very rigid way of life of Hindus. Each section was entrusted to fulfill a strictly prescribed duty, which was clearly prescribed within which people of that caste were to state their subsistence. Those duties which were considered as better and respectable made the persons who performed them better-off to those who were engaged in menial or low graded jobs. The logic of this theory is that the hierarchy caste is associated with the hierarchy of occupations. In this hierarchy the superior castes follow pure occupations whereas inferior castes follow impure occupation (Rao, 2004).

Nesfield is of the view that the social gradation of the occupation took place in different civilizations. The primitive tribes inhabiting the hills pursue the occupation of hunting and the pursuit of wild animals was the earliest stage in the development of human industry. Next in order comes the fishing caste. Above these come the pastoral castes. Above the pastoral castes are the agriculture castes and the various tribes included in them following the order in which these occupations are adopted during the progress of civilization. Above them are the various occupational castes. The higher groups include those castes whose occupations were coeval with the age of metallurgy, those who work in stone, wood, metal and make ornaments. At the top of the system stand the Brahman and the Kshatriyas (Singh, 2003).

Nesfield analyzed that caste differentiation was mainly due to the functional differentiation. He at last concluded with his words that Function and function alone is responsible for the origin of the caste system (Rao, 2004).

Traditional Theory

Caste system according to traditional theory is based on the Divine origin. The backup for this theory is to be found in the sacred books of Hindus like Purushasukta. Purushasukta reveals that the fourfold division of the society came into being from four different parts of Brahma or the viratpursha or the Divine or the Supreme Being. The topmost Varna out of the Varna system are the Brahmans who according to Purushasukta were created from the topmost part of Brahma i.e. mouth. The next Varna in descending order is the Kshatriyas who were created from arms, the Vaishayas were created from thighs of the Brahma and the last Varna i.e. Shudras were created from the lower most part of Brahma i.e. feet. The order of creation according the purushashukta became the order of their service i.e. the Brahmons were assigned to serve the society in terms of teaching, advising or counseling etc. The Kshatriyas were given the task of protection and rule the society. The Vaishayas were supposed to meet the material needs of the society and the last creation i.e. Shudras were expected to look after the other sections of the society.

In support of the origin of the Varna system Lord Krishna in chapter 14 sloka 13 of Bhagavad-Gita himself says that He only created four Varnas on the basis of Guna and Karma (Rao, 2004).

Racial Theory

Herbert Risley is the most ardent exponent of racial theory of the origin of caste system. Other supporters of this theory are the scholars like Ghurye, Majumdar, Westermarck and others. According to this theory caste system came into existence due to clash of cultures and the contact of races (Rao, 2004). The Aryans came to India around 1500 BC through fighting with their predecessors. The fair skinned Aryans arrived in India from south Europe and north Asia. Before the Aryans there were other communities in India of other origins such as Negrito, Mongoloid, Austroloid and Dravidian. The Negrito’s have physical features similar to people of Africa. The Mongoloid have Chinese features. The Austroloids have features similar the aboriginals of Australia. The Dravidians originate from the Mediterranean and they were the largest community in India. When the Aryans arrived in India their main contact was with the Dravidians and the Austroloids. The Aryans disregarded the local cultures. They considered the native people as inferior to them and maintained their own ideas and ceremonial
purity. The Aryans got married to the non-Aryan women, but refused to give their own daughters in marriage to the non-Aryans. They aimed at conquering and took control over regions in north India and at the same time pushed the local people southwards or towards the jungles and mountains in north India.

The Aryans organized themselves in three groups. The first group was of the warriors and they were called Rajayana, later they changed their name Rajayana to Kshatria. The second group was of the priests and they were called Brahmans. These two groups struggled politically for leadership among the Aryans. In this struggle the Brahmans got to be the leaders of the Aryan society. The third group was of the farmers and craftsmen and they were called Vaisia. The Aryans who conquered and took control over parts of north India subjuged the locals and made them their servants. In this process the Vaisias who were the farmers and the craftsmen became the landlords and the businessmen of the society and the locals became the peasants and the craftsmen of the society (Dube, 1996).

IV. Changes in Caste System since British Rule

Before the advent of British rule in India the caste had developed into an authoritative social institution with the dominance of Brahmans at the climax of the hierarchical ladder. The Hindu Kings were not at a distance from such an institution they also upheld this institution with the help of civil power. But with the establishment of British as the political head of the society the traditional form of the caste started taking a different shape. Allegiance of British to the policy of comparative non-interference made the lower castes revolt against the Brahmin supremacy. Industrial development and rapid spread of urbanization made possible the flexibility in the traditional caste institution. This situation made it certain for the people of different castes, classes and religions to live in close congregations in cities.

Declining hold of the Caste Panchayats: - Before British rule in India every caste used to have its own caste panchayat which used to perform a number of functions like:

1. To make the members comply with caste rules and regulations.
2. Resolve caste disputes.
3. It gave punishment to those who violated caste rules and obligations etc.
4. But after consolidating their power the British avoided the non-uniformity of the caste panchayats and introduced uniform legal, legislative and judicial system. The British developed its own mechanism of power management under which the judicial powers of the caste councils were transferred to the civil and criminal courts, which affected the authority which the panchayats had held over the members. Questions of assault, adultery, rape and the like were taken before the British courts for decision. In civil matters such as marriage, divorce, caste based occupational disputes, disputes between husband and wife, parents and children etc., the intention of the British was to be guided by the caste customs. But in actual practice various decisions of the High courts set aside the authority of the caste (Rao, 2004).

Influence of Census System: - To have the record of inhabitants, the British devised a system known as decennial census system which was introduced in 1870. The real purpose of developing this system was to provide the numerical strength of each caste and religious group and their relative social status. Various interested castes in no time get the chance of raising their status through this very system. They organized conferences of their members and formed councils to take steps to see how census tabulations recorded their caste status. The leaders of lower castes regarded census as an opportunity for obtaining some recognition which were denied by members of higher castes (Ghurye, 1957).

Decline of Caste Based Occupation: - With the evolution of industrial revolution the traditional socio-economic relations get changed not at once but slowly. The age old economic system (where by high caste landowning families called jajmans were provided services and products by various lower castes such as carpenters, barbers, potters, blacksmith, washer man etc. the servicing people called kamins were paid in cash or in kind–grain, fodder, clothes, animal products like milk, butter etc. ) started declining (Ahuja,1999) & (Milner,1994).The British came up with modern machines, factory system of production, new occupations, salary based service system and said good bye to the traditional patterns of livelihood. People of all castes showed some positive response towards the modernity and started make use of the new economic opportunities.

With the result of industrialization the traditional occupational and geographical boundaries get diminish. People start thinking out of their hereditary occupation and from the ancestral village towards new occupations and work places (Rao, 2004).

Change in Marriage Restrictions: - Traditionally marriages were being performed on the basis of endogamy, often called the essence of caste system. Inter-caste marriages were socially forbidden and were considered violation of custom. But in present scenario inter-caste marriages are legally valid under the “Special Marriage Act 1954” and “Hindu Marriage Act 1955”. Though not very common, yet except Shudras inter-caste marriages are usually not disliked by the community as a whole.

Improvement in the Position of Lower Castes: - Caste system gave birth to inequality which resulted in the creation of unequal segments of society with unequal treatment. Brahmans, the superior caste enjoy the flavor of special privileges while as Untouchables; the lowest caste suffered the disabilities. But the current Constitution of India has removed such privileges as well as disabilities and made all castes equal in equal circumstances. The
Constitution of free India provided compensation in the form of ‘reservation’ to those who suffered the disabilities in order to protect their interest. They have been given special encouragement and economic assistance so that their backwardness may be removed (Mukhi, 1975).

**Decline in the Supremacy of Brahmans:** - Once Brahmans had occupied the topmost social position in the society and were considered supreme as compared to other castes. Their supremacy was based on the virtue of birth and nothing else. Subsequently up on the process of modernization the supremacy of Brahmans has been relegated to background. Today supreme are those who possess economic and political power irrespective of the family background.

V. **Statement of Problem**

Traditionally each caste used to have a caste council, which used to lead somewhat autonomous existence and each caste used to pursue a hereditarily prescribed occupation. Several castes were allied to each other through a traditionally determined barter of services and produce. Each of the caste groups was thus the unit within which cultural and perhaps genetic evolution occurred and various castes had come to exhibit striking differences in cultural traits like skills possessed, food habits, dress, language, religious observances, as well as in a number of genetic traits. Under the Caste System, a person is born into a Caste with ascribed social roles and endogamy, i.e. marriages take place only within that caste. In the course of early Indian history, various tribal, economic, political and social factors led to a continuous closing, consolidation and variation in the prevailing social ranks which tended to become traditional, hereditary system of social structuring.

VI. **Methodology**

The methodology which I used in this research work is secondary in nature. The data being collected from secondary sources such as Book and Journals available in various libraries, is the main source.

VII. **Review of literature**

Important adding to sociological study of Indian caste system is the concept of ‘sanskritization’ which argues how the formerly, non-sanskritic social groups came under the influence of the “greater culture” (Srinivasan, 1989). About the emergence of social stratification with reference to the emergence of concepts such as varna and jati, socio-historical studies advocate that the evolution of varna and jati was a slow and steady process (Thapar, 1992). In fact, during the earliest times, there is evidence of the interchange between castes, which meant that society was not as rigid as found during the post-Mauryan period (Jaiswal, 2000).

VIII. **Conclusion**

Caste in today’s India is not what it once was. Caste has assumed a different form in the modern times. People from diverse castes and even different hierarchies came into contact with one another on regular basis. Modernity paved the way to flexibility for the caste system. Social and religious privileges and disabilities born of the caste are no more recognized in law. The today’s caste system is no longer a clearly demarcated system of hierarchy-ordered caste groups. As a result occupations have become more a matter of choice than a matter of caste rule. Traditionally individual had no alternative regarding the selection of occupation but had to follow the occupation ascribed to him by his caste. But now a days occupation has become caste free. Caste centered beliefs, customs, practices, rituals, manners; food habits, dress habits etc. have also changed.

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