

CASTE IN INDIA: IS IT A RITUALISTIC HIERARCHY OR A MATERIALIST CONCEPT?

Abstract

This research paper deals with the sociological problem of caste and tries to understand the nature of caste. The paper covers the perspectives of some of the eminent sociologists like, Mencher, Dumont, Srinivas, Habib, Berreman and Ghurye to understand the existing debates around the caste system. Through this paper, I have tried to unfold the thematic patterns that have shaped the caste system and the nature of caste from a sociological lens. The paper also attempts to showcase the implications of the caste system in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Caste System, Sociological Lens, Sociologists, Rampura Village.

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Caste populations in India have extensive geographical overlap and members of several castes constitute the village society. Each caste is regulated by caste council. Traditionally, each caste used to pursue a hereditarily prescribed occupation like artisans and service castes and pastoral and nomadic castes. Several castes were linked to each other through a traditionally determined barter of services and produce (Ghurye 1961, Karve 1961). The jati pratha was broadly associated with the Varna system. Jatis were hereditarily associated with certain occupations which defined their ritual status and their social ranking. Indian caste system described system of social stratification and social restrictions in which social classes were defined by endogamous hereditary groups. In India, caste system became more prominent during the colonial period. Caste system served as an order where mutual consent ruled over compulsion; where ritual rights and culture of one caste group was different from others and where inter-caste relations were unequal and hierarchical. Ritual hierarchy of castes can be seen in residential patterning of different castes within rural settlements. Sociologists have argued on Indian caste system significantly. Some of them believed that caste was a ritualistic hierarchy and some defined caste by using the marxist-materialist approach.

Sociologists like G.S. Ghurye, M.N. Srinivas and Louis Dumont contributed significantly in understanding the caste from a ritualistic and hierarchical perspective. M.N. Srinivas noticed that the caste system in India was flexible in nature and asserted that mobility was possible in the middle regions of hierarchy. Lower - caste could upgrade their caste status by following the customs of upper- castes. When a caste enjoyed all elements of dominance then it was dominant in a decisive way and the decisive dominance was uncommon as a caste which was ritually high may not have sufficient number of members while a caste which was not so much ritually high had sufficient members. He took the example of Rampura village where the peasants were dominating and enjoying all the benefits of dominant caste. According to the Varna system, they were Shudras, a lower caste but as there were no Kshatriyas or Vaishyas so it nullified the effect of caste discrimination. He noticed that even the Brahmins and the Lingayats respected the peasants and as Brahmins migrated to towns so, these lands were passed to peasants. Brahmins and Linguists provided an example of existing ritual dominance. Main source of income for these families was the land in which temples were built and the cash/ gifts given by the devotees to the priests. Untouchables were immobile and they restricted group mobility. According to Srinivas, locally dominant caste did not want untouchables to improve their position as they wanted them as cheap labourers and perform degrading tasks. They were not allowed to enter the temples where upper caste went to worship or take water from the wells of the upper- castes members. Dumont defined caste system as powerful and stable and it opposed ethics and intellect. It taught us about ourselves. He understood caste as a hierarchy and perceived it as the conflict of defining modernity. He connected caste system to ' jati system' and focused on three important features of caste and stated them as follows:

- Caste and class were of same nature
- Hierarchy was incomprehensible
- Separation took place as subordination played a major role in creating differences amongst people.

He identified caste as a rank or a position and observed that the structure of caste was depending upon oppositions. The concept of purity and pollution was the reason behind the

existing caste system. The Brahmins were the purest of all whereas untouchables were considered 'impure' and contradicted that hygiene was related to the notion of impurity and argued that it was used to rationalize the concept of purity and pollution. His ideas related to permanent and temporary purity explained them to be the same. Specialization in impure tasks led to attribution of permanent impurity to some categories of people. He defined hierarchy as religious ranking and based it on the degree of dignity and connected Varna to caste so the relationship between hierarchy and power could be identified. As he was more inclined towards the Brahmanical spirituality, he believed that Varna was the model, which was universalized in India. He could place himself into the prominent Brahmanical Varna system and could notice the difference between the two extreme groups of the society: Brahmins and the untouchables who were not even mentioned in the varna system. He noticed that power operated in the middle areas in the Varna system and Varna was concentrated on the ideology of purity and pollution. Varna was used as a tool to mobilise and Kshatriyas and dalits could easily enter the caste system from outside. Untouchables were not allowed to use the same wells as others so they did not get any local relaxations and they were not allowed to enter into the upper-caste Hindu temples. Dumont admitted that every religion was based on caste. Except Shudras, every other caste was twice-born. Brahmins and Kshatriyas dominated over other castes but the latter could not perform any sacred rituals. He emphasized the relationship between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. His observations revealed that purity and impurity was based on rituals and in Varna. India declared untouchables as illegal. According to his standpoint and his understanding of Indological texts reflected that caste was rigid on both the extreme ends and it was not an egalitarian concept.

Ghurye described caste as a product of underlying 'racial' differences that were rationalized and reconstructed to continue intercultural contact and conflicts between two different groups. His book 'caste and race' focused on caste, analyzed the nature of various caste groups and described the society during 1920s. Caste was determined by birth and no social intercourse took place in between different caste groups. He differentiated between class and caste and stated that in a class-based society, status was defined in the terms of vocation and income. Customs of every caste was different like Brahmins did not allow remarriage and concubineage as a caste-practice. According to Ghurye, order of social precedence amongst individual castes of any class could not be made definite as rank was accepted but ideas were uncertain and caste was divided on the basis of food i.e. kachcha and pakka food. Food restricted socio-economic relations due to the idea of purity and pollution. Kachcha food could be taken only from fellow caste people. A Brahmin could not accept kachcha food from any other caste and accept pakka food from some castes people. Caste denied civil rights by segregating people by denying access to spiritual resources and status symbol. In rural areas, impure castes lived in the outskirts of the villages and were not allowed to take water from the wells of other castes. In Punjab, a sweeper was supposed to carry a broom in his hand or under his armpit and had to shout to people warning them that he was coming. Lower caste men were not allowed to cover their upper bodies and women could not cover their breasts fully. Capital punishments were given to dalits whereas Brahmins were exempted from death sentence. Every profession with few exceptions were open to everyone wherein occupations were hereditary and traditional occupation had to be followed. Occupations were monopolised and occupations of the lower castes was fixed. Customs like marriages should happen within the groups and if this rule was violated then the

members would be expelled from their groups. He recognised sub-castes as real castes and defined them as endogamous.

Sociologists like Mencher, Irfan Habib and Gerald Berreman had prominently recognised the contribution of Dumont but criticised him by applying marxist- materialist approach.

Berreman criticized the way Dumont described traditional and modern societies. According to Dumont, traditional societies were characterized by collective nature of man on the basis of social obligations and goals and modern society was characterized by individualism and egalitarianism. Dumont described traditional societies as non- believers of equality and liberty and he described authors as ethnocentric who wrote about stratification but Berreman critiqued Dumont's works were based on Indian sources and hence his indological view contributed to ethnocentrism. Dumont described ritual hierarchy as unreal but he argued that Dumont denied initiative and individuality in traditional societies and defined the complexity of the Indians who were consistent and working according to the upper caste people. Indian society tolerated deviance for non-conformity and diversity. He associated power with status and contradicted Dumont's Statement that power was considered inferior to the status. He criticized Dumont for focusing too much on hierarchy rather than focusing on power and status and depicted how hierarchy was based on power. He criticised Dumont as his criteria of rank was reduced to purity and pollution. He clearly noticed the injustice done by Dumont to the people as he wanted to justify oppression by using Sanskritic texts which were only known to the elites. He criticized Dumont as he failed to understand caste on empirical basis and Dumont did not address the cross-cultural comparisons of caste organization and he did not bring out the qualitative differences between traditional and modern societies. Berreman argued that Dumont was not aware of the caste like systems prevailing in South Asia and he also avoided talking about the racism present in America. He criticized the texts used by Dumont to understand caste. He did not refer to literature written on village India and on caste in India. Berreman critiqued Dumont's understanding of caste as it was artificial and idealized due to his complete focus on upper caste Brahmins and ignored lower- castes people who were oppressed and he concluded that without knowing the plight of lower castes, studying caste would be futile. He stated, "the human meaning of caste for those who live it is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and degradation, plenty and want, reward and deprivation and security and anxiety."

Mencher's understanding of caste derived its viability from masking of extreme socio-economic differences. He argued that Dumont's understanding of caste and universal significance of dharma was utopian. In caste system, not every caste had been given privileges. He looked at the caste system from the bottom-up perspective and pointed out its features:

- Caste was exploiting lower-caste people
- Prevented formation of social classes which had common interest.

He questioned the argument presented by upper-caste people that low caste people accepted their position and argued that superiority of upper-caste kept lower ones oppressed. The system was going through certain changes and poor did not respect rich because they

were politically aware that they were equivalent to rich. Pollution system was weakening but untouchability still existed. Changes occurred due to government policies. His observation revealed that lower caste people had more materialist view of the system and of their role into it. Notions of dharma and karma were more useful from the viewpoint of upper-castes. He studied the untouchable caste 'Paraiyans' of Tamil Nadu and pointed out that traditionally, they dealt with upper-castes except Brahmins but they had to follow certain rules like they could not go beyond veranda, would not wear sandals or shirts in the presence of any upper-caste people and economic dependency led them to follow these rules but now the situation was gradually changing but differed from village to village. During festivals or any other occasions, Paraiyans and other village members sit together now-a-days but it was not true for every village. Even now, they could not enter caste-hindu temples. They had little power in the political system as a group but had no influence on village councils. They did not talk about beef-eating much until and unless he mentioned that he eats beef too and in those areas where untouchables were more in numbers, they talked about it freely. Untouchables were stigmatized as they ate beef and positions of Harijans was subjected to various political manipulations of members of dominant caste, who often controlled them by dividing them among themselves and maintained traditional barriers between untouchables and poor high-caste hindus.

Habib argued that Dumont's explanation of caste was very narrow and hereditary division of labour was shaken and its effects were receded. Dumont built a theoretical structure on false premise to explain what India was. According to Habib, caste was based on the accumulation of surplus. He wrote that Purusasukta in Rigveda , in which Varnas were described, was describing more about classes rather than castes and argued that there was no sign of existence of a hereditary division of labour or any form of endogamy in the Vedic times. He argued that concept of purity and pollution was used to rationalize the caste system and caste was based on division of labour and relations of production. He mentioned about negligence of Dumont towards current historical work. He emphasized on the fact that caste was a system of class exploitation in medieval India and he also defined the relationship between caste and power and modernization had gravely shaken the economic basis of caste system as workers of several castes have united and industrial production led to decline in professional and artisanal castes.

Considering all the above mentioned arguments by the sociologists we can see that even the materialist interpreters of caste are not denying the fact that concept of purity and pollution is present so as to rationalize the caste system. Still in many of the hindu temples, lower caste people are not allowed to enter and even during festive occasion like Durga Pooja, we can barely see any Dalit or Shudra entering the pandals of Brahmins. Even if they are allowed then the quantity of 'prasad' they get will be very less and whereas we can see the Bengali Brahmins taking a huge amount of prasad. Lower caste have to stand in a separate line while taking the bhog(prasad). These pictures clearly represent that there is the idea of purity and pollution and even the plates and pots are separately kept for these lower castes people. Menstruation is termed as a temporary pollution and menstruating women are not allowed to cook for four to five days and they are not allowed to worship due to the pre-existing idea of purity and pollution. Therefore, notions of purity are regarded as the most powerful protection against social contamination and efforts are made to erect this as the universal hierarchical principle. Such an ideology ultimately codified pre-existing relations of domination on the one side and exclusion of subordinated from the means of production on

the other since the lower caste will not accept their status as impure. Pollution is the most visible and potent form by which exclusion is achieved. So, caste is based on ritualistic hierarchy as pollution still covers the major portion of any caste-based studies.

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