

ROLE OF DEMOCRACY AND CASTE IN MAPPING DALIT MOVEMENTS

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Abstract:

Caste was the identity marker in the Indian society. The power of existence of caste in Indian society from history to present days signify the deep roots of this system in Indian social framework. It would not be wrong to express less effect of reformative movements than the expectation attached to these movements as a strong reason for the changes that were expected with the change in rulers and system of governments in the caste based social system. This system was a larger institution that covered and affected social, economic, political, religious and mainly the cultural traditions. It was rooted so strongly that it had taken most of the energies of the reformers and leaders who believed in transforming Indian social structure to a new system that can open doors for more modern and progressive values with not much change in the belief on the caste system. This paper will discuss the caste and movements that happened to establish democratic ideas in Indian society.

Keywords; *Indian social framework, reformative movements, cultural traditions, new system, democratic ideas.*

Understanding caste principles

In the pre-colonial period Indian society very easily functioned on the basis of caste division in the hierarchical order. Placing a few castes above the others and considering lowest caste to be the people who were assigned menial tasks as per the preaching of the texts that taught moral and traditional values was the legality. The Indian society cannot be assessed only in simple division of *jatis* but the need of this division between people within the same country was the formation of bigger institution that was supposed to empower certain people and create situation of loss of complete power for others. Caste was the system born out of power division between powerful and powerless communities.

It is pertinent to go into the details of anthropological division of people into *jatis* which also indicated the dominance of a few on others. It was an institution that was planned and was placed firmly on the strong roots of many principles that covered almost all the aspects of socio-cultural life of people. These principles can be discussed by going over the historical set up of Indian society that also created the not to be divided division of caste structure. It was an overall barrier that saw that people within the caste system must understand it as a system which was divine and soulful, hence could not be disobeyed at any cost. The anthropological studies also indicate towards the ethnographical division of people into different castes. The historical perspective in the case of studying caste indicates it to be a system that was economic, cultural and moral preaching leading to division of people. In *Critical Quest* (2004) on *Caste and Democracy* (1933) K. M. Panikkar describes,

‘Caste is an institution peculiar to India. Racial, social and occupational divisions of classes exist elsewhere, but they differ fundamentally from the peculiar social structure of India. Caste is not merely a principle of social division, but a comprehensive system of life, dealing with food, marriage, education, association and worship. It is a religion rather than a social changing order.’ (Panikkar P4)

Panikkar clearly mentions the division of caste not as a simple division based on the choice of occupation but he is also considering it to be system where following caste laws means abiding by the religious preachings.

Discussing this further historically, the caste division was also made by the dominance created by the Aryan invaders who were fair and tall and considered the local people of India as tribal and dark. These indications have also been made by Panikkar and he also talks about the control of the Aryans over the local tribes or the Aborigines of the North, where they educated them to consider themselves lower than the Aryans. Panikkar writes, ‘and thus came into existence the primary difference of caste-the *Varna Bheda* or the difference in colour’.(P5)

This *varna bheda* was not based on four major castes but was the division of people into different *varnas* on the basis of their race and skin colour. This division considered people to accept the *varna* they are born in on the basis of their deeds of their previous birth and they can change it only by following subordination to the ‘twice born’ *varnas* and they might get entry into the superior caste in their next birth. These divisions were strictly followed and were also considered as the divine law.

The major caste divisions took place gradually which divided people into various castes on the basis of their occupations. These caste divisions were considered as exclusive groups where no exit or entry was allowed and was done practiced majorly by the upper caste and was gradually practised by all castes. The enforcement of power and position to certain castes at the higher position and lower position to others was enforced through religious sanction.

This division of people into castes was though completely based on the division of skills on the basis of which each caste had its own occupation, it was always considered as an occupation that was earned by an individual by his birth. It was enforced for a particular caste profession to be passed on the next generation and change of profession or learning another profession or skill never impacted the caste of any person within caste system. Caste was decided by birth and remained the same till death. This rigidity of profession and skill impacted the economic value of each caste and also decided the earning people within each profession can do. This also affected the change of class as people from the menial professions could never change their status or earning.

Another very significant characteristic of caste system that gave strength to the caste system was the division of people by their birth and considered them to follow caste laws of remaining within their caste boundaries based on the religious preachings. Each caste was an exclusive group and followed the divine rules of exclusion. These laws were followed strictly in private and public spaces both.

Panikkar writes,

‘ The prohibition of marriage except in one’s own caste, and the extreme rigorousness of the punishment meted out to all marriages outside caste are of the essence of the system. The critics who say that this regulation with regard to marriage only emphasizes the primary characteristic of caste as resulting from the co-existence of two races, one of which claimed superiority over the other, are only partially right.’ (P9)

These endogamous caste groups closed their gates to each other, leading to the marriages in their own castes and making these caste groups smaller and smaller. These affected the progress and extension of the Indian civilisation and also created barriers in the progressive ideologies. Panikkar talks about the three conceptions, ‘inequality based on birth, gradation of profession and their inequality and the restrictions on marriage outside one’s own sub-group’ as the basis of inequality in all forms.

The laws made by the upper castes were passed on to all castes and were enforced on the lower castes for them to follow it without questioning the validity or reason behind those laws. Many practices and traditions that were followed very comfortably everyday were the reason for the inequality in the social divisions. The strict and rigid laws of caste never allowed feelings like solidarity or equality to prosper, or even if these emotions existed, these were restricted to caste boundaries.

Evil practices like ‘untouchability’ and ‘unapproachability’ were based on the idea of pollution and purity and these were practiced in all spheres of social life. Non-accessibility of basic rights like education or natural resources like water was a big challenge for the forthcoming generations.

Democracy and Reformative Movements

The leader and pioneer who challenged the system that was based on enslavement of particular castes and people within those castes, was Jotibharao Phule (1826-90). He raised his voice against the caste-slavery. He used the term Dalit to address people who were oppressed and were overpowered by the oppressors. He was against the caste laws and to challenge these, he wrote the history of castes in India and how the division of people into *varnas* was done. The contribution of Phule in raising voice against any kind of slavery and further he called the lower caste oppressed people to come together to fight against their caste-slavery of generations.

The movement that was aggressive and reformative movement was the movement started by B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956). He initiated his movements at the ground level but soon took it to the National level. He was an intellectual and after reading all the scriptures that advocated caste system, he denied their teachings through his books and articles in the form of newspapers. He wrote his book *The Untouchables, Who were They and Why They became Untouchables?* (1948) that was a strong attempt to historically set up the base for the *Shudras* and to construct an identity for them that cannot be challenged historically. He considered his knowledge as the medium for the strong right that he has acquired to speak for the untouchables. Many rights denied to the depressed castes was the motive for struggle that was started by Ambedkar at various levels. The discriminatory harsh treatment of untouchables was a practice adopted in all parts of India. As described by Pannikar,

‘Many of the untouchable castes were, in some parts of India, considered to be hereditary slaves; others were confined to “unclean” occupations. To all, education was totally denied.’ (p15)

The practices and traditions allowed the upper castes to consider untouchables as the marginalized sections who were treated with traditions of their exclusion from social and economic equality. These treatments were enforced and in the lack of opportunities, there was not enough protest from the untouchables.

Ambedkar was always in struggle with the unequal treatment of the oppressed castes in India. He emphasised on movements that were focused on uplifting the lower oppressed people in India to set up a social solidarity of a social construct which was not based on division and instead supported the social equality and fraternity. Ambedkar had a vision for a democratic India. He mentions it in his writing *Prospects of Democracy in India* (1956) that India has moved into the set up of a Republic but for Democracy there are many more prospects than only building a government based on the adult suffrage.

He describes a society as one unit where communities are not divided but belong to one single community working towards public welfare and more compassion and co-operation for each other. Can we say the same for the Indian society? The need to have equality in Indian society can not be achieved without implementing democratic ideas for one just society. Caste based divisions and identities destroy the idea of having democratic soul in the social system.

Ambedkar emphasised that democratic set up should be in all set ups of social dimensions, be it cultural, economic or the religious beliefs. One religion and one single community can establish the basic ideas of democracy in India. This equal and just society cannot be achieved with the old caste system based on ‘graded inequality’. This also brings the inequality and division in culture and language. A system that divides occupation in graded inequality cannot bring equality in the functioning of the system and administration and government.

Ambedkar emphasised on idea of democracy to be implemented in re building a social structure that can create equal opportunities for all. The division of occupation should not be in the hierarchical order of keeping one occupation above the other, in fact, it should be given to people on the basis of skills they acquire and the skills they inherit by being born in a particular household. It was important to understand the basis of the Constitutional values he was emphasising upon. His ideas were not to destroy but to re build a social structure that can have a future stronger than the orthodox values which created inequality and division between its own people. Ambedkar was advocating a system that should create more and equal opportunities of education and of opportunities to change occupation as per the knowledge acquired. This was not possible if one occupation is kept over the other and unequal or no accessibility was given to certain people within the democratic set up on the name of the castes that they were born into.

Ambedkar’s idea of social equality also dealt with the change in the system of education that would not teach supremacy of a caste over the other. In fact, he insisted upon creating a knowledge system that allowed people to have a better scientific and modern approach towards education. For his knowledge is not only preaching but was a natural resource that should be equally divided between all people of a society. His vision was more to give a shape of the social structure with stronger values like equality, liberty and fraternity. Ambedkar carried forward the ideas of Phule and worked towards a better social structure.

English systems and Dalit upliftment

Raj Kumar in his book *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (2019) lays emphasis on the rise of Dalit movements and emergence of Dalit literature to voice the Dalit perspectives. It was important for Dalits to come together, unite and organize their agitation. He writes,

‘An early example of this was seen in Maharashtra when Dalit activists and writers came together in 1972 to launch a united Dalit movement famously known as the Dalit Panther Movement. J. V. Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Djhale

were the founder- members of the Dalit Panthers. With the formation of Dalit Panthers the term 'Dalit' became commonly used in the public sphere, first in Maharashtra and later all over India.' (Kumar P 5)

The caste of field servants protested against feudalism and their exploitation went on for decades. Before 1920, British rulers gave more strength to the *Jajmani-Balutedari* system

British law supported this system. In 1858, British rule enforced relatively meaningless law of religious and ritual restrictions, eg, exclusion of lower castes from temples and court did not support or take any action against upper castes who acted on their own to discipline the lower castes.

Patankar and Omvedt described the movement of Dalits as the movement for a few focused changes that they essentially required. One was their freedom from the feudal oppression and right to acquire land. Secondly, they wanted their own representation in the government that will be dominated and will be made of no representative of Dalits in the government. Ambedkar said, "We want to become a ruling community".(Patankar& Omvedt p18) The movement that was initiated in the beginning, led to be the movement to achieve power or share power. Ambedkar was aware of the bourgeois parliamentary set ups that were going to be the empowered institutions in India. There was no one to understand the victimization and needs of Dalits. Hence, their representation was must for them. This could not be achieved despite of many efforts of Ambedkar. As Patankar and Omvedt continue discussing the rights and reformative movements for the upliftment of Depressed Class, they refer to the paper of Marc Galanter, *Untouchability and the law*(1969) where he mentions various reformative actions taken during the conferences and other government bills. The abolishment of untouchability could not happen but resolution was passed for 'the people of India the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom upon the Depressed Classes' (Patankar p21) in the Depressed Classes conference in 1917. After this, another resolution was passed by the government of Madras and Bombay in 1920 (Patankar p21) in another important resolution. This resolution confirmed the rights of Dalits to many public and government facilities like admission to schools and use of wells. But these were not implemented successfully. Despite of resolutions passed for fundamental rights in 1931 at Karachi Congress(Patankar p21) for a very important public employment, equal rights to use public roads, wells, education and other public facilities was passed for all castes. Ambedkar consistently worked for abolishment of untouchability and land rights to untouchables. In the year, 1936, Ambedkar proposed a bill and led a march, for the abolition of the *khoti* system in the Konkan.(p26) The agitation to acquire land rights for Dalits could not be done in more agitative way because of the lack of integration in the peasant movements. Patankar writes, 'Still the achievements of the dalit movement are impressive, and are too often overlooked. They have given birth to a tradition of struggle in many areas, not only on cultural and ritual issues but on breaking feudal bond. They have mounted powerful pressure on the national movement resulting in constitutional provisions for reservations and laws making untouchability an offence; unsatisfactory as these have been, they have still provided weapons in the hands of low-caste organizers.' (p28)

The British government established the exclusive jurisdiction where the power to resolve civil and criminal matters was given to state instead of the communal institutions. Another reformative action was done to have a direct legislative enactments, 'like the Civil marriage Act, the Removal of Caste Disabilities Act, the Widow Remarriage Act, etc., have attacked even the theoretical basis of caste'(Pannikar p22) This was the impact of the English tradition that was made effective under the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. The legislative authority slipped out of the religious communities and was made more English dominated system.

The system in this period was to make more people literate and give Indo- British education for better administrative functioning. These were also leading towards gradual shift in the not so possible functioning of practices like distance pollution of castes in the courtrooms and offices. Even in the state and village administration, people were selected and transferred without looking at their castes and seats were reserved for untouchable castes in many rural set ups. (p23)

The change was gradual but was making a slight difference in the forced togetherness in the administrative and legislative functioning under the English traditions. But the struggle against the differences of language, custom and lack of unity was still pushing for future reformative policies.

Conclusion

As Panikkar writes,

'Democracy is the realisation of a truth. It is as purposeless to question it now as it is to question the use of electricity as air navigation. To criticise it on the ground of its imperfections in actual practice would be irrelevant to our purpose. It is undoubtedly true that democratic practice falls far short of democratic ideals.'

The social system requires reformations which will lead to a better just society. It is time to look at the ideas of democracy and at the same time caste also should be looked at with the new ideas.

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