Abstract: This paper as entitled “The History and Structure of Caste System in India”, talks about the caste system, as prevalent in Indian society, its features, different theories regarding its origin and other issues related to it. But most importantly, it focuses on the characteristics of caste which are still continuing today, its features which have changed partially and also which have undergone complete changes. This paper also focuses on various Indian intellectual interrogations which talked about caste as an evil meant to be destroyed and eliminated from our society.

Introduction

The Indian Caste System is historically one of the main dimensions where people in Indian are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. The Indian Caste System is considered a closed system of stratification, which means that a person’s social status is obligated to which caste they were born into. There are limits on interaction and behavior with people from another social status. Although scholars continue to debate the precise origins of the caste system, there is general agreement among historians and anthropologists that it has existed in India for as long as two thousand years. The ancient Hindu scriptures, the Veda, describe a strict social hierarchy that bears some resemblance to the modern Indian caste system. According to the Veda, the universe is organized into a strict classification scheme and a set of hierarchical relationships that are reflected in the organization of society. The relationship between the caste system and the structure of the universe provided a deep religious justification for the stratification of society according to caste, and its compartmentalization into sovereign communities with the power to govern their own affairs.

The caste stratification constitutes one of the most fundamental features of India’s social structure. In Hindu society, caste divisions play a part in both actual social interactions and in the ideal scheme of values. Members of different castes are expected to behave differently and to have different values and ideals. These stratifications are sanctioned by the Hindu religion. Traditionally, the caste system of stratification in India was legitimized through classical Hindu religious texts, especially as interpreted by Brahmans. The caste system was rationalized in ancient India on various grounds. One of them was the justification in the Vedas. The caste system would not have found approval among the Vedic people unless there was some reference to it in the Vedas. The Purusha Sukta in the 10th Mandala of the Rigveda describes how the castes came into existence: from different parts of the Purusha, the Cosmic Soul, at the time of a grand sacrifice performed by the gods (Jayarama V). As per it, the Brahmans came out of his mouth, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaiyshas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet.

But the historians accepted the occupation based theory of caste. According to this theory, the caste system divides society into discrete groups that are traditionally associated with a certain profession and that strongly prohibit marriage outside of the caste. These groups exist in a hierarchical relationship to one another, and a person born into a caste remains within it unless he or she is expelled from it. By tradition, moving from one caste to another was extremely difficult if not impossible; the caste identity that one received at birth could not typically be altered by any means. The caste groups
commonly known as “untouchables” are at the very bottom of the caste system and have traditionally been subject to discrimination and severe forms of oppression by the higher castes. The relationships among the castes, especially between higher castes and the untouchables, frequently take the form of physical distance. The caste hierarchy is founded on the belief that the lower castes can pollute the higher castes, and the fear that members of the higher castes who have contact with the lower castes will be spiritually damaged.

The meaning and origin of the word caste:

The word caste was first used by the Portuguese to denote the social classification in India, as they thought that the system was meant to preserve the purity of blood. The word "Caste" owes its origins to the Spanish word 'Casta' which means 'breed, race, strain or a complex of hereditary qualities.' The English word 'Caste' is an adjustment of the original term 'Casta.' 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." Martindale and Monocheast defined Caste as "an aggregate of persons whose share of obligations and privileges are fixed by birth, sanctioned and supported by religion and usage." According to Anderson and Parker "Caste is that extreme form of social class organisation in which the position of individuals in the status hierarchy is determined by descent and birth."

Origins and History of Indian Caste System

The origin of the Indian caste system has not definite and many theories behind it. Some of them are religious, while others are biological. The religious theories explain that according to the Rig Veda, the holy scripture of the Hindus, the primal man, Purush, destroyed himself to create a human society and the different parts of his body created the four different varnas (Purushasukta Mandala). The Brahmins were from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet. The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created. For example, Brahmans, who were derived from the head of Purush, are considered the intelligent and most powerful varna because of their wisdom and education and are a representation of the brain. In the same way, Kshatriyas, considered the warrior caste, were created by arms, which represent strength. Another religious theory claims that the Varnas were created from the body organs of Brahma, who is the creator of the world in Hinduism.

The biological theory claims that all existing things inherit three one of three categories of qualities. Varna means different shades of texture or color and represents mental temper. There are three Guna: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Sattva is white, Rajas is red, and Tamas is black. These in combination of various proportions constitute the group or class of people all over the world with temperamental differences. Sattva qualities include characteristics related to wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness, and other positive qualities. Rajas include qualities such as passion, pride, and valor. Tamas are considered to acquire qualities that include dullness, stupidity, lack of creativity, and other negative qualities. People with varying amount of these inherent qualities end up adopting the appropriate occupation. According to this theory, the Brahmans usually inherit the Sattva qualities. They are serene and self-controlled and possess the quality of austerity. They are considered to have purity, uprightness and forbearance. Brahmans also have the will to acquire knowledge, wisdom, and faith. The Kshatriyas and Vaishyas inherit the Raja qualities, and the Shudras inherit the Tamas qualities. The type of one’s actions, the quality of ego, the color of knowledge, the texture of one’s understanding, the temper of fortitude, and the brilliance of one's happiness defines one’s Varna.
Historically, it is believed that the caste system began with the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 BC. The literary records of the Indo-Aryan culture contain the earliest mention and a continuous history of the factors that make up the caste system. The Aryans came from Asia Minor with fair skin that contrasted with the indigenous Dravidians in India. When they arrived, their main contact was with the Dravidians. Unfortunately, the Aryans completely disregarded their local cultures and began conquering regions all over north India. At the same time, the local people were pushed south towards jungles of mountains in north India.

The Aryans possessed a particular principle of social ordering called *Varna* Vyavastha, which was based on the four hierarchical divisions of function in society. They were placed in order of decreasing importance: religious and educational functions, military and political functions, economic functions, and menial functions. The Aryans organized themselves in three groups. The first group, Rajayana (later changed to Kshatriya) were the warriors, which were followed by the Brahmins, who were the priests. These two groups constantly struggled for political leadership among the Aryans. Eventually, the Brahmins became the leaders of the Aryan society. The final group consisted of the farmers and craftsmen, and were called the Vaishyas (Daniel). The Aryan conquerors subdued the locals and made them servants. In this process, the Vaishyas became the landlords and businessmen of the society and the locals became the peasants and craftsmen (Daniel).

**The origins of caste system**

The origin of the Indian caste system has many theories behind it. Some of them are religious, while others are biological. Though there are different theories, opinions and beliefs about caste, the exact origin of caste cannot be traced. Indo-Aryans reached India about 1500 B.C. The Caste System took its birth after the arrival of Aryans in India. But it can be decidedly said that the Varnashram Vyavastha did exist before Caste System.

According to Dr. Majumdar (Racial Origin Theory), the caste system took its birth after the arrival Aryans in India. In order to maintain their separate existence, the Indo-Aryans used for certain groups and orders of people the favourite word 'Varna,' 'Colour.' Thus mainly two prominent groups Aryan and Dasa varna became known not by their occupations or other characteristics but by their colour. Rigvedic literature stresses very significantly the difference between the Aryan and Dasa, not only in their colour but also in their speech, religious practices and features.16

According to Political Origine Theory, Caste System is a clever device invented by the Brahmins in order to place themselves on the highest ladder of social hierarchy. 'Caste' is a Brahminic child of Indo-Aryan culture cradled in the land of the Ganges and thence transferred to other parts of India, says Dr. G.S. Ghurye. The Brahmin post Vedic literature mentions certain mixed classes i.e. "Sankara Jat" and also group of outcaste classes 'Antyavasin.' The first three classes are called 'Dwija' because they have to go through the initiation ceremony which is symbolic of re-birth. The Shudra was called 'Ekjati' (one born). The word "Jati" hence means the numerous subdivisions of a "Varna." The God created Shudra to be the slave of all.

The Occupational Theory states that caste is the outcome of occupational division and specialisation. The persons or castes engaged in better and respectable profession used to consider them superior and the persons or castes engaged in manual and dirty profession were treated as inferior in the social setup of the day which is continuing till date world over but in India touchme-not-ism entered into the social setup whereas the same seems to be absent elsewhere in the world.17 Nesfield says that, "function and function alone is responsible for the origin of Caste Structure in India."

The traditional theory is based on Divine origin. It says that Varna and Caste are not man-made but the same are created by God and such references are available in Hindu scriptures like Rigveda, in its 10th Mandala, Hymn No.90, Verse
No.12 and in Bhagavad Gita, Chapter No.4, Slok No.13. Both in Rigveda and Bhagavad Gita, the theory of Divine creation is put in the mouth of God. Bhagavad Gita is very specific about the creation of Varnas when it mentions that "Chaturvanas" are created by the God. "I have created four varnas" declared Lord Krishna on the battle field of Kurukshetra, on an open ground while exhorting Arjun to fight against the Kauravas.

As per Guild theory, specific occupation, trade, business, calling, commerce indulged in by a group of people created a class or caste which followed same means of livelihood which resulted in social bond knitting them together for all social and economic common goal, aims and objectives. The Evolutionary theory believes that the Caste System did not come into existence all of a sudden. Number of factors played their parts which are as under:-

1. Hereditary occupation.
2. The desire of Brahmins to keep themselves pure.
3. The lack of rigid unitary control of the State.
4. The unwillingness of the rulers to enforce a uniform standard of law and custom and their readiness to recognise the varying customs of different groups as valid.
5. Belief in re-incarnation and the doctrine of Karma.
6. Ideas of exclusive family, ancestor worship and the sacramental meal.
7. Clash of antagonistic cultures particularly of the Patriarchal and Matriarchal System.
8. Clash of races, colour prejudices and conquest.
9. Deliberate economic and administrative policies followed by the various conquerors particularly by the British.
10. Geographical isolation of the Indian Peninsula.
12. Foreign invasions.
13. Rural social structure.
14. Hindu traditional mind-set of social exclusion making large section of society as untouchable and unapproachable.

**Features of Caste System**

1. **Segmental division of society:**
   Primarily Hindu Society is divided into four Varnas and many castes and sub-castes and thus totally stands not only segmented but fragmented vehemently based on the idea of high and low, superior and inferior, pure and impure, touchable and untouchable. There are two main characteristics on which the caste system is based:-
   (i) Hereditary - All such caste based distinctions or divisions are hereditary and irrevocable and unchangeable.
   (ii) By Birth - The caste status is not an achieved status but an ascribed one for which an individual does not have to put any effort.

2. **Social and religious hierarchy:**
   The Shudras are socially as well as religiously neglected and are not treated as human-beings but are treated even worse than dogs and cats i.e. even less than sub-human beings. Servitude is proclaimed to be a permanent condition of Shudras. According to Kautilya, "a Shudra, if he violates a Brahmin female, shall be burnt to death. If he intentionally reviles or criminally assaults a Brahmin, the offending limbs shall be cut."

3. **Restrictions on feeding and social interaction**
   The various restrictions were put on Shudras and Ati-Shudras in the matters of residence, marriage, feeding etc. and the social theory of social exclusion worked as its peak in Indian Social context. Here theory of pollution also played its detrimental role. In Kerala a Nair may approach a Namboodiri Brahmin but must not touch him while a Tiyan must keep a distance of 36 steps from the Brahmin and a Pulayan may not approach him within 96 (ninety six) paces. A Pulayan must not come near any of the Hindu Castes.

4. **Endogamy:**
   A person born in a caste remains in it for life and dies in it. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of Indian Constitution had declared that though he was born Hindu, he would not die as Hindu. He changed his religion from Hindu to Buddhism at the fag end of his life but the fact remained that though he
changed his religion, he could not change his caste which remained a 'Mahar' only. Endogamy is, closely linked with Caste System as it does not permit marriage out of the same caste or tribe and thus endogamy is essence of caste system\textsuperscript{19}.

5. Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation

Everyone had to do his own caste occupation only and thus there was total absence of upward social mobility in such a social structure. The Shudras had to stick to only the menial jobs prescribed for them and they cannot even think of changing the same even though they might have interest and inclination for other occupation.

6. Civil and religious disabilities

Under the Marathas and the Peshwas, the Mahar and Mangs were not allowed within the gates of Poona between 03-00 P.M. to 09-00 A.M. because before nine and after three bodies cast too long shadow which falling on members of the higher castes defiles them\textsuperscript{20}. Sawai Madhavrao Peshwa's time, Mahars were treated as Ati-Shudra - beyond Shudra.

Conclusion

Untouchability was born out of caste system which is a blot on the Hindu society. Individual Caste solidarity was there but the national solidarity was retarded due to the caste system. Dirks suggested that, it was under the British that “caste” became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all “systematizing” India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization. In short, colonialism made caste what it is today\textsuperscript{21}. Gandhi talked about caste as an ugly growth of a body or like weeds of a crop for which one will not destroy whole body for the sake of it.

Therefore, according to him, only untouchability has to be removed and then caste system will be purified because for him, it was the duty aspect rather than ranking aspect which provided a functional legitimacy to the Varna system.

There are contrasting views and debates on whether “caste” in the strict sense of the term does exist in contemporary India, or it has withered away. There are various points of views on the issue. There are two views regarding the present and future of the caste system. One view is that caste system is fast changing and is weakening though it is not being disintegrated or abolished. To this school of thought, belonged early scholars of the 1950s, 60s and 70s like D.N Majumdar, Gardner Murphy, Pauline Kolenda and Max Weber and scholars of 1980s and 1990s like R.K Mukherjee, M.N Srinivas among others. The other view is that caste system is not transforming itself fast and the changes are gradual. To this school belonged scholars like G.S. Ghurye, I.P Desai, K.M Kapadia, Louis Dumont, Andre Beteille, Yogendra Singh and others.

The Indian caste system has played a significant role in shaping the occupations and roles as well as values of Indian society. Religion has been the constant push towards this stratification system for centuries, beginning with the Aryans and continuing down a long road of unfortunate discrimination, segregation, violence, and inequality. Hinduism was the backbone of the puritipollution complex, and it was the religion that influenced the daily lives and beliefs of the Indian people. Even after sixty-eight years of independence, Indians continue to be in the grip of caste consciousness.

End Notes

2. Oliver Mendelsohn & Marika Vicziany, THE UNTOUCHABLES, p 48-49
4. SMITH, supra note 13, at 49.
5. Id.
6. Deshpande, Manali S., op.cit
7. Ibid.
9. *Id*
10. Oliver Mendelsohn & Marika Vicziany, p20
11. Marc Galanter, p14
12. Deshpande, Manali S., p18
13. Lahiri, R. K. "CASTE SYSTEM IN HINDUISM", p15
17. *Ibid*
18. Ghurye, G.S. *CASTE, CLASS AND OCCUPATION*, p1
21. Swapnil, Singh, p2

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