

## **Role of Caste, Society in Forming a Socio-Cultural Superstructure- A Sociological study**

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to study how **caste system** of India based on the hereditary hierarchical **society** of the ancient relations of production and led to **sociocultural superstructure**. Defining the word “Caste” itself is harder than thought to be. The description of caste identified by cited by describe it as “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name, claiming a common descent from 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 endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivision. Caste is the term derived from a Portuguese word, Casta, meaning breed, lineage, or race. It is a terminology that is used to identify the different social groups divided on the basis of their occupation in Jajmani system. According to Dr.Babasahab Ambedkar, it is mainly the custom of endogamy that has preserved the castes and prevented one caste from fusing into another. In India, caste is a system of stratification based on institutional sanction of the society, which ascribe the status for different caste based on their place in social hierarchy.

The two important contending approaches are the 'culturological approach which argues that caste is a primordial reality of Indian society and everything else springs from it; and various 'Marxist' approaches which, while recognising the importance of caste, question the theoretical and historical assumptions underlining the 'culturological' approach. The most lucid and influential exponent of the thesis of caste as primordial reality is the French sociologist, Louis Dumont, A measure of the influence of Dwmont's views can be had in the fact that a Marxist critic of Dumont, Maurice Godelier, in arguing that caste is part of the 'infrastructure', apparently taking a middle position between those who argue that caste is part of the sub-structure and those

who argue that is part of the superstructure, ends up finally with views virtually similar to those held by Dumont. The Indian caste system is historically one of the main dimensions where people in India are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, gender and language. Although this or other forms of differentiation exist in all human societies, it become a problem when one or more of these dimension overlap each other and become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources.

*Key words: caste, society, socio-culture, institutional sanction, superstructure*

## **Introduction**

The India caste system is considered a closed system of stratification, which means the social status of the individual is ascribed by the caste he/she born into. There are limitations of interaction and social exchange between people from different social status. The social division based on ranked groups (Castes) defined by descent and occupation, based on underlying notion of purity. Srinivas (1962) defined caste as “a hereditary, endogamous group which is usually localised, It has a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relation between caste are governed among other things by the concept of purity and pollution and generally maximum commensality, i.e., inter-dining occur between castes”. This definition described the ideal form of caste system. However, in real life different patterns of caste ranking, customs, behaviours, marriage rules and caste dominance are found in various parts of the country. In India ‘Jati’ is the common word used to define the endogamous communities. Dube (1990) defined the main attributes of Jati as a) Jatis are endogamous units; b) They are hierarchically graded; c) They invariably Jatilinked occupation; d) Consideration of purity and pollution determine the interaction between different units. Dutta (1968) in his book *Origin and Growth of Castes in India* has referred to characteristics such as restriction on marriage, eating and drinking, occupation, hereditary membership, and the hierarchical gradation of caste. According to him, the caste system in its principle of exclusion, isolation and disintegration is reminiscent of the savage man. In view of Ketkar (1979) caste is a social group having two characteristics of hereditary membership and endogamy. Ghurye (1993) outlined six basic attributes of the caste system: i) The sequential division of society; ii) hierarchy; iii) restriction on food, dress, speech and customs; iv) pollution; v) lack of unrestricted choices of occupation; and vi) endogamy.

The outline of the basic features of the caste system reveals that the Hindu society is divided into hereditary caste groups which are arranged in a social and ritual hierarchy. The concept of hierarchy is one of the most essential attributes of the caste system. Endogamous is the other essential feature attributes of the caste system. (Davis, 1951) cited by (Kumar, 2005) called it the central and the most essential feature. In fact, it is one of the main reasons for the persistence of the cast system. The Indian caste system has three important elements: repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization. According to (Velassery, 2005) cited by (Deshpande, 2010) “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”. (2) There are many rules in India 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 the 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 members. Another is the social interaction between the castes. There is strict barrier when it comes to 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 interaction. A fourth element is the belief of purity and pollution. Cleanliness is considered to be very important value in Hinduism, and the caste system enforces this idea. Untouchability was thus a mean of exclusivism, a social device that become religious only by being drawn into the pollution-purity complex (Velssasery, 2005). Therefore, if become a social norm that the higher castes were more pure and the lower castes are unclean and can pollute the upper caste. Most important characteristic of caste system is discussed by (Pyakurel, 2010) cited by (Deshpande, 2010) as stabilization of caste system through imposing restriction of up or down in the caste based hierarchy ascribed by birth of an individual in a particular caste.

**Objective:**

This paper intends to explore and analyze **system** of social hierarchy to an open system of social **stratification** based on individual and formation of sociological superstructure the **caste system** is an Indian **socio-cultural invention**

**Caste, society, socio-cultural superstructure**

The origin of the Indian caste system has many theories; some have regarded the institution of caste as divine creation, for some European observers considered it as creation of a clever priesthood for permanent subjugation of masses, while some viewed it based on racial differences. The religious theories explain that according to Rig Veda, which is the ancient Hindu book, the primal man, Purush, destroyed himself to create a human society and the different parts of his body created the four different varnas. The Brahmins were from his head, the Kshatriyas from his hands, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet.

The Varna hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the Varnas were created. For example, Brahmins, who were derived from the head of Purush are considered the intelligent and most powerful varna because of their wisdom and education and are a representation of the brain. Next in the caste hierarchy comes the Vaisya's who are the traders, moneylenders and merchants. It's believed that they originated from Brahma's thighs and finally in the caste based ranking. We have the Shudra's who are numerically the largest Varnas. They are supposed to have originated from Brahma's feet and hence perform the most despicable and menial jobs. Lastly, we have the Ati Shudras or untouchables. They performed occupation that were considered unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and hence not even considered a part of the Varna system. The biological theory claims that all existing things inherit three one of three categories of qualities. Varna means different shades of texture or colour and represent mental temper. According to the "Triguna theory" based on Bhagvat Gita, there are three Gunas: Sattva, Rajas and Tamas (Ghurye 1993). Sattva is white, Rajas is red, and Tamas is black. Sattva qualities include characteristics related to wisdom, intelligence, honesty, goodness and other positive qualities.

Rajas include qualities such as passion, pride and valor. Tamas are considered to acquire qualities that include dullness, stupidity, lack of creativity and other negative qualities. People with different amounts of these inherit qualities end up adopting the appropriate occupation. According to this theory, the Brahmans usually inherit the Sattva qualities. They are serene and self-controlled and possess the quality of austerity. They are considered to have purity, uprightness and forbearance. Brahmans also have the will to acquire knowledge, wisdom and faith. The Kshatriyas and Vaishyas inherit the Raja qualities, and the Shudras inherit the Tamas qualities. The type of one's actions, the quality of ego, the colour of knowledge, the texture of one's understanding, the temper of fortitude, and the brilliance of one's happiness defines one's Varna. During the Vedic period the vocations assigned to each category was followed by people according to their ability and liking and occupations had not become hereditary. However, in the later Vedic period, the invasion of Aryans brought many changes in social, economic, cultural and political conditions in the society.

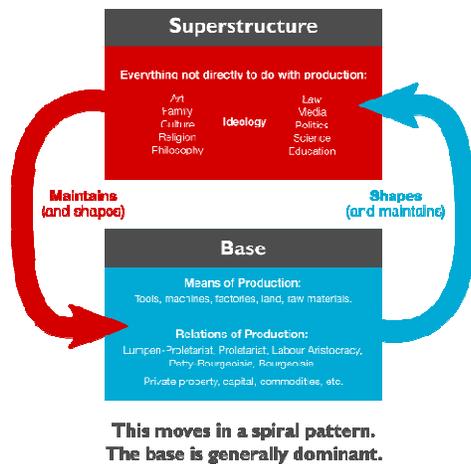
### **Caste as an Institutionalised System of Exclusion and Discrimination in Indian Society**

The understanding of caste as a system of exclusion and exploitation stands in sharp contrast with traditional understanding of caste as tool of social control for preserving the Hindu society. While it is argued that all men are born equal, the social reality is that not all men are born equal. Caste with its practices of casteism, untouchability and discrimination continues to infect as well as inflict upon the social order and human collectively (Mishra, 2006). Most of authors starting from Ketkar (1971), Ghurye (1994), Dube (1990), Velssasery (2005) all have fundamentally defined the caste system on the basis of hierarchy, social division, purity and pollution and endogamy. The dichotomy of purity and pollution has deprived certain groups from enhancing their mobility enhancing life chances. At different points of history the so called polluted castes have been designated as chandals, untouchables, harrijans, depressed class, scheduled caste or dalits. The presence of caste system in the society have always acted against them and also socially and economically ostracized them, violated their basic rights, dehumanize them and also instigated various caste based atrocities upon them. Now, there is consensus upon the negative impact created by the Hindu brahminical world to the continuation of caste as institutionalised system of discrimination, deprivation and denial of developmental opportunities to the marginalized section (scheduled caste) in the mainstream society. However, there are scholars

who believed that the caste line have faded in the modern society because all its functions have collapsed. It has lost whatever relevance, role, utility and justification it may have had (Nadkarni, 2003) cited by (Mishra, 2006). Alvin Toffler (1980) cited by (Mishra, 2006) discusses the new phenomenon of what he calls presuming or prosumer, occasioned by the blurring line between producing and consuming. This refers to 'do-it-yourself' kits and self services, which is becoming more prominent. According to him there are certain tasks which were associated to certain castes are now performed by individuals irrespective of his/her caste like we do the daily shave ourselves with razor, taking over the tasks of a barber. Many of us wash our clothes ourselves and iron them too. The apparent message that it depicts is that the old phenomenon of caste based occupational 'fixing' is disappearing. In the economic sphere also we can trace that the role of caste has declined in a limited manner. The a study conducted by (Bailey, 1957) cited by (Kumar, 2005) found out that the increasing contact of the villages with the cities due to introduction of better means of transport and mass communication has brought market economy to the villages.

### **Base and Superstructure**

GAIL OMVEDT is one of the prominent scholars who had often been questioning Marxist positions on caste and class. She started with adopting a methodology of revised historical materialism and has ended up in advocating vulgar Marxist positions in the name of scientific interrogation of the theory. According to her, liberalisation and market are beneficial to dalitbahujans, and they should strive to derive maximum benefit out of it. She has ultimately turned into a staunch proponent of liberalization and market forces in the process of her quest for a 'revised' historical materialist approach towards dalit democratic revolution.



She had been repeatedly talking about the relationship between base and superstructure. She says, “Marxism set up, for decades to come, the paradigmatic polarities of class and caste, base and superstructure, economic and social/cultural/ideological. For communist and socialist radicals, this meant taking class/the base/economic as primary...”<sup>8</sup> Its disadvantage, according to Gail Omvedt, was that it took the overriding reality of ‘class’ and ‘class struggle’ so strongly as to assert the fundamental irrelevance of every other sociological category. She says that the proponents of Marxism and Socialism treat family, kinship, the state, gender and in India, of course, caste, as not only secondary but practically non-existent factors. She characterises the assertion that behind the apparent reality of caste ultimately lay class and its dialectics, ‘a class content to a caste form,’ as Marxist mechanical materialism.<sup>9</sup> The positive side of the dalit movement in the period of Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar, in contrast to their followers today, was that it had a very strong democratic content and not much of hostility towards the broad left current while asserting the centrality of caste. At least, there was an attempt to discover the roots of exploitation, unlike the new social movements that fight exploitation without the goal of ‘expropriating the exploiters’, so as to eliminate caste. Gail Omvedt, in fact, has only revised the Marxist framework to suit her framework of ‘New Leftism’ adopted by new social movements and accuses communists of remaining wedded to Marxist mechanical materialism. She also equates state capitalism with socialism and acknowledges Nehru’s philosophy as a socialist one.

Unravelling the ‘class content of a caste form’ enriches the scientific, dialectical understanding of the caste question so as to eliminate caste. Or else, one is bound to look for solutions only at the cultural or ideological level and is sure to end up preserving the system in spite of good intentions. The form and content do matter in a scientific analysis. For the naked eye, it appears

as if the sun is revolving around the earth. But this is only an appearance. In essence, it is the earth that is revolving around the sun. That is the scientific truth. In this case, the cognizance by mere visual observation (the sun revolving around the earth) is only an absurdity. A scientist has to go deep into an appearance and unravel its content. This applies to social science as well. Even in social science and science, on many occasions, in appearance, form stands opposed to the content. Likewise, in the concrete conditions of India, too, it appears as if caste, rather than class, is a basic category of social structure.

Comrade Vinod Mishra, too, said that in certain historical situations class might express itself in the form of castes, in other situations the two might be interwoven, overlapping and at the same time criss-crossing each other, and in yet another situation castes are disintegrated to crystallize as classes, but he never mixed up both. He unraveled the dialectical relation between caste and class, maintaining class as a distinct category, firmly upholding application of Marxism in Indian conditions. This is one of his major contributions to Marxism in the Indian context. He could achieve it not because of his 'Althusserian influence' but by applying Marxism in the concrete conditions of our country.

How to comprehend this phenomenon of caste and class in the backdrop of the relations between base and superstructure? This is one crucial point on which there is a need for greater clarity in many circles. Again, it is more appropriate to return to Comrade Vinod Mishra. He says that the introduction of class-caste duality sabotages the study of appearance of caste struggle to unravel the essence of class dynamics in our society. VM explains the interrelation between class and caste, base and superstructure using the tool of dialectical materialism: "For me, the caste system itself was a product of a certain mode of production and corresponding level of production relations. Class relations here assume the form of castes, which, in their turn, are given a divine sanction by priests. Their permanence, however, is determined primarily not by any divine sanction but by the static social organization of the village community which again is the product of definite level of productive forces. The caste and class here appear in apparent harmony. This harmony of class and caste, this correspondence of base and superstructure, is apparent because the two are distinctly separate categories, rooted respectively in the base and superstructure, in the mode of production and regulation of distribution.

### **The Limits of Casteist Framework in socio-cultural superstructure**

WE ALSO acknowledge the progressive role played by Mandal implementation and the rise of dalit movement. Implementation of Mandal recommendations has led to the growth of a new elite and a middle class from among the intermediate castes. These movements have really checked the onward march of the forces of Hindutva in our society, albeit temporarily. In fact, these movements rose, also partly, as a reaction to the rise of the forces of Hindutva. It has spread on a large scale, particularly after the demolition of Babri Masjid, as a reaction to the threat posed by Brahminical, Hindutva forces to the very secular fabric of the society. But, it cannot lead one to theorise that 'casteism in politics' is an agenda for the very transformation of the caste system. But, Rajini Kothari is precisely doing it. He argues, "The point is that the caste does resurface as a result of the democratic process but in its resurfacing it gets transformed".<sup>11</sup>

No transformation is automatic. Mere resurfacing of caste by itself cannot bring about the much-needed social transformation. Rather, caste movements should have to look beyond caste to eradicate caste. It is true that the assertion of dalits and backwards just cannot be considered as a 'reactionary' one in a semi-feudal society as long as it challenges the very existence of feudal oppression and power. Assertion of weaker sections of society, even if along caste lines, can play a progressive role at a particular juncture of history. It can continue to play the same progressive role only when it moves beyond the confines of caste and grapples with the real issues of the society at large. Or else, there is also a danger of the movement degenerating into a reformist one, just scratching the surface of the oppressive social system. It will defeat the very purpose of the movement.

Talking about political power to the dalits and backwards in itself cannot bring power to the dalits. It should be accompanied by a democratic programme for the transformation of society as a whole. Then, it should have a clear-cut analysis about the state. Trying to establish dalit power by attaining majority in the assembly can at best be a half measure. Because, the administration is brahminical, even according to these "social" revolutionary ideologues. We don't expect a new democratic programme from the Kanshi Rams and the Kancha Ilaiahs. They should at least have a vision for a programme to eradicate this brahminical mindset in politics and in the state administrative structure.

### **New Breed of “Social” Revolutionaries**

THE DECADE of 1990s began with the Mandal agitation. It also witnessed the dramatic rise of the BSP and the dalit movement in some parts of the country, which introduced a new genre of dalit discourse on ‘social justice’ and paved the way for the birth of a new breed of “social” revolutionaries and ideologues. We have also seen the ‘globalisation’ of dalit discourse in its recent attempt to include caste in the agenda of the UN Conference against Racism, Racial Discriminations, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances.

Marx said: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”. But the new breed of “social” revolutionaries has come up with the formulation, “The history of the hitherto existing society in India is the history of caste struggles”. This new breed of scholars includes Kancha Ilaiah. Gail Omvedt and Gopal Guru represent other major strands of dalit discourse. These are essentially the major strands of dalit discourse in the recent period.

If the first phase was marked by dalit discourse against Brahminism, the second phase is marked by the dalit-bahujan variety. This variety of discourse particularly refuses to see the socio-economic roots of caste oppression. It considers the varna system and caste-based oppression mainly as a ‘conspiracy’ of the Brahminical forces. The dalit question today cannot be simply viewed as confined to dalits vs. Brahminical upper castes. Rising kulaks from among upwardly mobile intermediate castes, too, indulge in oppression on dalits in order to scuttle the demands of the agricultural workers and poor peasants for wages, land, social dignity and political emancipation.

Many dalitbahujan ideologues share a common perception. They equate the Marxist perception with the vision of Congress-led state capitalism represented by Nehru and with the social democratic streams of the communist movement. They call Marxism ‘caste-blind’. They over-emphasise the caste background of an individual rather than directing fire against Brahminism as an ideology and system. They consider elimination of caste, a superstructural category, to be a precondition to any transformation and fail to see the dialectical relation between caste and class. Rather, they also end up failing to propose any real, practical solution to the caste question except for suggesting some sort of ‘cultural/social revolution’. This is best articulated in their upholding conversion to Buddhism, another religion, as the means of ending exploitation and

oppression based on caste hierarchy. They also believe in non-violent means, in other words, class collaborationism, for achieving their desired goal.

The recent dalitbahujan discourse has made a definite departure from Ambedkar and the major/central themes of the dalit movement of his period. Ambedkar denounced the twin enemies of Brahminism and capitalism whereas the recent discourse, particularly that of the BSP, denounces communism and the left in general and even considers 'Manuvadi' parties less dangerous than the communist parties, thus revealing its class character. This variety of dalitbahujan discourse attaches one-sided importance to political power ignoring every other aspect of the dalit question and advances concepts of mobilizing 'dalit-bahujans'. That, on many occasions, degenerates to the level of mobilizing 'sarvajan' and dalitisation of bahujans etc.

Gail Omvedt claims to have adopted a 'revised' historical materialist approach to study the issues related to dalits and democratic revolution. Kancha Ilaiah believes in the argument that presenting the facts, in itself, is emancipatory and he shot into prominence as a dalitbahujan ideologue through his book *Why I am not a Hindu*. Gopal Guru advocates the line of combining both, caste and class, and ends up in an eclectic combination. He has a limited understanding of the category of 'class' and finds it somewhat lacking so he suggests supplementing with 'caste' – the eclectic combination – but it is also true that he doesn't share the crude version of reductionism of others who just reduce, and deride Marxism to an 'economic' category.

## **Conclusion**

Caste system created the infrastructure for formation of social relations and interactions between different groups, people and social systems in Indian society. From the above evidences, we can conclude that the old age caste system is still perpetuating in Indian society. However some changes have been observed in its representation and nature but still caste based discrimination, exclusion and divisions are persisting as Institutionalised system directed towards the marginalised, downtrodden and oppressed people through restricting all means and resources for enhancing their life chances and upward mobility. The base (or substructure) and superstructure, base comprises the forces and relations of production (e.g. employer–employee work conditions, the technical division of labour, and property relations) into which people enter to produce the necessities and amenities of life. The base determines society's other relationships and ideas to comprise its superstructure, including its culture, institutions, political power structures, roles,

rituals, and state. The relation of the two parts is not strictly unidirectional, against such economic determinism as the superstructure can affect the base

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