



## EVOLUTION OF CASTE SYSTEM - A STUDY

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### Introduction

Caste is a unique system; it pervades the whole of Hindu society in India, and it is an encompassing system. This caste system featured hereditary specialization hierarchical organization, reciprocal repulsion; as far as any social form can realize itself in its purity; at the very least it penetrates Hindu society to level unknown elsewhere. We can note the prominence of religious values in the caste system. The religious values among the Hindus center in the ideas of pollution and purity. Caste as a structural phenomenon is considered as a part of the general theory of social stratification. The principle of status summation seems to be the structural feature of caste stratification.

### Caste and Its Function

The function of caste in their social, economic, political and religious aspects from the point of view of the individual member; from that of the caste as a communal unit; from that of state and society as whole. Caste as a stabilizer, as an organism its religious sanction its drawbacks. Political, economic, and social, the genetic function of caste.

### Its function on individual

From the individual point of view member of a caste the system provides him from birth with a fixed social milieu from which neither wealth nor poverty success nor disaster can remove him. Unless of course he so violate the standards of behavior laid down by his caste that it spews him forth temporarily or permanently<sup>1</sup>.

Individual is provided in this way with a permanent body of associations, which controls almost all his behavior and contacts<sup>2</sup>.

His caste canalize his choice in marriages, acts as his trade union, his friendly or benefit society, his state, club and his orphanage; it takes the place from him of health insurance, and if need be provides for his funeral<sup>1</sup>.

It frequently determines his occupation, often positively, for in many castes the occupational tradition is very strong indeed, commonly negatively since there is many pursuits, at any rate in the case of all but the lowest castes. Which he cannot follow or can follow only at the cost of excommunication from the society to which he belongs<sup>1</sup>.

Thus the practice of his caste dictates to each member customs to be observed in the matter of diet, the observance of ceremonial uncleanness. It prescribes to some extent [or at least limits his choice of] ritual to be observed at birth, initiation, marriage and death<sup>5</sup> with regard to the individual the function of caste is to pre determinate his pattern of behavior in this world to a very considerable degree of nicety, leaving much less to individual choice than is usual in a casteless society<sup>6</sup>.

### **Its function on communities**

From the aspect of the community itself caste determines everything. It is true that in the case of some castes, particularly those of sectarian origin, recruitment from outside may be possible, but generally speaking a caste cannot increase the membership of in body except by mean of an increase in the number of births within the caste<sup>7</sup>.

Caste again determines to a very large extent the social status of each state in regard to other castes. The caste system enables the caste to act corporately and to control the behavior of its component members<sup>8</sup>. This may not be easy to achieve and may perhaps be accomplished only in the course of generations, but it certainly has been and can be done. By organization and propaganda a caste can change its name and in the due course of time get a new one accepted and by altering it's canons of behavior in the matter of diet and marriage and can increase the estimation in which it is held<sup>9</sup>.

### **Political stabilizer**

The second very important function of caste; has been to act as a 'political stabilizer'. It was this function apparently, of the caste system, which so moved the admiration of the Abbe Dubois<sup>10</sup>, who considered the caste; system of the Hindus 'the happiest efforts of their legislation. He regarded the caste system as being responsible for the preservation of India from complete barbarism, and as the sure basis of orderly government, as a defense against despotism, and a means for preserving the arts, and as a

sure mean preserving the Hindu pattern of culture under the regime of alien conquerors<sup>11</sup>.

The admiration of Dubois was not without some justification and he has not been the only writer to draw attention to the value of the caste system as a stabilizer of society<sup>12</sup>. Indian society has survived a vast number of invasions, famines, revolutions and social upheavals of all kinds, including conquest by invaders of alien religions essentially antagonistic to Hinduism, and there can be no doubt but this is largely due to the caste system on which that society has constructed itself, a system which has often survived even conversion to Islam or Christianity<sup>13</sup>.

Again the caste system does provide for the various functions necessary to social life, functions ranging from education to scavenging from government to domestic service of the most menial kind; and it makes this possible under the sanction of a religious dogma, the belief in karma, which renders the superficially inequitable distribution of functions acceptable as being part of the divine order of the universe and a transient episode in the prolonged existence of the individual soul, which by acquiring merit in one existence may rise in the scale in the next, or which may be suffering from a degradation in caste merely by reason of its transgressions in a previous life<sup>14</sup>.

### Caste functioned as a organism

This view of the caste system as an organism as it were, a composite unit of many individual cells each functioning independently, most not be taken as precluding a certain fluidity in the system a power of mutability in caste itself within certain definite limits<sup>15</sup>.

Durkheim has suggested that the function of the division of labour is to give the individual more freedom by substituting an organic for a rigidly mechanical economy, but the organic structure created by the caste system would seem to have provided for the division of labour on a plan ingeniously calculated to avoid giving just that freedom for occupation is determined by status instead of contacts, and transition from status to contracts, which Sir Henry Maine regarded as an essential feature of political progress<sup>16</sup>.

### Making Plural society

In examining their economy he says that a plural society in its political aspect 'resembles a confederation of allied provinces, united by treaty of within the limits of a formal constitution merely for certain ends common to the constituent units and in matters outside the terms of union, each living its own life<sup>17</sup>.

The elements are so intermingled that secession identical with anarchy. This is not an unfair description of the caste system, that such a society lacks a common will in economic life and there is an consequence an absence of any common social demand social wants are sectional, and there is no social demand common to all the several elements. This raises the economic criterion to a new place in the scale of social values<sup>18</sup>. Since the only place where the various sections of the community meet on common ground is the market place, where the highest common factor of their wants is the economic one; the elements of such society come to regard the production of material goods as the prime end of social life<sup>19</sup>.

The social needs of the country as a whole are not apprehended social demand itself becomes sectionalized and within each section of the community the social demand becomes de-organized and ineffective, so that in each section the members are debarred from leading the full life of a citizen in a homogenous community; finally the reaction against these abnormal condition<sup>20</sup> sets one community against the other; enhancing the need for the society to be held together by some force exerted from outside, such a force is clearly to be found in the law, 'but in a society which has no common bond but law, Right is superseded by legality, and the only duty is not to be found out<sup>21</sup>.

B.C. Lunia described the castes system of the Aryan society in the following word "the caste system enabled Hinduism to expand its rank, led acted as the stabilizing force and preserved the Hindu culture<sup>22</sup>.

The institution had obtained recognition in the country for many centuries holding against many onslaughts. In a word it contributed to the stability of Hindu society. In the words of Monier Williams "caste has been useful in promoting self sacrifice in securing subordination of the individual to an organized body, in restraining vice and in preventing> The tyranny of the Brahminical class forced the other classes to rebel against the superiority of the Brahmins. The effect breaking down the caste barriers and clearing atmosphere of superstition created by the priestly class<sup>23</sup>.

### **Features of the caste system**

The outstanding feature of Hindu society when it was ruled by the social philosophy 'of caste.

### **Segmental division of society**

This caste society was not more or less homogeneous community in which whatever distinctions of social status may exists, they are so much in the background that a special inquiry has to be made in order to realize their presence, but a society in which various groups with a well developed life of

their own the membership where of unlike that of voluntary associations and of classes, was determine not by selection but by the birth<sup>24</sup>.

### **Hierarchy**

Hierarchy is the principal characteristics of the caste society, viz the hierarchy of the groups. Everywhere in India there is a definite scheme of social precedence amongst the castes, with the Brahmin at the head of the hierarchy<sup>25</sup>.

### **Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse**

There are minute rules as to what sort of food or drink can be accepted by a person and from what castes, E.A.Blunt has made out, there is "no relation between a castes social position and the severity of its cooling taboo"<sup>26</sup> castes in a village is the most obvious mark of civil privileges and disabilities and it has prevailed in a more or less definite form all over India. A Brahmin never bows to anyone who is not a Brahmin, but requires others to salute him and when he is saluted by a member of anon-Brahmin caste he only pronounces a benediction. Some of the lower castes carry their reverence for the Brahmins, especially in northern India, to such extreme that they will not cross the shadow of the Brahmin and sometimes will not take their food without sipping water in which the big toe of Brahmin is dipped. The Brahmin has been regarded as the most important section, needing protection from the king, so much so that the king is styled the protector of the Brahmins and the cows other subjects being regarded as too insignificant to be motioned<sup>27</sup>.

### **Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation:**

Generally a caste or a group of allied castes as its hereditary occupation, to abandon which in pursuit of another thought might be more lucrative was thought not to be right. Thus a Brahmin thought that it was correct for him to be a priest. This was only generally true. For there very groups of occupations, like Trading, agriculture, labouring in the field, and dong military service which were looked upon as anybody's and most castes were supposed to be eligible for any of them<sup>28</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

The caste system in India is deep rooted in the long drawn social-economic, cultural and political history of our sub-continent. It has brought about a deep and complete division in the Hindu-society. Since the days of yore, these divisions had become the symbols of status. From the upper class to the lowest category, some social reformers and their movements did effect in this paper should not cease and they should remain an ongoing process.

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