



UNDERSTANDING CASTE WITH HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT:

The caste identity maintains their social hierarchy and expects parallel economic status. The assertion of caste identity is combined with the discourse of patriarchy and their traditional roles. The ideas of purity and pollution locate castes in their religious identities. Their religious identity obliges them to follow different traditions, customs and rituals. Their identities establish their limitations and restrictions in the social sphere. To undo these limitations, they endorse religious reforms or alternatives. There is a parallel development between economic status and caste identity as well as caste hierarchy and religious identity among the mainstream people. If anything is disturbed from it, they reject caste and religion. They persistently struggle either to maintain or repair these two identities with economic gains. The upper castes men, do not reject their caste or religious identities as they are beneficial for them. They ascertain traditional roles to men and women through patriarchal networks. They glorify their masculine identity to subordinate women. And they explore their caste and religious identities to enslave the downtrodden. They advocate culture through religious rituals, traditions and customs. Instead of religious conversion, mainstream men often prefer alternative versions of the Hindu religion.

INTRODUCTION:

Caste is a classical expression of inequality; it is present in religious institution among Hindu, Sikh, Jains, Muslims, Christians and Jews in India. In the due course of centuries alien groups like the Scythians, Parthians, White Huns, and Yue-chi came to India and understood the characteristics of castes. The membership of caste is assigned to a person by his birth to the parents belonging to the same caste. As far as the Hindu religion is concerned, the

*Purushsukta*¹ in the *Rigveda* describes that Brahmins are emerged from the mouth of the Primeval man (*Purush*), Kshatriyas from his arms, Vaishyas from his thighs and Shudras from his feet. Every *varna* is given its *varnashramadharmas*. During Vedic period, there were occupational groups which were not assimilated in the *varna* system and it is not known whether such groups were castes. The four *varnas* follow the idea of pollution and purity with the Panchamas or Chandalas. Those ideas are depended upon inter-caste relations; food acceptance, inter-caste marriages and sex relations, touching to others are related to pollution. The polluted has to undergo purification ritual. Its nature is depended on the parameters of violation purity-pollution rules. The Caste Council takes necessary disciplinary action/s for such purification. However, a birth or death of an individual ascribes impurity among its kinship. The purity is followed at public or personal level for religious rituals and festive occasions.

In Pre-British India, the political intervention in the religious space cut the cultural ties in the existing political boundaries. Even a linguistic area possessed a 'vertical' unity, common to all the castes from Brahmins to Untouchables. Horizontal unity cut across the 'linguistic area'. In short, a Brahmin in U.P. does not share the same regional culture as a local Chamar, but he also shares same cultural forms with Brahmins everywhere in India from Kashmir to Kanyakumari.

Section I

There are about 200 caste groups which are sub-divided into about 3000 smaller units each of which is endogamous. The untouchables, as an integral part of the society, are denied privileges which the higher castes enjoy. Hinduism has a socio-economic and cultural design that manipulates the consciousness of masses. It has created several institutions to sustain Brahmin hegemony with methods of consent or violence. Caste hierarchy is depended on two types i.e. traditional and emergent. Traditional hierarchy is articulated in religious terms

¹ A hymn

whereas emergent hierarchy is depended on power, property and personal changes. But always Brahmins are found at the top and Untouchables at the bottom in them. The occupational practice, diet and customs form separate hierarchy. The marriages are performed between the same castes, the people from the same caste share food whereas the superior caste fellows do not take food and no marriage is possible with the lower castes. The Brahmins perform religious rituals on behalf of all other castes as these castes are not allowed to perform the rituals on their own. As the religious rituals are the monopoly of the Brahmins, they accumulate solid material gains. The Brahmins exploit masses like the feudal lords and serfs. Apart from the material gains, the Brahmins structure the entire community as subservient, timid and fearful by creating inferiority complex among them. They ascertain Brahminical notions of life with their spiritual and political hegemony. Nobody is allowed to question, debate and discourse with them which could be blasphemy. They project the image of the deity as almighty- powerful to manipulate, defeat and kill enemy. They follow patriarchal authoritarianism over the masses as well as their women folk. The Brahmin women cannot become priests. They acquire power centers like politics, bureaucracy and highly paid professions and do not deal with nature or production processes.

Classical Kshatriyas are dormant now but they are replaced by neo-Kshatriyas with the acquisition of economic and political power. They buffer between Brahmins, Baniyas and all productive castes by controlling land, major means of production, art and science. They have an artificial heritage of martial culture and mixed food habits. The Baniya/Vaishya has similar ritualistic formalities and life style like Brahmins. Their houses are shaped in a shop like way to communicate with masses separately in a common language along with their own divine appearance. Their women are also skillful to attract the village women folk. They tell lie about their margin and acquired surplus.

Shudras and Ati- Shudras have the knowledge of production, innovation of agrarian and artisan technology; the scientific use of manure and tools of production. Their markets are based on secularism where the commodities such as cattle, beef, mutton, toddy and leather are exchanged. The payment depends

on the social, economical and philosophical understanding of seller and buyer. There is no place for individuality and personal property in the life of Dalitbahujans. Distribution, not the consciousness of retaining something for future, is the life style of these castes. They believe in their labour power. They engage themselves for physical and mental labour for land, productivity and procreation. They have knowledge of medicinal plants and skills of technology and engineering.

Section II

With the Westernization the three *Varnas* entered into post-puberty & widow marriages which are common to the Dalitbahujans from their origin. Moreover marriage is a social contract to them which can be broken with certain rituals, to enter into new. It has more realistic approach than the spiritual one. Marriage is a kind of system for the production of food, goods and commodities and procreation of human species than the holy conjugal state. Marriage is a social contract for the Dalits, which can be resettled at any time. It intends production of food, commodities and procreation than the holy conjugal state. The intended couple should be physically fit for the marriage. The match follows different canons of caste and relations where horoscope matching is less important. The Dalit women accompany their husband for earnings. Their infertility of the couple may result into divorce for new contracts for both of them. The post-puberty, widow marriages and divorces are common among them. The marriage is a community event for them which proliferates relations. The parents decide the marriages of their children. The violation of caste codes are repaid with various types of penalties and punishments. The women enjoy much freedom than the three *Varnas* with their equal participation in earning, dispute and mutual replacement for work than the *Pativrata*dharma. As per the *Pativrata*dharma, the marriage system uproots the women from their natal house to settle down at the in-laws. They cannot defend themselves at their husband's house. At the same time, they are forced to stay there by the men from their natal house. Consequently, the men take reformation as anti-religious and anti-caste. They do not want to lose their control over the females. Their enslavement is glorified as culture. The mainstream men appreciate those who

Dr. Yeshwant Madhav Radhakisan

respect patriarchy and the rebellious women are given derogative identities. Mainstream women accept their caste identity as they are benefitted from it. However, patriarchy enslaves them to their men. They are economically dependent on their men. They are economically ruined if the men are not able to maintain their economic status. Consequently, the women endorse their caste identity till they encounter economic adversities. They accept new roles to counter their financial difficulties. They reject patriarchy to resist the discriminations of a gendered society. However, their gender identity is subjected to the notions of purity and pollution. It ascribes impurity to them in the context of religion. Their religious identity makes them follow various traditions, customs and rituals which confirm their subordination to men. They search religious alternatives to earn their space. They stress religious reformation rather than conversion.

The multiplicity of relationship between two people is conditioned by different spaces such as Time, Politics, and Culture, Religion etc. irrespective of gender, age and economic status. They are tied with economic, kinship, political and ritual relationship. The 'upper' caste men can have relationship with 'lower' caste women but the 'lower' caste man dare not to have relationship with 'upper' caste women. Otherwise there is a communal relationship among men women due respecting in their domains. The social and family relationship is transparent to the Dalitbahujan children; home is a 'social unit' where anyone has a right to interfere, arbitrate and take quarrel to the Caste Panchayats. Every one present in the Panchayat has right to be involved in evolving a judgment; creating less opportunity for injustice. But the social and family relationship is more pious to the upper caste children. The neo- Kshatriyas have brahminized the human relations. Their children are taught to acquire productive fields and political powers by Kautilyaism.

Dalitbahujan castes are excluded from the state institutions of power i.e. Police Patil, Patil or Patwari. They are the sellers of the skills to the unskilled upper castes consumers. Irrationality and exploitation are structured to be valued, while creativity is ashamed of. There is no institution or social organization for the overall castes gathering at family level. But there is

similarity in poverty among Dalitbahujans -houses, food, clothes etc; minimizing jealousy and competition among them. Caste is a kinship groups living in a few neighboring villages. The morality is made of kin and caste obligations and the rules of religion; it works against egalitarianism. The philosophy of Dalitbahujan believes in the principal of 'unless the handworks the mouth cannot eat' totally against the mainstream philosophy i.e. 'You have the right to work but not to the fruits'. The Dalitbahujan do not find their language (of skills and activities and knowledge and experiments) in the state affairs and textbooks which are the currents of sophisticated language.

Through the *Vedic* texts and divine theories, Brahmins imposed the spiritual structures of caste system to enjoy the manipulation and exploitation of the Shudra castes. There is a social system in the caste where some caste men have to obey and some have to command only irrespective of their age, gender and status. Humiliation and to be humiliated are 'negative' birth rights for the castes.

From the British rule, the non-Brahminic movements have been asserting liberal-rationalist ideology and the human being irrespective of birth to provide social and cultural status to the Dalitbahujans for example 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' by Mahatam Jyotirao Phule. The cultural movement i.e. Sanskritization tries to find access to the ritual power whereas economic and political powers can be gained to subjugate Brahmanism. But Brahmins are westernized to enjoy urban properties and scientific inventions; to make life more comfortable. The Sanskritized Dalitbahujans do not get jobs without reservations. In short, Sanskritization does not dilute caste identities and humiliations. Dalitization is a collective consciousness, believes in human relations and needs. It is productive and egalitarian based on labour power and not on material gains. The interactions with Nature, Pleasure, Pain and Social events are shared. That's why Dr. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism and Periyar Ramasamy Naikar attempted to establish Dravida Culture.

In the democratic India, the shift of political power from ruler to people exposes safeguards for Dalitbahujans in the form of Reservations in various opportunities in the Constitution itself. But Dalitbahujans do not find

themselves comfortable in the prejudiced educational and political systems where Brahmins and neo-Kshatriyas acquire hegemony to follow their own ideology. The Dalitbahujans are not lagging behind in the recital education in which they expect scientific, rational and productive knowledge with open mind though the traditional occupations are practiced in the towns. Even the Communist leaders think Dalitbahujans as unworthy and without confidence to handle power forces. They do not desire to lead by Dalitbahujans.

The last hundred years have given solidarity and consciousness to the castes in India through various social and political spheres; caste identifying institutions- decreased the interdependence between different castes. This has resulted into deterioration in efficiency and honesty. The numeric strength of the castes is used for the political dealings and pressure. The minor upper castes dominate local self-governing bodies to reaffirm their dominance into a region and to influence state politics through which they try to secure their interest in money making enterprises. The neo-Kshatriyas use Brahminism to retain the power and operate interest within the domains of philosophy and ideology. The gap between Dalitbahujan and Hinduism is full of antagonistic and distrustful on the basis of religious and cultural terms. The anti-Dalit sentiments get the expression through the beating, hut-burning, and violent attacks on the Dalitbahujans. In the political sphere they are defeated by the diversionist strategies. The Dalitbahujans has acquired specific and universal ideologies to overthrow the caste-class hegemony of bourgeois Brahminism. They have decastize society, socialize the means of production and finally create humanitarian socialism in India. The Brahminical forces in the politics always co-opt the marginalized non-Brahminic movements to defeat the major forces of the Dalitbahujans and sustain their hegemony. The present situation in India requires deeper consciousness among the Dalitbahujans about their conditions.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the caste identity was recorded by the British administrators, argued by the social reformists and rejected by the social revolutionists in their own accord. The thinkers restated it in its technical terms. Under the influence

of the native intellectuals, the mainstream society defended caste as well as religion against the colonial policies, foreign education and Christian missionaries. The freedom movement opposed the British rule through the 'Nationalist' political movements. But the 'Nationalist' movement was divided into political as well as anti-caste movements. It indicated that national struggle was not only political opposition to the British but also 'class opposition' to native feudal lords. The anti-caste movements were central in democratic India. They included non-Brahmin movements and Dalit movements in Maharashtra. These were anti-systemic movements i.e. value oriented movements which were in opposition to norm-oriented movements. These movements wanted to transfer social system, i.e. caste, oppression, economic exploitation, political dominance by an equalitarian society. In the independent India, the anti-caste struggle is silent for two decades. Dr. Ambedkar makes the Dalit women aware regarding gender discrimination for their religious status and derogative caste identities.

NOTES:

1. Bahujans: SCs, STs and OBCs used by Kanshi Ram
2. Caste: a group of kinship in which blood relations are generated through intra-marriages.
3. Dalit: SCs used by Dr. Ambedkar in the context of Competitive politics, the suppressed and exploited people
4. Dalitbahujans: the suppressed majority class of OBCs and SCs
5. Depressed Castes: All working Castes Dr. B.R. Ambedkar
6. Hinduism: the philosophy of Hindu religion found in India. *Vedas* and *Upanishidas* are the scriptures
7. Pativrata-dharma: the religious obligations and loyalties of the wife towards her husband
8. Purushsukta: a hymn in *Regveda Veda* deals with the carnation of *Varnas*
9. Rigveda: a one of the four *Vedas*, others are *Yajurved*, *Samved* and *Atharvaved*
10. Sanskritization: the cultural movement of the lower caste people to acquire customs, rites, beliefs and life style of the Brahmins including

vegetarianism, wearing a sacred thread, teetotalism and codes of sex and marriage with the aim of subjugation

11. Shudras and Ati-Shudras: The socially excluded people, this term is used by Mahatma Phule to refer the OBCs, SCs and STs.
12. The neo-Kshatriyas: a land owning dominant 'upper' caste Shudra *Varna* people, exchange power sectors with Brahmins for their dominance in philosophy
13. Varna: a particular type of people i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudra
14. Varnashramdharma: the duties assigned to each and every *Varna* to be performed during the life span according to Bagvatgita i.e. *Brahmacharya, grihastha, Vanprasta & Sanyasa* to achieve *Purushartha* through *dharma, arth, kama and moksha*
15. Vedic Period: 1500 B.C. to 1000 A.D. when the Vedic literature came in to existence

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