

IMPACT OF CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA - A STUDY**Vanaja**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political science, Government Arts College. Bangalore-560001

Abstract:

The caste system has had a significant impact on Indian society, impacting social structure, economic development, education, health, marriage and family, gender, political representation, social mobility, cultural identity, mental health, business and employment, rural and urban areas, public services, international relations, access to justice, cultural heritage, and social capital. The caste system has resulted in discrimination and marginalization of the lower castes, a lack of access to education and employment, a lack of upward mobility, and a lack of representation in political positions. Additionally, it has led to discrimination in marriage and family, a lack of access to healthcare, a lack of access to resources, a lack of access to justice, and a lack of cultural integration. These issues have perpetuated the cycles of poverty and discrimination and have hindered economic, social, and cultural development. The caste system has also had a major impact on gender. Women, who are often seen as inferior to men, have fewer opportunities and are disproportionately affected by poverty and unemployment. This has led to a lack of education, employment, and other opportunities for women, especially those from lower castes. Additionally, the caste system has led to discrimination in marriage and family, with women from lower castes being denied the right to marry and form families. Furthermore, the caste system has led to gender-based violence, with women from lower castes facing higher rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of abuse. In order to address these issues and create an equitable society for all genders, it is necessary to address the root causes of the caste system, including inequality, discrimination, and marginalization.

Keywords: Social Structure, Social Mobility, Access to Justice, Cultural Heritage, Social Capital. Caste System, occupation, religion,

I. INTRODUCTION;

The caste system in India is a complex social hierarchy that has been in existence for centuries. It is a system of social stratification that is based on birth and is divided into four main categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The caste system has had a significant impact on Indian society, shaping its social, economic, and political landscape. The caste system in India is believed to have originated in ancient times as a means of dividing society into different social and economic classes. The Brahmins were considered the highest class and were responsible for spiritual and religious duties, while the Kshatriyas were the warriors and rulers. The Vaishyas were the merchants and traders, and the Shudras were the

lower class, responsible for manual labor. Over time, the caste system has become deeply ingrained in Indian society, with each class having its own set of customs, traditions, and beliefs.

Impact on Social Structure;

The caste system has had a significant impact on the social structure of Indian society. It has created a rigid hierarchy, with the higher castes enjoying more privileges and opportunities than the lower castes. This has led to discrimination and marginalization of the lower castes, who have been denied access to education, employment, and other opportunities. The caste system has also led to the creation of a rigid social hierarchy, with little room for social mobility.

Impact on Economic Development;

The caste system has also had a major impact on economic development in India. The lower castes, who are generally less educated and have fewer opportunities, have been disproportionately affected by poverty and unemployment. This has led to a widening income gap between the higher and lower castes, with the higher castes enjoying more economic opportunities and prosperity.

Caste Structure and Characteristics;

Defining the word “caste” itself is harder than thought to be. Risley defines it as “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community”. It can also be defined as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions. Caste name is generally associated with a specific occupation and, as mentioned before, is a closed stratification, which makes it endogamous. The Indian caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked castes called Varnas. They are classified according to occupation and determine access to wealth, power, and privilege. Leadership positions in society are monopolized by a few dominant castes. The two upper castes are ritually considered as superior to the lower castes. The Brahmins, usually priests and scholars, are at the top. Brian K. Smith, the author of *Classifying the Universe*, explains his definition of the Brahman caste: The Brahmin class is essentially defined by its supposed priority (as the class created first by the creator god), by knowledge of the Veda, and by the monopoly this class holds on the operation of sacrifice. These traits justify the social position of the class vis-à-vis others: they are predominant because they are prior, and they claim to stand outside of the power relations that govern social life for others because of their superior knowledge and sole possession of the ultimate “weapons,” sacrificial techniques.

Following the Brahmins are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. They were the ruling class and often times collaborated with the Brahmins as they reigned over their

kingdom. In ancient India, the rulers were bound by Holy Scriptures to govern their kingdoms with justice. A Hindu ruler was the protector of his subjects, and in order to protect his subjects the king needed to be an expert warrior. A Kshatriya is characterized by physical and martial strength. These qualities determined his relations with others: “the Kshatriya is charged with the protection of the higher Brahmin class with rule over the lower Vaishyas”. The word ‘kshatra’ in Sanskrit means government, power, and dominion. Kshatriyas are considered to be bold, alert and full of fortitude, generosity, discipline and modesty. Priests and warriors were said to be “better” than or “superior” to the other castes, and in general the Brahmans and Kshatriyas were regarded as united into a ruling class according to the populace at large. But although the Brahmans and Kshatriyas together proclaimed to be superior to the commoners, the Brahmans never hesitated to declare their own caste as higher than the Kshatriyas. The reason of this, according to the Vedas, is that Brahmans have been characterized as being self-sufficient, whereas the Kshatriyas are dependent on priests. Thus, it is said that Brahmans can live without rulers, but rulers cannot sufficiently execute their tasks without the aid of Brahmans. Next are the Vaishyas, or merchants. A Vaishya's duty was to ensure the community's prosperity through agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. The Vaishyas were considered and expected to be weak in comparison to their rulers, and were infinitely exploitable and regenerative. These oppressions however, were usually not boycotted because this was presented as a natural state of affairs in the social realm. Later, the Shudras took over agriculture and cattle rearing while the Vaishyas became traders and merchants. However though they were “twice-born” and economically strong because they controlled commerce, Vaishyas were denied a high social status, for which they resented the upper castes.

Caste includes three elements: repulsion, hierarchy, and hereditary specialization. According to Velassery, “a society is characterized by such a system if it is divided into a large number of hereditarily specialized groups, which are hierarchically superposed and mutually opposed. It does not tolerate the principle of rising in the status of groups’ mixture and of changing occupation”. There are many rules in the Indian caste system which caste members must adhere to in order to avoid being shunned from their caste members or, according to Hinduism, being born less fortunate in their next life. The two most important characteristics of the Indian caste system have to do with endogamy and occupational restriction. Every member of a caste or sub-caste is required to marry within their own caste. Any violation of this results in excommunication from one’s family and caste. When it comes to occupation, every caste is associated with a particular one to which its members are required to follow. Another characteristic is that every caste imposes restrictions on its members with regards to diet and has its own laws which govern the food habit of the members. There are two types of food: Pacca, which is food prepared with ghee, and Kachcha, which is food prepared with water. According to the castes, only certain kinds of foods can be exchanged between certain castes. For example, a Brahman can accept only Pacca food from a Shudra, but Kachcha food can only be accepted from a person of one’s own caste or of a higher caste. Another is the social interaction between castes. There are strict barriers when it comes to the mixing of a superior caste with an inferior

caste. Hence, under the caste system every caste abides by well established customs and well defined norms of interactions. A fourth idea is the belief of purity and pollution. Cleanliness is considered to be a very important value in Hinduism, and the caste system enforces this idea. Untouchability was thus a means of exclusivism, a social device that became religious only by being drawn into the pollution-purity complex.

It is unfortunate that although the original intent of Varnas was not to create caste, it has evolved into emphasizing the idea of the caste system. Varnas are conditioned with one's actions and desires based on Gunas, but people have mistaken Varnas for caste and treat them as identical. Varnas are God created, whereas caste is man-made; it is simply a social institution and can easily be changed and modified according to changing needs of society. Caste by birth was never the original intent nor was it ever the basis upon which the Varnas were constituted; it was meant to have individuals engaging only in a field of activity that they are capable of doing. The Varna System stood on the basis of Gunas and karmas of the individual and has nothing to do with birth. Movements and Political Policies against Caste There were many movements and governmental actions that took place pre- and post independence in order to overcome and attempt to eliminate the inequalities and injustices associated with the caste system. During the national movement, Gandhi began using the term "Harijans" (God's people) to refer to the untouchables in order to encourage a shift towards positive attitude towards the lower castes. Many lower caste members, however, found the term to be patronizing. The Census of India had started by the British in the late 19th century, and in 1935, "the British Government of India came up with a list of 400 groups considered untouchable, as well as many tribal groups, that would be accorded special privileges in order to overcome deprivation and discrimination. Those groups included on this list came to be termed Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In the 1970s, however, many leaders of castes considered untouchable started calling themselves Dalits". The anti-caste Dalit movement began with Jyotirao Phule in the mid-19th century, and he started a movement for education and the upliftment of women, Shudra's, and Dalits and the movement spread to many parts of India. He also worked to abolish the idea of "untouchability," which meant getting rid of restrictions on entry into temples, and finding a place for Dalits within Hinduism. After 1910, however, Dalit leaders started focusing on distancing themselves from Hinduism and began to advocate for a separate electorate for the Dalits. But Gandhi, who was one of the leaders of the Indian National Congress, tried to instead encourage the incorporation of Dalits as part of reformed Hinduism. Another prominent movement was the Dalit movement under B.R. Ambedkar, which began between the 1920s and 1930s. He campaigned for greater rights for Dalits in British India, and even after independence. Both Ambedkar and Gandhi were advocates for the abolishment of the caste system, but they disagreed on the means to go about it. Gandhi believed "untouchability to be a moral issue that could be abolished through goodwill and change of heart among the upper-caste Hindus". Ambedkar, however, believed that "the subordination of Dalits was primarily economic and political, and could only be overcome by changing the social structure through legal, political, and educational means".

Ambedkar did receive constitutional guarantees after independence that reserved a certain percentage of seats in elections for Dalits, but by the mid-1950s, Ambedkar was not satisfied by the rate of implementation of the measures. He therefore resigned from government and began to recruit Dalits to seek rights. In 1956, he encouraged around six million Dalits to convert to Buddhism “as a means of escaping the social stigma of untouchability within the Hindu caste system”. During the 1970s, the Dalit Panthers movement sprouted up among the younger generation of Dalits along with other social movements in India, and their movement expressed their anger and frustration at the failure of implementation regarding policies that would eliminate acts of violence against Dalits by upper-caste Hindus in many parts of urban and rural India. There are three main categories of people that have been identified as eligible for preferential policies that reserve seats in legislatures, in government jobs, in public sector enterprises, and in state-supervised educational institutions, in terms of their population proportion in their area. They have also been promised special programs (such as health care legal assistance, allotment of land, scholarships, loans, and grants) and are legally protected against discrimination. The first group is the Scheduled Castes (SCs), which includes communities who are considered to be untouchables. The second are the Scheduled Tribes (STs). This category includes in it those communities who did not accept the caste system and preferred to reside deep in the jungles, forests, and mountains of India, away from the main population. The Scheduled Tribes are also called Adivasi, meaning aboriginals. The third is the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), which includes in it castes who belong to the Shudra Varna, former untouchables who converted from Hinduism to other religions, and nomads and tribes who made a living from criminal acts. They are considered to be affected by “backwardness” based on social and economic disadvantages. It is not clear, however, what criterion identifies OBCs and there is an ongoing disagreement over whether to assign people this status on the basis of caste or on economic criteria. The problem with this is that caste and economic status have been largely correlated in the past, and even now, caste-based prejudice and discrimination hinder economic advancement for the lower castes. In the 1960s, the reservation system for SCs and STs began, but the individual states were the ones that were to determine which would be identified as OBCs. Many southern states identified economically disadvantaged castes as OBCs, but there has been considerable opposition to implementing these policies in other Indian states. The Central Government appointed a commission headed by B.P. Mandal to look into the issue, and by 1978, the Mandal Commission report was completed.

It was concluded that caste was the main contributing factor to social and economic backwardness. Many seats in state institutions were reserved for the three groups. The Commission recommended that 27 percent of seats be reserved for OBCs, in addition to 15 percent for SCs and 7 percent for STs. Unfortunately, the government did not implement these policies in fear of large scale opposition from the people, but in 1990, the Janata Dal government “attempted partial implementation of recommendations leading to widespread unrest and opposition from middle- and upper-caste youths, intellectuals, and elites” (. Modern India Relationships between castes have become more relaxed today. There is more food sharing

between castes and a lot more eating done at local restaurants where caste distinctions are less likely to be made. One of the biggest changes that took place in India was occupational pursuits among men. Earlier, most men did not veer away from their caste-linked occupations, such as blacksmithing and pottery making. Many have now taken up newer occupations that do not relate to their caste, such as government jobs, teaching, retail and services, and machine repair. Wealth and power in the village is now less associated with caste than before, and landownership has become more diversified. Also, the idea that purity and pollution is caused by the lower castes has diminished a good amount. It has, however, only somewhat diminished in the public, whereas behind closed doors and on ceremonial occasions, purification rituals related to caste status are still observed. Endogamy is still enforced among families, but not as strict as before. A women's status is still significantly tied to the status of the male, but education and awareness of equalization for women has widely spread throughout India. In rural areas, movement out of caste specializing.

Occupations and access to resources is still difficult and slow for the lower castes, but in urban areas, caste is now a less significant part of daily life. Although discrimination on the basis of caste has been outlawed in India, caste has become a means for competing for access to resources and power in modern India, such as educational opportunities, new occupations, and improvement in life chances. This trend is connected to India's preferential policies and the implementation of these policies. Implementation has been very uneven in the midst of debates and controversies over the preferential policies, but they have still had a very significant impact on many sections among the lower castes and classes. There has been an increase in representation of SCs, STs, and OBCs in elected offices and they have acquired strong local support. They have also become an important element in electoral politics and have gone on to form strong political parties in various regions. People from these disadvantaged groups have largely made their way into government jobs as well as all levels of educational institutions. Unfortunately, however, only a relatively small proportion of the lower castes have benefited from these preferential policies. Even though there is an increasing acceptance of lower-caste individuals, there is also more overt hostility and violence expressed against the lower castes and classes in many parts of India. For example, in parts of Bihar, which is a state in eastern India, upper-caste landowners formed a private army in 1994 called the Ranvir Sena to "protect" themselves from the lower castes. Although this was outlawed, the Ranvir Sena had carried out 20 massacres of Dalits by early 1999. Hostility is also expressed by the many people who support the removal of reserved government jobs and in institutions for technical education, particularly on the part of many from the traditionally higher castes who are economically disadvantaged. Individual achievements, merit, as well as economic position are also still significantly affected by caste.

Conclusion;

The caste system in India has had a significant impact on the social, economic, and political landscape of the country. It has created a rigid hierarchy, with the higher castes enjoying

more privileges and opportunities than the lower castes. This has led to discrimination and marginalization of the lower castes, who have been denied access to education, employment, and other opportunities. The caste system has also had a negative impact on economic development and politics in India, leading to a widening income gap and lack of representation for the lower castes. It is important to note that the caste system is still present in India, and despite some progress made in recent years, it continues to shape the lives of many Indians today, perpetuating discrimination and inequality. Caste system has had a far-reaching and long-lasting impact on Indian society, shaping its social, economic, political, educational, health, family, gender relations, cultural identity, mental health, political atmosphere, business and employment, rural and urban areas, public services, and international relations. It's essential to acknowledge the historical and ongoing impact of the caste system in India and work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

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