

Caste System in Changing India


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Every country has certain social and historical roots that lead to one group being discriminated against by another. This division differs from place to place and may be caste, race, ethnicity, religion, or gender, and it is often deeply integrated with the mainstream societal institutions and attitudes. In ancient India, the caste system developed through the Varna system, where those who were born into higher castes were Brahmins or Kshatriyas, and those born into lower castes, especially Dalit's or untouchables, faced different kinds of discrimination, exclusion, and limited access to resources and opportunities. Historically, India is a diverse country where different castes, religions, cultures, and languages exist. The caste system refers to a social practice that defined rules, restrictions and activities for each group based on their practices of occupation and social status. In Indian society, caste is determined by birth. That means an individual is born into the caste of their parents and remains in that class their whole life. The main objective of this paper is to analyse efficient understanding about the historical background of the caste system in India and changes taken in this framework. Although the Indian constitution provides constitutional and legal reform for caste-based discrimination and provides reservations in education and jobs, birth still determines caste identity. Caste continues to influence social practices, politics and access to resources and education, especially in rural areas.

Keywords: caste, discrimination, restrictions

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1. Introduction

India is a diverse country best known for its rich cultural heritage and deeply rooted tradition. Throughout the centuries, many social structures have shaped Indian society. Among them, the caste system is one of the most influential social stratifications in society. Originally it was developed to organize society based on the occupation and duties to provide a stable society, but with time passing, it led to a rigid and hereditary structure that influenced every aspect of life, from marriage, education, and opportunity to economic development and social status. Its origin, evolution and existence are peculiar to India. The caste system is a system, like the Western concept of racism, where people discriminate on the basis of their skin colours, but in the case of the Indian caste system, discrimination done on the basis of birth or social status defines his or her caste.

In other words, the caste system fixed whether he or she would be of higher or lower status in society.

Over the centuries the caste system justifies in termed of institutionalized inequality, especially those belonging to the lower caste. These group were facing widespread social exclusion, discrimination and subordinations. Even through various social and religious movements led by social reformer like Jyoti rao Phule, B.R ambedkar and periyar.

After India independence in 1947 and adoption of constitution in 1950, the government taken steps to abolish caste based discrimination and promote social equality. Various laws were enacted to protect disadvantages and deprive section of society and affirmative action policies such as reservation in education, employment and political representation were introduced to upliftment of schedule casts and schedule tribes. However, although legal protection are available but caste continue to influence many aspects of modern India. These is especially prevailing in rural areas and within traditional social settings. Caste background of caste system examine how it shape social practices. Access to influence caste based politics and promoting endogamy. These again influence education, opportunity and even in rent house.

2. Literature Review

Rimsha Javed(2021) conducted a study on "the Caste System In India During British Raj: (1872-1941)". Here he indicates that modification of caste system that are brought during British period. During this period caste system was center of gravity in all sphere of social life of Indian society. He views that British system does not account for betterment of caste system but they created infinite and never ending conflict in Indian society.

Radhika Kapur(2023) conducted study on "Understanding the Changes in Caste System in India". Here he explores changes that are brought in caste system in India. He emphasis various factor these are sanskritization, westernization, modernization, dominant caste, industrialization, urbanization and democratic decentralization these changes lead to progression of individual, communities and nation as whole.

Kamboju Ramesh (2020) conducted study on "Caste System and Political Change in Indian Democracy – A Study". Here he started that religion and caste are stratification system in Indian society. After Independence, Indian society moving towards open society brought so many changes in this framework. Many governmental action and social movement attempt eliminate inequalities ad injustice associate with caste system.

Rajwinder Kaur (2022) Conducted A Study On "Caste System In Modern India". Here he indicates that stratification of caste system responsible for continues discrimination, segregation, violence, inequalities. But present Indian society moving from closed system to state of change ad progress. Various movement and policies challenging injustice related to caste system. He found that many of the lower class benefited from the partial abolition of caste system.

3. Objective of the Study

This study aims to examine historical roots and structure of the caste system and also examine how modernization, educational awareness and constitutional reforms have influence caste based discrimination.

4. Historical Background

The caste system in India is an important part of Hindu traditions, and its terms were first used by Portuguese travelers who came to India; they used the term "jati." "Caste" comes from the Spanish and Portuguese word "Casta," which means "race" and "lineage," and is also derived from the Latin word "Custus," which means "pure." The origin of the caste system in India can be explained by various theories, such as biological theory and religious theory.

The religious theories are explained in terms of Hindu scripture based on the Rigveda and Manusmriti. The Purusha Sukta, or primal man, whose body parts created four varnas. The Brahmins were from the head, the Kshatriyas from the arms, the Vaishyas from the thighs, and the Shudras from the feet. This theory divinely portrays the caste system in cosmic order. This varna hierarchy is determined by the existence of different varnas. For instance, Brahmins were derived from the head of Purush; they were intelligent and taught the Vedas, and performing religious rituals represents wisdom. In the same way, Kshatriyas were derived from the arms of Purush, considered as warriors, which represents strength. Vaishya's derived from the thighs of Purush; they are the merchant class. Shudra derived from the feet of Purush; they were serving the above three classes. Another view of religious theory claims that Varna originated from the body organs of Brahma, who is the creator of the world.

Biological theory can be explained through a combination of three categories of quality, or gunas. These are sattva, rajas, and Tamas. Sattava represents the white colour, rajas represent red, and Tamas represents black. Sattava represents qualities related to wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness, and other positive qualities. Rajas represent qualities including passion and pride, and Tamas represent qualities including stupidity, inertia, lack of creativity, and ignorance. This theory views the dominance of these traits as determined by a person's caste and social functions from birth. According to this theory, Brahmins represent qualities of Tamas; they are considered purity and wisdom. The Kshatriya and Vaishyas represent the qualities of rajas, and the Sudra represent the qualities of Tamas.

Caste System in the British Period

The colonial reliance on texts like the Manusmriti and economic favouritism towards upper castes reinforced upper-caste authority. The British administration began classifying the population by caste through systematic censuses starting in 1871. Which again misrepresented the complex and diverse nature of Indian social structures. This led to the again fixing of caste identities and limited social mobility that previously existed. The British strengthened the dominance of the higher caste and discriminated against the lower caste economically, socially, and politically. At the same time, a strong anti-caste movement with leaders such as Jyotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar fighting against caste oppression

Ambedkar's Views on the Hindu Social Order

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar had strongly condemned the caste system in India because this ancient caste system used to divide the society into four castes, such as Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Ancient Indian political thinkers are considered suitable for the society. But gradually it becomes complicated due to three upper-class people behaving inhumanly with lower-class or Dalit people. Even during the time of the British period, the situation of Dalit's was pathetic. Dr. Ambedkar had realized the caste system was responsible for the pathetic condition of lower-class people because, due to this, Dalit's were not only discriminated against and exploited, but also considered untouchable.

Opposition to the Caste System

Dr. Ambedkar strongly opposed the caste system in India, the main reason for his own suffering. He considered the caste system a modern and disgusting form of the ancient Varna system. In modern times, a person is known by his/her caste. He considered the caste system and untouchability to be a stigma on the Hindu social system. It is one of the cruel practices towards untouchables in the ancient

Varna system, which didn't believe in the capacities of Dalit's and kept them away from society. In his seminal work "Annihilation of Caste (1936), he strongly criticized Hindu scripture, particularly the Manusmriti, for creating hereditary social Order. He rejected Brahmin dominance and believed in the emancipation of all the castes. He started the Mahad Satyagraha (1927) protest against the ban on Dalit's for using public water tanks in Mahad, Maharashtra.

He demanded Dalit rights to public resources. He demanded Dalit rights to public resources. He also fought against the Kalaram temple entry movement (1930), fighting against Dalits' right to enter the Hindu temple in Nashik. He demanded a separate electorate for Dalits (as per communal awards). It was later known as the Poona Pact.

Jyotiba Phule's View on the Caste System

Phule was a pioneer in the field of social reform and had radical and transformative views on caste. He was one of the first who raised concern against Brahmanic hegemony and rigid social hierarchical structure within society. He started an anti-caste movement that later inspired various thinkers like B. R. Ambedkar. Phule viewed that the caste system was not divinely made as claimed by Brahmanic texts but rather a man-made tool that exploited the lower caste. In his book "Gulamgiri" (1873), he compared the condition of lower-caste people in India to that of African slaves in America. Phule established the Satyashadak Samaj that aimed to establish a caste system. He advocated for the rights of lower castes and encouraged them to have equal rights and dignity and supported intercaste marriage to abolish caste-based discrimination. He founded this organization for promoting equality and justice for all castes. This organisation was not only empowering lower castes but also empowering women and other marginalized sections of society.

Periyar on Caste and Social Order

Periyar was orthodoxy-critical of the caste system. He believes that it is a fundamental source of social inequality and oppression. Unlike other thinkers, he also believes that the caste system is designed by Hindu religious texts like the Manusmriti that maintain the dominance of the upper class. One of the significant contributions to the fight against the caste system was the establishment of the self-respect movement. This movement aims at the rejection of religious rituals and practices that became a source of subjugation. This movement also aims to promote intercaste marriage and education for the marginalised sections of society. Another is the Vaikama Satyagraha, which Periyar started for advocating the right of Dalits and lower caste groups to enter temples in Kerala which were traditionally banned for lower caste people.

5. Characteristics of the Caste System in India

1. Segment of Division of Society

Indian society is divided into various small units known as castes. Each caste developed their own social group and membership, which was determined by birth.

2. Hierarchical Structure

Eminent sociologist Louis Dumont views that the caste system embodies a principle of hierarchy. At the top of the social hierarchy are Brahmins, while the untouchables and Dalits occupy lower positions. The intermediate caste falls in between; their position is not clearly defined.

3. Endogamy

Endogamy is one of the major characteristics of caste that provides marriage strictly restricted within the same caste or sub caste. Violation of this tradition often results in social exclusion and various practices like hypergamy (women marrying into higher castes) and hypogamy (marrying into a lower caste). Additionally, gotra exogamy means an individual is not allowed to marry within the same gotra.

4. Food and Drink Restrictions

Food and drink practices were strictly restricted in the caste system, and these were linked to the idea of purity and pollution. Higher castes avoid food and water from lower castes and are often banned from sharing meals or entering the kitchens of higher castes.

5. Distinct Caste Names

Each caste is identified by different names often associated with its traditional occupation, which gives a person their social identities.

6. Jati Panchayat

Each caste has its own governing body and its own panchayat. It was internal; the body didn't include outside caste. The panchayat ensures their own caste norms, especially related to marriage, food and occupation.

6. Changing Attitudes toward the Caste System in Modern India

The caste system is one of the rigid and deeply rooted minds of the people in Indian society. With the changing times, it is gradually losing its roots due to education and legal protection. Awareness campaigns play a significant role in changing attitudes toward the caste system. More people, especially younger generations, are questioning caste-based discrimination and supporting equality. Constitutional provision, movement, and reservation policies significantly empower marginalized communities. Although caste still influences rural areas.

One of the major turning points in changing the status with India's independence in 1947. The chief architect of the Indian constitution, Dr BR Ambedkar, took major steps to abolish untouchability and ensure social equality for all citizens. Various legal provisions were introduced to prevent caste-based discrimination, and affirmative action policies such as reservation in educational institutions, employment and political participation were established to uplift marginalised sections of society.

In the ongoing struggle against caste-based discrimination in India, education and awareness play an important vital role for social transformation. These stand as essential elements for challenging long-standing prejudices, dismantling rigid social hierarchies and building a more inclusive and equitable society. a. Spreading awareness of rights and privileges

Awareness campaigns help individuals understand the legal and constitutional protections and exits to protect against caste-based discrimination. When people know there is a right and legal protection for redress, they are more likely to report discrimination and demand accountability. Acknowledgement of these protections is regarded as an important step toward justice and empowerment.

7. Challenging Stereotypes and Deeply Rooted Perceptions

One of the important objectives of education and awareness programs is dismantling the stereotypes and prejudices that reinforce caste division. By encouraging dialogue and promoting empathy among diverse communities. These initiatives significantly help to reduce misunderstanding and foster mutual respect.

The reservation policy and affirmative action in India are essential measures to rectifying historical injustice, promoting social equality and addressing the deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination. The reservation policy aims to acknowledge the bridge gap by providing marginalized communities that they were historically denied.

Inter-caste marriage as a means to reduce caste-based discrimination. It plays a significant role in breaking down the rigid caste system and promoting social integration. When families and communities embrace inter-caste unions, they contribute to normalizing cross-caste relationships and reducing social barriers. By uniting individuals from different castes, we can challenge the deeply ingrained notion of caste purity and hierarchy that sustains discrimination. Promoting inter-caste marriage, dismantling caste-based discrimination and promoting unity in diversity.

8. Challenges and Future Prospects of the Caste System in India

Despite notable progress made in combating caste-based discrimination in India, many deep-seated challenges persist. These issues required multifaceted efforts to bring about long-lasting changes for meaningful transformation. Nevertheless, these are encouraging signs of progress that point to future prospects marked by greater inclusivity and social harmony.

1. Long-Standing Social Norms

Centuries of caste-based practice created a stereotypical image of caste in societal behavior. These continue to influence behaviour, relationships and access to opportunities even today. These are unwritten rules that society follows from generation to generation. While legal measures can address visible discrimination. These attitudes and behaviours require education and awareness to challenge these old ways of thinking.

2. Inadequate Implementation of Law

India has several strong laws aimed at protecting against caste-based discrimination. Despite these legal protections, many people from marginalised castes are unaware of their legal rights or how to report violations. Legal cases related to caste-based discrimination often require judgement for years that discourse victim for justice.

3. Lack of Quality of Education

One of the significant challenges faced during dismantling the caste system was the lack of education quality. Although education is a constitutional right in India, caste-based inequalities continue to affect the availability and accessibility of education for lower-caste people. Many schools in Dalit-located areas face shortages of teachers and lack of learning materials. All children from lower caste groups left school earlier due to poverty, family responsibility, and the need to work for survival. Dalit girls also face double disadvantages from caste and gender discrimination leading to low school detention rates.

4. Dispute over Caste-Based Quotas

The reservation system has been a powerful tool for addressing historical injustice and promoting social inclusion. But it also remains a highly controversial and debatable topic. Critics argue that reservation compromises meritocracy, as students with lower scores may be selected over higher-performing castes. Supporters counter that merit cannot truly account for historical oppression and unequal opportunity.

9. Legal and Constitutional Protections against Caste-Based Discrimination

The Constitution of India provides a legal framework to safeguard marginalised people and promote social justice. Through constitutional safeguards, the Indian state has made notable progress in ensuring equal rights and opportunities for all citizens.

1. Constitutional Safeguard

The constitution of India coming into existence in 1950 provided a more equal and just society. Article 15 explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, caste or place of birth, while Article 17 abolishes the practice of untouchability in all forms.

2. Affirmative Action

To bridge historical disparities, the constitution of India permits affirmative action in the form of reservation. Under articles 15(4) and 16(4), the state makes special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes, including SCs and STs.

The Constitution of India also provides reservations in state legislatures and parliament for SCs and STs. These aim to facilitate socio-economic upliftment.

3. Enacted the Atrocities Act 1989

This act criminalizes violence, intimidation and social exclusion directed at SC and ST. It also mandates strict penalties for offenders, offering a legal mechanism to protect the dignity and rights of vulnerable populations.

4. National Commission for SC and ST

The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes are empowered to oversee the implementation, safeguard, investigation, and complaints and recommend policy reforms. These commissions serve as watchdogs for the rights of marginalized communities.

5. Landmark Judicial Intervention

The Indian judiciary played a significant role in upholding social justice. Landmark cases such as Indra Sawhney vs. Union of India uphold the constitutional validity of reservation policy and reinforce the necessity of reservation policy. Another landmark judgement, N.M. Thomas vs State of Kerala, affirmed the state's power to grant special benefits to marginalised sections of people.

10. Future Prospects of Caste-Based Discrimination

Although caste-based discrimination continues in India. The future holds several promising prospects that can help to reduce inequality.

1. Rising Awareness

Social media, public campaigns, and education efforts are helping people understand historical caste injustice that was denied to him in every aspect and fostering empathy and social responsibility.

2. Youth as Agents of Change

The younger generations are increasingly questioning caste-based thinking, empowering themselves through education and global ideas. Youth are more likely to advocate equality and human rights.

3. Grassroots Movement

Local organizations and community-led initiatives are playing important roles in fighting against caste discrimination and promoting social equality.

4. Inclusive Education Reform

Introduced textbooks and teaching material that reflect the real historical contribution of marginalized communities, including lessons on caste discrimination, human rights, and equality from every grade.

5. Strong Legal Protection

Although legal protection ensures equal rights, despite this, implementation remains weak. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms is essential for making these protections.

6. Inter-Caste Marriage

Encouraging inter-caste marriage between two different castes can reduce rigid social boundaries. Government schemes and social incentives normalize such a marriage system.

11. Conclusion

Recent steps towards the Indian caste system reflect significant social transformation, making a more inclusive and egalitarian society. Although caste based discrimination continue to prevails, but now there are clear path for progress through strong legal reforms, inclusive development policies, education and civil society activism and other that will help to make more equitable and just society. By learning from the past and giving importance to the principle of equality and social justice, India can create a brighter future for all its marginalized sections of society.

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