

Casteism and its Impact on Shudras' Quality of Life in India

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Abstract

Casteism has so far been an integral part of our Indian society, especially Hindu society since the early period. The Hindu caste system is the system through which people in India are socially segregated as well as discriminated. The Caste System is a closed system of social stratification, which means that a person's social status is obligated to which caste they were born into. It sets limits on our interactions and behavior with people from another social caste. The caste system is an off-shoot of the classification of Hindus into four hierarchical ranks called Chaturvarna. Although there are four varnas in Hindu society –Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, castes are as many as (about) four thousand in India. The first three varnas have their own recognition and autonomy for their livelihood, including power, wealth, and liberty. But Shudra has got no provision for independent livelihood. As such they have been undergoing a dangerously unwarranted 'inhuman' position in the society. If we follow the provisions of *Manusamhita* in particular, we will see how Shudras' livelihoods have been affected for their caste-position. Consequently, the quality of life of the Shudras has been far lower than the life of that of the first three varnas. There are some strictures in *Manusamhita* that shown how Shudra's life and position in society is controlled. As Manu says, if a Shudra desires to earn a living, he may serve a Kshatriya or serve even a wealthy Vaishya. He should also serve the Brahmins for the sake of heaven. It is also said that the service to a Brahman alone is the pre-eminent activity of a Shudra, and for other works he might do brings no reward. The first three varnas have complete authority to allocate some work for the livelihood for Shudras from their own family resources, taking into account his ability and skill, and the number of his dependents. They would give him leftover food, old clothes, grains that have been cast aside, and the old household items. Even a capable Shudra has not the right to accumulate wealth! And the reason given by Manu is very interesting: if a Shudra gets wealth, he may

harass the Brahmans. Although the tradition of varna/caste hails from an early date, its impact is still felt in present Hindu society. In this paper I would like to focus on the issue of quality of life with special reference to the Shudras and Dalits. In doing this I would argue, following Dr. Ambedkar, that caste system is not merely the division of labour but a division of labourers, too, and that the system of Chaturvarnya is the root-cause of this caste-menace.

Keywords: Brahmanas, Casteism, Chāturvarnya, Dalit, Shudra, Untouchables

Casteism (*Jatibhedpratha*) has traditionally been characterizing our Hindu society since the post-Vedic period. Casteism is a closed system of social stratification, which accords a person's social status as to the specific caste he/she was born into. Although there are said to be four *Varnas* in Hindu society, namely *Brahmanas*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*, castes (*Jat*) have been many. One of the most interesting things about it is that the first three *Varnas* have got their specific recognition and own livelihood, have their right for accumulating wealth, power, and exercising autonomous will in the society. But the last *Varna*, viz. the *Shudra*, has got neither. They have been living a subsistence (in a sense inhuman!) life in the traditional Hindu society. They have not been allowed to choose any specific livelihood but to serve the other three *Varnas*. Anyhow, in this paper, I like to critically consider the influence of casteism on the quality of life of the lower castes, i.e., of the *Shudras*. While doing this I shall follow Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891 –1956) in particular and put forth the following points:

1. *Varnabhedpratha* and Casteism (*Jatibhedpratha*) are not essentially different.
2. The religious sanction of Casteism is to be uprooted to build an egalitarian democratic society. For this, we may have to go up to revising Hindu-Shastras, if needed, in the light of reason and morality.
3. Casteism is so deep a division that cannot be uprooted simply by the notion of economic class.

I

Although we are not certain as to when the *Varnabhedpratha* –and consequent *Jatibhedpratha* (casteism) –took its course, the following verse of the *Puruṣasukta* (10/90) of the *Rkveda* (1700 –1100 BC) is referred to as evidence of the institution of *Varnabhed*, perhaps for the first time:

*Brāhmno'sya mukhamasīd vāhu rajnyah kritah/
Uru tadasya yadvaiśyah padbhyām śudro ajāyata/*¹

Here the hierarchy of *varna* is interpreted with reference to different body-parts of the highest *Puruṣa* (God): from the mouth of God gets originated, from the arm the Kshatriya, from the waist the Vaishya and, lastly, from the feet the Shudra is born. This analogy points to the highest position of the Brahmans, on the one hand, and the lowest position for the Shudra, on the other. And this has later been seen as the foundation-rock for Brahmanism. Later religious texts have consolidated the supremacy of the Brahmans. For example, we may refer to the *Gīta* (500 to 200 BCE), which says:

Chāturvarṇyīm mayā sṛṣṭam guṇakarmavibhāgaśah. (4/13)

Obviously, here again, the *Chāturvarṇya* has been certified by Lord Krishna. Not only that, the Lord is, on the other side, too much worried about *varnasankar*, and considered such intermixing as bad consequence of inter-varna (or inter-caste) marriages. The *Manusamhita* (1500 BCE –500 AD) too, also known as the *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, integrated this *chāturvarṇya*, nay, *varna-vyavastha* most rigidly. The excellence and supremacy of the Brahman over three other Varnas – Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra were consolidated. This *Smrtisastra* disgraces and demeans the lower *varna* and corresponding castes of the society.

The traditionalists contend that *varnabheda* is rightly based on excellence of one of the three qualities (*guṇas*), viz. *sattvah*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Learning, teaching, professing *dharmashastras* as per rules and regulations, priesthood, etc. was reserved for the Brahman, in whose nature *sattvaguna* is said to preponderate. Kshatriya, in whose nature it is said to prevail a desire of domination due to *rajaguna* protects the country from external forces and ensure internal peace and security. And to improve prosperity of the country by agriculture and trade was reserved for the Vaishyas, in whose nature we find pre-ponderance of *rajas* and low level of *tamas*. But for there was no special profession to cultivate but to serve the other three *varnas* with physical labour was for the *Shudra*, in whose nature *tamaguna* is said to prevail.

Upgradation and degradation on the basis of excellence or absence of these qualities was sometimes maintained in the distant past. We can refer here, for example, Vasistha, the son of a prostitute, Satyakam, the son of maid Jabala, upgraded themselves to the status of Brahman. Kripacharya, Dronacharya, Karna, with anonymous paternity, became Kshatriya.

But later as professions got gradually concentrated into the *varna* or family in place of occupation on basis of *guna* or *karma*, there appeared the right of profession on the basis of *janma* (birth), the right to profession was gradually reserved on the basis of birth and family as per the social status in which they belong. In its root, it might be argued, there was parental affections and concerns for the future of their own children. In such an arrangement of non-competitive livelihood for them, and the families felt some sort of assurance from the system

of *varnabhed/ jatibhed*. But, barring some exceptions in the Vedic period, a person born in a Brahmin family, without acquiring the qualities of a Brahman, began to enjoy almost all facilities of their own *varna*. But, if a Shudra, e.g., acquired all the qualities of *Brahman*, did not get the right of profession meant for the Brahman. Thus *varnavyavastha* on the basis of birth, not on the basis of *karma* or excellence of qualities, gradually gained its ground in the society. Thus casteism (*Jatibhedpratha*) came out as an offshoot of *varnabhedapratha*.

After declaring themselves as the most superior *varna*, the Brahmanas tried to perpetuate their superiority and domination by making divisions among the other *varnas*, and this is the politics of *Brahmanyavad* (Brahminism). In order to perpetuate their rule and domination the Brahmanas supplied a theoretical and cultural ambience with otherworldly ideas, like *janmantar* (life after death), *karmaphal* (theory of karma), *svarga* (heaven), *narak* (hell), curses by the deities and the Brahmanas. In this process of acquiring leadership they took the help of physical power of Kshatriya and economic and productive power of the Vaishya, wherever they found it necessary. Thus gradually the status of Brahmanas got enhanced in course of time, and they placed themselves in the pinnacle of the society. And in course of time, inter-varna dining and inter-varna marriages were officially prohibited. But, as you cannot totally control human feelings –love and gregariousness –all these could not be fully averted. Consequently, different mixed castes began to develop, and *Jatibhedpratha* flourished, mostly with inhuman faces. Although *varnas* are four in number, *jats* (caste) in India now are about 4000 in number.

If we make a systematic study, we would see that caste is a rigorous social structure (with religious sanctions) in which classes are determined by heredity. Some of its features are:²

1. Strict compartmentalization of the society, with the various groups being strictly defined and membership of them determined by birth,
2. A hierarchical system defining a ranking place for all of the castes,
3. Very limited choice of occupation,
4. The general practice of endogamy, the institution of marrying within a specific ethnic group, here in Hindu society specific caste, rejecting others on the pretext of being unsuitable for marriage,
5. Restrictions on dietary and social interactions that define who could consume what, with whom and accept from whom,
6. Concrete physical segregation, accompanied by limitations on movement and access, including religious and educational institutions and to basic amenities, like supplies of water,

7. The notion of purity and pollution is attached with the caste system. Higher castes are believed to be purer and less polluted, while the lower castes as less pure and more polluted.

As the evils of casteism he had to suffer in his own life, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar was very radical in his attempt to contend Hindu casteism. He strongly contended that it is not possible to break caste-circle without annihilating the religious notions/sanctions in which the caste system is founded. A socio-anthropological study shows that casteism is an integral part of the grand ideology of *Brahmanyavada*, which attempts to perpetuate social, cultural and political domination and economic exploitation of the lower *varnas/castes*. He was very critical of authoritarian Hinduism based on different *Shastras* including *Manusmrti*. He was damned sure that it is the *varnavyavastha* that is the root-cause of caste-oppression and untouchability. And he asserted that there is nothing divine in casteism, but it is the invention of some arrogant, selfish and dominating people of the Hindu society. In order to perpetrate this system, these Brahmins put all these in the mouth of mythical/divine characters, like Sri Krishna. This has gone so wild that the capacity to appreciate merits in a man apart from his caste is absent in Hinduism. It is interesting to note that simply to say 'I am a Hindu' would not suffice: "Because so essential is caste in the case of a Hindu that without knowing it you do not feel sure what sort of a being he is."³

Ambedkar had to fight different organizations and great individuals. The Arya Samaj, Mahatma Gandhi, even Vivekananda, supported *Chaturvarnya*, though not casteism. Their contention was, more or less, like this: *varnabhed*, as it is based on 'scientific' theory of *triguna*, it should continue; but its degeneration in casteism should be discarded. Gandhi went far to claim that caste had nothing to do with religion. The discrimination and trauma of castes was the result of custom, the origin of which is unknown. He held that the problems of casteism, and oppression of the *dalits* could be solved remaining within the fold of Hinduism. But Ambedkar contended that casteism does not merely signify a division of labour, it is also "*a division of labourers*."⁴

Its ultimate sanction lies deep in *Shastras*. Anyhow, this is an issue in which these two leaders were basically opposed. In 1932 Ambedkar went too far to demand separate electorate for the *dalits*, demanded adult universal suffrage. But, due to Gandhi's intervention, he ultimately had to withdraw the demand at a time when India's struggle for independence was passing through a crucial phase.

II

Let us take a glimpse to the life of the Shudra and Untouchables through the eyes of Manu and Ambedkar, some are mentioned here:⁵

1. “They must live in separate quarters away from the habitation of the Hindus. It is an offence for the untouchables to break or evade the rule of segregation.
2. They are not to take any procession of Untouchables through the village.
3. An Untouchable must conform to the status of an inferior and he must wear the marks of his inferiority for the public to know and identify him such as having a contemptible name, not wearing clean clothes, not having tiled roof, not wearing silver and gold ornaments.”

And, contravention of any of such rules is treated as an offence.

The following duty-code also reflects their miserable situation:⁶

1. “A member of an Untouchable or a Dalit community must carry a message of any event in the house of a Hindu such as death or marriage to his relatives living in other villages, no matter how distant these villages may be.
2. When the whole village community is engaged in celebrating a general festivity such as Holi or Dasera, the Shudra must perform all menial acts which are preliminary to the main observance.
3. On certain festivities, the Untouchables must submit their women to members of the village community to be made to subject of indecent fun.”

According to Ambedkar, the cardinal principles of such *varnavyavastha* are these five:⁷

(i) Graded inequality between the different castes and classes; (ii) complete disarmament of the Shudras and the Untouchables; (iii) complete prohibition of education for the Shudras and the Untouchables; (iv) ban on their occupying property, power and authority; (v) complete subjugation and suppression of women. But he is pained to see that for a Brahmin it is normal and natural thing, and as such, it neither calls for expiation nor explanation on their part. In fact, religion compels the Hindu to treat a casteist isolation and segregation as a virtue. Ambedkar, in this context, remarks: ‘The record of the Brahmins as law-giver for the *Shudras*, for the untouchables and for women is the blackest as compared with the record of the intellectual classes in other parts of the world’⁸. Gandhi’s loving word ‘*harijon*’ for the *dalits* and *asprisya*, and Nehru’s secular idioms, could not deter him to embrace Buddhism in 1956, bidding goodbye to Hinduism.

He asks for discarding the religious sanctity for casteism: “Make every man and woman free from the thralldom of the Shastras, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the Shastras, and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry, without your telling him or her to do so.”⁹

He is equally sure that nothing short of free inter-caste marriage will solve the caste-system (the thought just opposite of what is said in the *Gita* (4/13). We have to take steps for notional changes against man's inhumanity to man in the name maintaining honour for one's own caste. Still now, many Hindus think that caste is the natural outcome of certain religious beliefs which has the sanction of the Shastras, which are believed to contain the command of divinely inspired sages who are endowed with supernatural wisdom and whose commands, therefore, cannot be disobeyed without committing sin.

Thus, we see that for Ambedkar the most crucial part of our movement against casteism is that divine authority of the Shastras, which, at least indirectly, supports casteism must be overthrown. He is not sure whether the Brahmins, the intellectual and leading class, come forward to eliminate it. He, of course, appeals to a varna-Hindu to follow his free reason, and moral sense. At the same time he upholds that we may succeed in saving Hinduism if you will kill Brahminism. Pointing to the inner weakness of Hinduism, he reiterates: "In my opinion only when the Hindu society becomes a casteless society that it can hope to have strength enough to defend itself."¹⁰

III

Let take a look at the later development. Ambedkar, the great architect of constitution of Democratic Republic of India, is remembered today with great respect for giving a clarion call for 'annihilation of caste.' His commitment of casteless society led him to accept the new definition of caste called 'Scheduled Caste' which was coined by the British in 1935. He put this new notion of caste in India's Constitution in a belief for peaceful 'annihilation of caste' in India. One may ask the question: Has the caste system in our Democratic Republic of India been 'annihilated'? The answer is 'Yes' and 'No', both. Objectively, it might be said that caste has been annihilated in India and Babasaheb's aspiration has been fulfilled. And the whole credit goes to him and his followers. But subjectively, caste is still alive, and this is evidenced by the ongoing attacks and humiliations on the lower castes. The question then arises: How can one which is dead be still alive? A section of people refers to Modern Medical Science's practice of 'putting the dead patient on ventilator as long as required,' and it is Ambedkar and his followers-politicians who have kept it alive for their political mileage. Unless they do that, casteism would have been evaporated, so they think.

What is about caste being subjectively alive or caste being put on a ventilator? In order to comprehend it one ought to comprehend Ambedkar's vision and strategy. Ambedkar, his colleagues in the Constituent Assembly and their mentors did not want caste to disappear as it might prove fatal to their actual scheme of building capitalism on the foundation of British Colonial capital. So, they thought once hundreds of caste groups accept their status of 'Scheduled

Caste,' they will serve their political end fruitfully. Soon, the term 'Scheduled Caste' was replaced by a Hindi term 'Dalit' which in English means 'oppressed.' This suited the political goal very well. Though there is no such caste as 'dalit,' it was passively received by those who had accepted their status as 'Scheduled Caste.' Later in 1980 similar new metaphysical caste categories like 'backward caste,' 'Creamy layer' were created to 'ensure caste' on ventilator' does remain alive. All political parties and mass media told them that they have been exploited, oppressed and discriminated by other castes, particularly, the Brahmins since time immemorial and that Indian State is there to protect them if they continued putting their faith in the Constitutional Scheme for their liberation. It gave rise to the following:

- (i) Emergence of Dalit consciousness
- (ii) Conflict between dalits and non-dalits

It may here be mentioned that faced with strong criticism particularly by leaders like E.V. Ramasamy (revered as Periyar) and several others, Ambedkar realized his mistake and warned his friends and mentors about the dangerous implications of winning political freedom without economic freedom. He remained cabinet Minister in Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet and finally resigned in 1956 out of utter frustration and disappointments. The resignation letter that he wrote to the Prime Minister Nehru is not in public domain.

Anyhow, the question still remains: How can the ventilator of caste be removed in order to give it a decent burial? It is sometimes argued: If 130 crores of Indians can realize that their real enemy is *class* and not caste and resolve to throw the yoke of caste and form a solid and cohesive class unity, the ventilator of their caste will go off automatically. Accordingly, the class could annihilate 'caste.' Today's Democratic Republic of India may be considered as a class-divided Republic. It has high class, upper class, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class and lower class. Each class is composed of people of different castes. What matters to them is their class and not caste. Said differently, there is a class within each caste. Each caste is divided into upper, middle and lower class. Let us illustrate: Of around 140 crore Indians, over 100 Indians are today billionaires and nearly 5 crores are super rich. Another 5 crore may be richer. Still 10 crores may be just rich. There may be 20 crore Indians who comprise the lower middle class. Remaining 100 crore Indians form the lower class. They have nothing except their bare bodies and empty hands. They live sub-human life, no better than the life of a street dog. Caste does not mean anything to them.

IV

In conclusion, I like to say that it is not so easy to get rid of casteism. We may come to agree that class-consciousness will ultimately help us to overcome the menace of casteism. But, is there any guarantee that with the emergence of class-

consciousness casteism and its underlying Brahmanism will disappear? Present-day incidences like at Hyderabad University and still its repetition elsewhere make me more skeptical.

References

1. As to this *sukta* there are many controversies. It has been contended that this *Dasham Mandal* of *Purussukta* is later *Prakshipta*. Also, it is sometimes reminded that we have Megasthenis' account (298 BC) speaks of different *jatis*. All these are about the dating of casteism. Whatever may be, we like to state here that this is a very old institution. Another debate is innovating: it is about interpretation of the body-analogy. Some people argue that origin of different *varnas* from different parts of God's body does not mean any hierarchy in positions. Some even goes far to contend that foot is much more important than head, and so the Shudra has here been given more importance! I have just one point to make: it is the last pretext for conserving *Varnabheda* and Casteism!
2. See "Caste System in India." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caste_system_in_India> 23.10.2022
3. Ambedkar, B. R. "Annihilation of Caste." *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*. Ed. Valerian Rodrigues. New Delhi: Oxford University Press (Oxford India Paperbacks), 2002. p. 286
4. Ibid. p. 263.
5. Ambedkar, B.R. "Outside the Fold." *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*. op. cit. pp. 325-326
6. Ibid. pp. 326-327
7. Ambedkar, B. R. "Caste, Class and Democracy." *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*. op. cit. p. 146
8. Ibid. p. 147.
9. Ambedkar, B. R. "Annihilation of Caste." *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar*. op. cit. p. 290
10. Ibid. p. 305

Special acknowledgement: The first part of this article is based on a PPT titled *Reflections on Ambedkar's Critique of Casteism* prepared by Professor Santosh Kumar Pal, Dept. of Philosophy, The University of Burdwan. (Unpublished)