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Caste, Religion and Social Exclusion in India

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Abstract: India is a country well known for its diversity and complexity in its cultural, socio-economic and political life. A very unique social system known as caste system is an important peculiarity of this country. This system still remains critical and complex in the research of social sciences. The practice of endogamy has maintained the rigidity of caste system till now. This system is governed by the concept of purity and pollution – purity and pollution by interpersonal relationship among individuals being common in terms of blood, food, occupation and by rituals which are bifurcated into pure and impure. The relative socio-economic disadvantages among Muslims prove their exclusion from the majority infested Hindu in general and the upper caste in particular. The socio-economic and political conditions of this community are not far better than the schedule caste and schedule tribe. The negative prejudice of the majority community and fear from the same urged them to reside together in urban areas which resulted in the formation of ghettoisation. The forms of social exclusion are divided into many groups which have been perpetuating since ancient time and have taken some new shape under the market led economy and globalisation.

Keywords: Caste, Discrimination, Exclusion, Ghettoisation, Globalisation.

Introduction

Caste has for long been a subject of inquiry with sociologists and social anthropologists. Caste system is an Indian origin. It distinguishes Indian society from western society. It is a system of social relation. Caste system is both an institution as well as an ideology. Institutionally, “caste” provided a framework for arranging and organizing social groups in terms of their statuses and positions in the social and economic system. As an ideology, caste is a system of values and ideas that legitimized and reinforced the existing structures of social inequality (Jodhka 2010). Hierarchy is the core feature of caste system. Hierarchy is based on the idea of Varna system where Brahmin was always placed at the top of the hierarchical order, followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The untouchable communities were outside the formal hierarchy but their status also followed this hierarchical ordering derived from the logic of purity and impurity. Caste is a peculiarly Hindu practice and states that the Hindu mind was concerned with maintaining social difference and inequalities. The caste reflects a fundamental social principal and hierarchy. System of hierarchy is governed by the concept of purity and impurity. Pure was understandably superior to impure (Dumont 1980, 43). Charles A. Bouglé (1971) sees this hierarchy in terms of occupational division. He argued that different occupations were arranged in a hierarchical order that made their occupants socially unequal. Three core elements make caste: hereditary specialization, hierarchy, and repulsion (Bhatt 2009, 172). Indian caste system is a 'status groups', which were present in all societies where market or capitalist relation had not yet evolved. Status groups were like ethnic communities, completely closed to outsiders, and sharing some form of “social estimation of honour.” Birth within the group, like an ethnic group, determined the membership of a caste group (Hutton 1946). According to Ambedkar (1936), caste is not just a division of labour; it is a division of labourers – division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour. It is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. In no others country the division of labour is accompanied by this gradation of labourers. The division of labour brought about by the caste system

is not a division based on choice. Individual sentiment, individual preference, has no place in it (Ambedkar 1936). G.S. Ghurye (1991) identified six different features of the Hindu caste system, viz. segmental division of society, hierarchy, restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, restrictions on marriage. Untouchability is unique in caste system. Practice of untouchability divides touchable and untouchable castes. The notion of untouchability is based on superiority and inferiority. There are three school of thought of the origin of untouchability – racial, religious and social. According to racial theory touchable (Caste Hindu) and untouchable (Ati-sudras) belong to two different races, differentiated by colour (Shah 2002, 19). Before the Aryan came to this country, it was inhabited by members of some other race. Those who were considered inferior from the point of view of race later on became untouchables and inferior in many respects. Apart of racial theory there is religious factor which contribute to untouchability. In religion much importance is attributed to purity and divinity. So, as a result of these beliefs it came to be realised that those who engaged in impure occupations could not be considered as touchable. In words of Ghurye, “Idea of purity, occupational, or ceremonial are found to have been a factor in the genesis of caste or the very soul of the idea and practice of untouchability.” It was on account of the wrong notion of purity which became part of the religious beliefs. The sweeper and cobbler came to be regarded as untouchables in the Hindu Society. According to social factor, social custom and convention shared the burden of maintaining the untouchability recognised by racial and religious cause (Ghurye 1969).

Conceptualising Caste

Caste is a dynamic appearance. Caste is a system of social stratification which lies at the very root of social structure of most social groups in India. No sociologist had ever precisely defined it. Ghanshyam Shah cited Hutton and G. S. Ghurye in *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*, “The truth is that while caste is a social unit in a quasi-organic system of society throughout India, is consistent enough to be immediately identifiable, the nature of the unit is variable

enough to make a concise definition difficult” (Shah et al. 2006). In addition to the attempt to define it, there is a huge debate on the nature, characteristics and origin of the caste system among the sociologists. Many sociologists theoretically and practically look and examine the issue of caste and how the system of caste came into existence in hierarchically stratified society. Hitherto many ethnologists and anthropologists have been trying to go in deep to find explanation about its origin, but it still remains unexplained. It is about hundred years before that Ambedkar mentioned in his Ethnological thesis, “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development”, he cited the definition of Dr. Ketkar who has brought a critical insight and an open mind to bear on his study of caste. He has defined caste in its relation to the system of castes, and has concentrated attention only on characteristics which are absolutely necessary for the existence of caste within a system. These characteristics are prohibition of intermarriage, and membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born. Ambedkar further argues that these two characteristics are one and the same, if you restricted intermarriages you limited the membership to those who are born within a closed group. He defines the superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste. “Caste in India means an artificial chopping-off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy. Thus the conclusion is inevitably that, endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to the caste. If one will succeed in showing how the endogamy is maintained, he shall practically have proved the genesis and also the mechanism of caste” (Ambedkar 1936).

The Historical Background of Caste

Despite difficulties in defining the caste and how it came to be, scholars are at a consensus about the philosophical central idea which constitutes the caste structured society. They absolutely find that “homo hierarchicus” is the central and substantial element of the caste system which is different from other social systems of the west. One simply can say that “homo hierarchicus” means the established hierarchy among different homogeneous social groups which constitute the system of castes. This system is governed by the concept of purity and

pollution – “Purity and pollution, by interpersonal relationship among individuals being dictated in terms of blood, food and occupation and by rituals related to them being divided into pure and impure. It is obligatory to each Hindu to confine her/his relationship and interaction within the restricted circle called ‘jati’ so as to maintain purity in marriage, relationship, exchange of food and in the pursuit of occupation” (Shah 2002, 7). This is the main philosophical concept which provided the founding base to the most exploitative system so called the caste system. “The concept of purity and impurity in hierarchical system implicate to the principle of the antipathy between pure and impure. Where pure is superior to the impure, underlies the separation which is must to keep them separate, which also underlies the division of labour because the pure and impure occupation must be kept separate. The whole system is hierarchical coexistence of opposites” (Dumont 1980, 43). In some more specific ways some theory reflects that the caste system is interlinked with the ‘Varna’ model which divides the Hindu society into four orders – Brahmana (priest), Kshatriya (ruler and soldier), Vaishya (traders), and Shudra (labourer and servant). The first three castes are ‘twice-born’ or ‘dvija’ since the men from these castes are entitled to do the sacred thread at the Vedic rite of Upanayana, which the Shudras were not allowed to perform. The untouchable castes are outside the varna scheme. The philosophy of caste manages to sustain it throughout time immemorial only because of its religious sanction (Pritchett 1979). Louis Dumont explores the relationship between power and hierarchy in the varna system to specify the relationship between varna and caste. He says the hierarchy in the caste is not the same as in the class, social stratification of western countries, nor it is mandatory graduated authority of power. In caste, hierarchy is the systemic phenomenon which establishes the rank relation of the elements of system to the whole system. He argues that it is not a linear order but a series of successive dichotomies or inclusive positions. “The set of the four varnas divided into two categories, the last category that of the Shudras is in antipathy to the block of the three, whose members are ‘twice born’ in the sense that they have a sanction to participate in initiation, second birth and in religious life in general. The twice born then divided in two: the Vaishyas are opposed to the block formed by Kshatriyas and Brahmans,

which in turn divides into two. But the fifth category, the untouchables are outside the varnas just as the shudras were outside the twice-born” (Dumont 1980). Dr. Ambedkar argues that the caste system has religious legitimacy and sanction, hence he rejected Hinduism. Further he argues the caste system is anti-development which perpetuates the Brahmin and upper caste hegemony, and is politically not acceptable. He was the first to argue that untouchability is a part of the caste system and caste system is the consolidated infrastructure for Hindu religion to stand. If you destroy the caste system, the whole structure of Hinduism will collapse, because Hinduism is nothing but castes based structure. Further he made the distinction between family reform and social reform in Hindu society and argued for the imperative need of reorganization and reconstruction of the Hindu society. He proposed that the social and religious change is required first to have a political change. He says, “I have taken in support of the proposition that social and religious problems have a bearing on political constitutions seem to be too particular. Perhaps they are. But it should not be supposed that the bearing of the one on the other is limited. On the other hand one can say that generally speaking history bears out the proposition that political revolutions have always been preceded by social and religious revolution, the emancipation of the mind and the soul is a necessary preliminary for the political expansion of the people” (Ambedkar 1936).

Minoritisation in India

A minority at the present historical juncture is first and foremost that section of society which has a poor access to power and suffers from a democratic and developmental deficit. A minority is a state of marginalisation. There is a need for minority rights in the form of opportunities and resources which are important for the realisation of any minority's creative potential. The minority with special focus on Muslim are suffering from much exclusion. Their woeful conditions are summarised in the extensive report of the Sachar committee. This shows the poor and backward educational, economic and women condition of the Muslim. The Rangnath Mishra Committee Report (2007) shows the same and recommend for the affirmative action by the state for their improvement. The atrocities against them are also rising in the forms of illegal detention under TADA (Terrorist and Disruptive

Activities) and other laws which are completely a human right violation. There are basically three important dimensions of the social exclusion of the Muslims - backwardness, marginalisation and discrimination. Educational status and literacy is very low among them. They are lagging behind with a literacy rate of only 67.6 per cent as against the national rate of 74 per cent. In higher education, the difference between Muslim and others stand out even more sharply. Their marginalisation can be easily seen with the evidences on high rate poverty and low income level. The exclusionary and prejudicial behaviour toward the Muslims have resulted into the economic and labour market discrimination which has its effect on high incidence of poverty. The low participation in salaried jobs, higher dependency on low income self employment, low worker participation and massive unemployment among them compel them to remain poor and stand at the bottom. There is a high share of Muslim workers in self employment activities, particularly in urban areas. This concentration in self employment like street vending, small trades and enterprises ensures that the community is far more exposed to the disruption and damages caused by urban conflict and violence. The fragility of Muslim participation in the economy and the low level of assets accumulation in general further intensify their vulnerability to the displacements, physical and economic, caused by situations of continual communal strife. The less focus by the government for their uplift particularly after the new economic policy forced them for casualisation of work and ghettoisation in urban areas. The lack of access to credit urges to look for Islamic banking system for financial inclusion among the Muslim. The financial exclusion is concluded in the form of lower share in credit from specialised institution and lack of banking facilities in the Muslim concentrated areas. The average size of the credit is meagre and low as compared to other socio-religious groups. Their participation is relatively lower in managerial, technical and professional work in urban areas and they tend to be more insecure and vulnerable in terms of conditions of work. They are poorly represented in defence and security related activities as well. They are discriminated on the basis of the public service provision including low educational, medical and banking facilities in their areas (Robinson 2008). Although there are some constitutional provisions under article 29 and 30 which provides

them cultural and religious rights besides some other policies, these are either not being implemented or insufficient to handle the deprivation faced by a large section of the Muslim in the country. Any fundamental right of equality and equal opportunity have not been updated in the context of the Muslim minority in India where a variety of exclusionary activities deeply rooted in systems and mechanisms have kept Muslims out of the process of development and democratic fabric of this country. The government has not actually been able to protect this minority which can be observed from the growing gap in development indicators.

Caste and religion in contemporary India

The forms of caste base discrimination are changing in the present scenario. New forms of discrimination are being practised unlike the earlier untouchability. Owing to the implementation of laws to protect these communities, invisible forms of discrimination are taking place. After the Dalit Panthers movement in the early 1970s and more specifically after the emergence of the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP) under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati some positive changes have started to come in the forms of mobilisation and polarisation of backward people, coalition politics, social and political assertion. The formation of Dalit identity aims at uniting them as the oppressed at one level, cutting across religious and linguistic boundaries. It is secular in nature and not confining to any caste or religious community. The new forms of caste discrimination are taking place from the market based activities also besides some earlier practice of caste discrimination or atrocity. The growth of labour productivity in the unorganised sector including most of the agriculture comes from lengthening the hours of work, due to lack of labour laws and social security to protect workers. The surplus labour value of the workers, who are mainly from the lower caste, are used for profit making by the owners which widens the gap between the rich and the poor and spells out the negative idea of justice in the society. Instead of protecting the interest of the people from the adverse impact of the market, government is forcibly snatching the natural resources – land, water, sea shores and forests are being handed over to the Private investors/corporations for mining and industrialisation in the name of

the formation of SEZs (Special Economic Zones). So, instead of creating employment, SEZs are destroying livelihoods of marginalised people. Owing to the impact of globalisation, disciplines imposed by the financial markets and the Bretton Wood Institutions, inequality and distress increase due to the state's roll back and privatization of expenditure in areas of social services like basic health, education, and public distribution of foods. As the economy becomes market oriented, this caste is turning into class in some aspects, and the proletarianisation (process of downward social mobility of upper class) and embourgeoisement (upward social mobility of lower class) are being observed particularly in urban areas as well. In order to uplift the condition of socially excluded group, the government has adopted the protective measure and promotive measure. According to the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) 2014, 30 per cent of rural and 20 per cent of urban households said they practised untouchability, while the inter-caste marriage is just over 5 per cent in India. The Muslims are not very different from such discrimination and their present economic and political conditions are also on the same line. As regards Muslims, some of the reports show improvement on a few indicators; the increase has been marginal and rate of growth still much lower than that of SC/ST. The situation is more or less the same as articulated by the Sachar Committee report. There is a high concentration of Muslims in urban areas, making the incidence of poverty more visible there. A report by the Justice Ranganath Mishra Commission further emphasised the deplorable condition of Muslims on socio-economic indicators and strengthened the findings, arguments and recommendations of the Sachar Committee report.

Understanding Social Exclusion

Council of the European Union defines social exclusion as a process whereby certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, or lack of basic competencies and lifelong learning opportunities, or as a result of discrimination. This distances them from jobs, income, and education and training opportunities, as well as social and community networks and activities. They have little access to power and decision-making bodies and thus often feel powerless and unable to take control over the

decisions that affect their day to day lives (Council of European Union 2004, 8). The idea of social exclusion was conceived in western Europe to capture different forms of disadvantages that had resulted from the economic restructuring in 1970s. It was, however, first popularized by Rene Lenoir in France. In the process of its evolution, social exclusion has been conceptualized as both process and outcome. As a process, social exclusion examines the way individuals or groups become excluded in the society in which they live. As a state or condition or an outcome, it identifies the most disadvantaged people or social groups who could be labelled as excluded from larger social system and relationship (Alam 2013, 16). Jo Beall (2002) has identified three approaches to social exclusion. The neo-liberal approach views social exclusion as “an unfortunate but inevitable side effect of global economic realignment.” As a consequence of the emergence of free trade and a single global market, workers are now excluded from the benefits of trade barriers and social and employment protection. A second approach argues that “social exclusion represents little more than an unhelpful re-labelling of poverty or acts to distract attention from inequality generated by the workings of the economic system.” The third, transformationalist, approach focuses attention on social relations embedded in formal and informal institutions, and “signals the use of the social exclusion framework to analyse international processes and institutional relationships associated with rapid social and economic global change and local impacts and responses” (Beall 2002, 43-44). Of these three approaches, the neo-liberal and re-labelling of poverty approaches conceptualise social exclusion as a ‘state’ whereas the transformational approach focuses attention on exclusionary processes. This latter approach is concerned with social interactions and power relationships at different levels – from global to local – and recognises the social, political and cultural, as well as the economic, dimensions of power. The origin of the term 'exclusion', nevertheless, is traced to Weber who identified exclusion as one form of social closure that is an intended attempt of one group to secure privileged position at the expense of other groups through process of subordination (Hill, Grand, and Piachaud 2002). Such Weberian framework of exclusion is visible in Indian context where certain groups, especially upper caste in dominant religious communities, have developed social closure and

have systematically excluded vast majority of masses from accessing goods and services. The idea of social exclusion is considered a necessary and inherent characteristic of unequal post-industrial capitalism founded around a flexible labour market (Byrne 1999, 128).

Social Exclusion in India

The concept of economic and social exclusion was encouraged by debates in Europe on new forms of poverty in the wake of the crisis of the welfare state, more specifically, consequent upon World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in 1995, and endeavoured to explore the notion of social exclusion (United Nation, 2006). Social exclusion is defined as social process which involves denial of fair and equal opportunities to certain social groups in multiple spheres in society, resulting in the inability of individuals from excluded groups to participate in the basic political, economic and social functioning of the society. Social exclusion denies equal opportunities in multiple spheres from political to economic field which lead to lack of freedom and human poverty (Thorat and Sabharwal 2010). According to Amartya Sen (2002), the dimension of social exclusion can be unfavourable inclusion (inclusion with unequal treatment) and unfavourable exclusion (complete denial to include) (Sen, 2000). He differentiates between active and passive exclusion. Active exclusion is the deliberate exclusion of people from opportunities through government policies or other means. This can be seen in the context of the land acquisition policy of the government in the tribal regions where their land are forcefully taken by the government in the name of eminent domain. The displacement of millions of poor people mainly from schedule caste and tribe through the establishment of large dam and other government infrastructure projects also refer to the instances of the active exclusion. Passive exclusion refers to the social process in which there are no deliberate attempts to exclude, but nevertheless, may result in exclusion of people from a set of circumstances. Sen further distinguishes “constitutive relevance of exclusion” from that of “instrumental importance.” In the former exclusion and deprivation have an intrinsic importance of their own. For instance, being unable to relate to others and to take part in community life can directly impoverish an individual, in addition to further deprivation that it may generate. This

is different from social exclusion of “instrumental importance”, in which the exclusion in itself is not impoverishing but can lead to impoverishment of human lives (Thorat 2010, 4). Such types of exclusion are being experienced by schedule caste, tribe and Muslim as well in various forms. The prejudice behaviour has been pushing them into impoverishment and perpetual deprivation. In the civil, cultural and religious spheres, the ‘untouchables’ may face discrimination and exclusion in the use of public services like roads, water bodies, temples and institutions delivering educational and health services. Due to the physical (or residential) segregation and social exclusion on account of untouchability, they can suffer from a general societal exclusion. Since there is a societal mechanism to regulate and enforce the customary norms and rules of the caste system, the ‘untouchables’ usually face opposition in the form of social and economic boycott and violence, which acts as a deterrent to their right to development. In the political sphere, the ‘untouchables’ can face discrimination in limited or no access to political rights, and participation in the institutions of governance and the decision-making process. In the Indian context poverty is largely a social question arising from caste conflict and further caused by politics played by certain interest groups. In order to hold power, assets, and resources some upper section of society influences the government policies and programmes in such a way which keep the people of lower caste vulnerable. The social groups (SCs and STs) and Muslim suffer from unfair exclusion and unfair inclusion with discriminated access to rights and entitlements which result in the denial of equal rights and opportunities and induce more poverty among them. Unfair exclusion means complete denial of certain groups from the access to their rights and entitlements while unfair inclusion means to involve them to provide access to rights and entitlements but with unequal terms and condition or different treatment. Such discriminations take place due to many factors: Market institution and non-market institution. Market institution discriminates these groups in various ways. First, landlessness or marginal land holders; secondly, lack of access to credit due to having absence of mortgage as they are landless and it’s considered as collateral mortgage, so the market does not provide them credit; third, factor input markets including material and services inputs and higher prices paid to

fertilizers, irrigation etc; fourth, non-farm business and markets like denial of license, electricity, water etc; fifth, labour market discrimination which includes complete denial of certain social groups to hire them as they are untouchables, low wages paid, denial of jobs or employment in certain categories as they are involved in unclean or polluting occupations. In the context of non market institutions, discrimination takes place in access to education, public and private health services, access to CPRs (common property resources in the village), access to basic amenities and access to participation in the village panchayat (Thorat 2008).

Consequences and Impact of Social Exclusion

The denial and exclusion in employment and in certain categories of works result in higher unemployment and under-employment among the discriminated groups. Lower wages reduce income and compulsory involvement in works due to traditional caste obligations which make them vulnerable to exploitation and often lead to unpaid labour. The most adversely affected businesses owned by discriminated groups are likely to be ones dealing in consumer goods, in which the restrictions on purchases by higher castes from the low castes may be more pronounced and persuasive due to the notions of purity and pollution. As a corollary, few persons from discriminated groups are likely to engage in businesses dealing with the sale of consumable items. This may particularly be the case in the village setting and close localities in urban area where the caste identity of the seller is known. In effect, such restrictions will affect the magnitude of sale of consumer goods and incomes of businesses owned by the untouchables. Social or any kind of exclusion of these groups namely SC/ST and Muslim can reflect the high incidence of poverty among them. According to Panagariya and More (2013), the poverty rate among the SC and ST was 29.4 and 43 per cent compared to 22 per cent among all groups in the year 2011-12. The poverty rate among the Muslim was 25.4 per cent compared to 21.9 among the Hindu. Uttarakhand which has a large areas of mountains and hill is also not different from the presence of caste, tribe and religion based discrimination. Poverty rate among the SC and ST was 14.9 and 13.5 respectively compared to 11.4 for all groups (Panagariya and More 2013, 24). According to the 61st round of NSSO, 75 per cent,

52.5 per cent and 46.4 per cent rural households are either landless or having less than 1 acre of land among SCs, STs and others respectively. Only 4.7 per cent SCs households hold more than 5 acres of land. There are also some cases of caste based discrimination in the state (Thorat 2010). The conditions of tribals are pathetic because of multi dimensional exclusion in the form of geographical, social, political and economic exclusion. The conditions of Muslim are deplorable with high incidences of poverty rate at 19 per cent compared to 10 per cent among the Hindu. Besides the high incidences of poverty, these communities, particularly tribals, have been excluded for a very long time. Such exclusionary policy led to the commencement of the Chipko movement. Caste system also constrains the economic growth and development which reduces the mobility of labours as well as capital. It assumes that poverty is a complex and cumulative consequence of power relations over a period of time between groups within a region and between regions in modern India.

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