

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND CASTE OPPRESSION

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ABSTRACT:- Caste system in India has killed the spirit of Equality, Liberty, Freedom and Fraternity which have been the noble principles of classical western Christian philosophers Hegel, Rousseau, J.S.Mill, Immanuel Kant and John Rawls. Historically caste system and its uncivilized practices that are sponsored and conceived by Hindu Religion have at stake for the last 6000 years. Article is an eye opener to know the oppression of Hindu sponsored caste system in India.

Keywords:- Caste Oppression, Hinduism, Equality, Liberty, Freedom, Fraternity, Castes of Mind

The Indian Hindu caste system is understood to be almost six thousand years old. The article will debate that caste is a sole characteristic of the Brahmanical Hindu religion, and as such, Hindu caste systems only live in societies that practice Brahmanical Hinduism with the exception of the fact of caste among Diaspora communities.

We have got two states/societies which can be said to be Hindu states/societies i.e India and Nepal. Therefore the fact of caste based socio-religious-cultural-economic and gender discrimination affects these two societies mainly. States or societies with larger Hindu religious minorities also are drawing attention to attest that wherever Hinduism practiced there caste or gender violence will be prevailed¹. Even though sociologists

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and historians might be different as to an exact meaning of caste and the parameters of its connotation, it is the religious component that differentiates the social system from other forms of violence and discrimination based on hereditary status of one's own birth.

Dr B R Ambedkar, in *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936), rightly said: Caste system has not the equal social significance for non Hindus as it has for Hindus. Among non Hindus, caste is only an observer, not a sacrosanct establishment. Religion is forcing the Hindus to treat separation and isolation of castes as a desirable quality. Caste Hindus view caste not because they are cruel or idiotic, however since they are extremely religious. People are not immoral in observing caste practices. In my view, what is wrong is their religion. Then the enemy is not the people who observe caste, but the Vedas that teach them the religion of caste². Reformers working for the removal of untouchability including Gandhi do not understand that people will not change their conduct until they cease to believe in the sanctity of the Vedas on which their conduct is founded. Caste has a divine basis. The observance of caste and untouchability is a religious duty³. Dr B R Ambedkar was writing this at a time when the term caste was being functional to a variety of situations, particularly discrimination on the basis of skin color.

The article will argue that the word caste should be kept wholly for unfolding the Hindu religious system, because 'it, the caste system in Hinduism, represents a godly, holy or natural order of things'⁴. In order to annihilate caste system in Hinduism, Dr B R Ambedkar argued, *you must therefore destroy the sacredness and divinity with which caste has become invested*⁵. The Vedas were in survival by fifteen hundred BC⁶. The formation hymn the *Purusha sukta*⁷, which is brought into being in the tenth book of the *Rig Veda*, is the oldest existing opening on the fourfold *varnashrama* foundation of the castes: When they created *Purusha*, into how many parts did they separate him and what was his mouth and What were his arms and What were called his thighs and feet. The *Sanatana Hindu Brahman* was his mouth and the *Kshatriya* was made his arms that which was the *Vaishya* was his thighs and the *Shudra* arrived from his feet⁸. The unbearable effects of the Hindu caste system, together with the practice of untouchability, were laid down by the *dharma* codifiers, *dharma* meaning duty⁹, and in following religious tracts that drew their right from, and set up their validation in, the formation hymn of the Vedas. The Vedas put restricted rules on purity, pollution, ceremony, marriage, inter-commensality, expulsion from a caste, or any of the countless connected practices that grew in the order of the unique fourfold

Hindutva division. These were considered as a tone to the established rituals established in the Vedas—the theory of the *varnas* provided the authors of the *dharma-sutras* with a structure within which they could lay down the exact duties of individuals according to their caste¹⁰. The *karma* canon perpetuated caste separation and ascriptive inequality, for it promised support within the Hindu framework scheme in the next life to those who

widely referred by eminent scholars in the school of humanities. I am thankful to Prof. Dr. N .Kanakaratnam Gaaru, Head, Department of History, Archaeology and Culture, Dravidian University, who is an eminent scholar in the studies of Madiga modernity.

1. For example, the situation of caste in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. However, there is a difference in scale between these states and India and Nepal that must be appreciated. Because they are not states with a majority Hindu population (Bangladesh is ten percent Hindu, while the Tamils in Sri Lanka constitute 18 per cent of the population), caste cannot be said to permeate all aspects of socio-economic life, as is the case in India and Nepal. The latter are the only predominantly Hindu states in the world and caste-based discrimination is systematic and endemic in these two countries.

² <https://books.google.com.pk/books?isbn=900415826X>

³ Ambedkar, B. (1936), 'The Annihilation of Caste', in Rodrigues V. (ed.) (2002), *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar* (Oxford University Press), 285-290.

⁴ Sharma, A. (2000), *Classical Hindu Thought* (Oxford University Press), 134.

⁵ Ambedkar, B. (1936), 'The Annihilation of Caste', supra n.24, 291.

⁶ Sharma, A., supra n. 25, 192.

⁷ The Sanskrit word *Purusha* means man or mankind, *sukta* means well-recited, or eloquent. Turner, R. (1966), *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages* (Oxford University Press [reprinted 1973]), 469, entry 13546.

⁸ <https://books.google.com.pk/books?isbn=1409495930> *Rig Veda*, Book 10, Verse 90; *Vajasaneyi Sanhita*, Book 31, Verses 1–16; *Atherva Veda*, Book 19, Verse 6.

⁹ Koller, J. (1972), 'Dharma: An Expression of Universal Order', *Philosophy East and West*, 22:2, 131: 'as a social concept it refers to a moral code, natural and positive law, and also to various distinct duties of individuals'. See generally Kane, P. (1941 (reprinted 2000)), *History of Dharmashastra* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute).

¹⁰ Lingat, R. (1973), *The Classical Law of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 29.

practiced the approved rules of *dharma* in this one¹¹.

The Hindu caste system itself is collected of an unidentified amount of groups called *jatis*, which are endogamous and practice their own rules and regulations of duty, representation to a variety of degrees from the very old *sanatana dharma* Hindu codes, such as the *Manusmṛiti*¹². *Jatis* stand for the reality of caste separation, and they do fit equally into the four Vedic categories or *varnas*-Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. However the entire system of *jatis* is established within these fourfold *varnashrama dharma* corners¹³. Klass explains that the *sanatana* Vedic system which means the typical *varna* system remains the justificatory and descriptive shield. The Hindu caste system is obviously the classic *varna* system, yet Hindus believed that castes have derived from those *varnas*¹⁴.

The Untouchables were conventionally considered to be *outcastes*, outside the Hindu religious system, below even the *Shudras* or servants, and were treated as impure and contaminated due to their deliberate ignorance of *sanatana brahmanical Hindu dharma* ritual and ensuing buildup of pollution¹⁵. The levels of punishments sentences for disobedience of caste boundaries in all aspects and spheres of social communication are lengthily recognized in the *sanatana Brahmanical Hindu dharma* codes¹⁶. Untouchability stems from the ranking position of castes and sub castes that is rigid neither by prosperity nor learning nor the possession of land, but by the taking of water¹⁷. Zinkin elaborates very interesting observation that water may perhaps be taken from equals and superiors, but not from inferiors. Untouchability differs in degree somewhat than in kind from other caste boundaries. All through the Hindu caste structure there are convinced human relations which cannot be had with inferiors. Marriage, for instance, only takes place with a fellow sub caste member of the same caste. For the *Shudras* and Untouchables these restrictions are extended in *toto* to keep them slaves permanently. And not only does one not take water from them but they may not even take water from the same well. And not only does one not take food from them but they may not even eat in the same restaurant or in the same room or nearer places¹⁸.

It is impossible to have a clear notion of what constitutes a caste because it is not only attached with body but also with the mind and soul. Every feature that can be recognized can also be contradicted by the pragmatic truth of caste divisions in Hindu society. Zinkin clearly writes that it is much easier to say what caste is not than what caste is¹⁹. The scholar proceeds to record what caste is not- it is not class, for in every caste there are educated and uneducated, rich and poor, well-born and ordinarily born; it is not skin color, for an Untouchable is an Untouchable whether born fair or dark and it is not the Aryan or non-Aryan, for the Aryans never penetrated into the South or East of India and it is not profession, for even though some occupations are tremendously recognized with particular castes, mostly artisans, the main occupation, agriculture, is open to all up to Vaishya

¹¹ According to the doctrine of *karma*, 'a person's current incarnations and experiences are, at least in part, the fruit of past actions'. Milner, M. (1993), 'Hindu Eschatology and the Indian Caste System: An Example of Structural Reversal', *Journal of Asian Studies* 52:2, 298. Max Weber linked the *karma* doctrine to the operation of the caste system: 'the idea of compensation was linked to the individual's social fate in the societal organization and thereby to the caste order'. Weber, M. (1958), *The Religion of India* (New Delhi: Manoharlal), 119. Weber's analysis has been criticised; see Milner, M., 299 n.4.

¹² Pillai writes: 'The caste system is upheld by the orthodox on the authority of the *dharmasastras* or *smṛitis* ... the often quoted one is *Manusmṛiti* ... this *smṛiti* was given out by Manu to a group of Brahmans, who approached him for "the sacred laws in their order, as they must be followed by all four castes."' Pillai, G. (1959), *Origin and Development of Caste* (Allahabad: Kitab Mahal), 71.

¹³ Deshpande writes that the evolution of *jati* distinctions has an economic origin: 'As the economy grew more complex, the *varna* system metamorphosed into the *jati* (also translated as caste) system, with *jatis* sharing the same basic characteristics of the *varnas*. However, what makes the *jati* hierarchy complex is that (i) *jatis* are not exact subsets of *varnas* and (ii) there is considerable regional variation in the evolution of specific *jatis*', Deshpande, A., supra n.20, 322.

¹⁴ Klass, M. (1980), *Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System*

(Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues), ch. 3, 'Divine Plan or Racial Antipathy?', 63.

¹⁵ www.rierc.org/social/paper574.pdf

¹⁶ See generally Charsley, S. (1996), 'Untouchable: What is in a Name?', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2:1, 1-23.

¹⁷ Zinkin, T. (1962), *Caste Today* (Institute of Race Relations, Oxford University Press), 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

and Shudra castes²⁰. Panikkar, writing in 1933, summarized caste as a common system of life, a religion, rather than a varying Hindu social order, and its caste rigidity with which its rules are imposed would put to humiliation even the Great Inquisition²¹.

CASTES OF MIND:

In *Castes of Mind*, Dirks, argues that caste became a far more omnipresent, totalizing, and homogeneous, being distinct by the British as a fundamentally religious social order. It was taken to be a peculiarly rigid social phenomenon detached from anti-caste and anti-inequality socio-political-religious and cultural political awakening processes, providing a specifically Indian form of civil society. It was seen to defend the rejection of socio-religious-economic-political rights to Indian subjects i.e Dalits²². Being a *suppressors of modern* social form, Indian subcontinent and its high caste sabhas and associations required continuing colonial British rule while it slowly legitimized its social institutions under British guidance. Even though this understanding drop sizeable light on the socio-cultural-economic politics of caste during the British colonial times, it tends to undervalue the profound historicity of caste system, and how it has penetrated into every pore of Indian Hindu society for centuries and long before the coming of the British the Shudra castes and Dalits have been crippled by the omnipresence of this institution called caste. As one social science critic rightly exclaimed soon after Indian independence:

The nuisance of untouchability is like a hydra-headed monstrous²³. If you take away one of its heads, and two heads come out in its place. If you take away it in one place and it appears in a different place. If you try to cut it in one form and it appears it in another form²⁴. A sense of caste status is deeply internalized by the higher caste Hindus amongst its masses or Indians. This center social and religious institution has been basic to Indian Hindu barbaric civilization, culture and tradition, and is certainly not as Dirks asserts the *craftsmanship*, or a *handy work* of British ethnography. We should note what Dirks seems to be oblivious of, his challenging title *Castes of Mind*. The gigantic of caste permeates the Indian Hindu mentality; all that the British colonial masters did was to change some of the socio-religious forms in which it was expressed. Above all, following Babasaheb Dr B R Ambedkar, we may argue that caste is not a physical or material thing like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down²⁵. Caste is not only a physical but also a notion; it is a state of the mind which was superimposed by high caste Hindus on lower caste Hindus in a way that they can inescapable from its mind²⁶. The destruction of caste system does not therefore mean the destruction of physical barriers but it means a notional or imaginary change²⁷.

The non- resistance of Depressed Classes to their oppression does not, research would hold, reflect an agreement or endorsement of the higher caste system, but rather an accommodation to the realities of the distribution of power among the twice borne castes, through its the nature of sanctions, and the opportunities for Dalit groups with no change within the culture. Every opportunity is taken to utilize any break in the wall of oppression to mitigate it or escape it from its age old higher caste Hindutva oppression. It is the most creative and regular mechanisms of higher caste groups imaginable are utilized to influence the Hindu system and legitimizing high caste Hindu dominance through its colonial masters²⁸. Some scholars like Harold Issacs and Marc Galanter have mentioned the psychological problems that this creates for Dalits²⁹. It is the dilemma of the

²⁰ Ibid., 1–3. Zinkin does not deny that generalisations can be made, for example with regard to class, most members of the upper classes are in fact the upper castes while most members of the lowest classes are in fact Untouchables.

²¹ Panikkar, K. (1933), *Caste and Democracy* (London: Hogarth Press), 9, quoted in Zinkin, *ibid.*, 4.

²² wrap.warwick.ac.uk/1157/1/WRAP_THESIS_Paik_2007.pdf

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ D.C.Sharma, Lok Sabha Debates (31 August, 1954), p. 706, as quoted in Anupama Rao, 'Undoing Untouchability? Violence, Democracy, and Discourses of state in Maharashtra, 1932-91' (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1999), p. 4 1.

²⁵ ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/section_20.html

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ Ambedkar, BAWs, Volume 1, p. 68.

²⁸ Berreman, *Caste and other Inequities*, p. 167.

²⁹ Harold Issacs, 'The Ex-untouchables,' in Michael Mahar (ed) *The Untouchables in Contemporary India* (Arizona, 1972), pp. 375-410; Marc Galanter, *Law and the backward classes in India* (Berkeley, 1984);

Dalit identity that they want to assert themselves politically while at the same time they do not want to be socially stigmatized by their identity. The Dalit mentality of defiance and an urge for social revolution are thus accompanied by a preparedness to accept and accommodate³⁰. The debate around untouchability was transformed by the anti-reservation agitations³¹ that began during the 1980s, culminating in the Mandal Commission and the all-India agitation of 1991 against the V. P. Singh government³². It facilitated caste-based mobilization of different communities towards political ends and revealed the deep-seated caste prejudice that still remained among the upper-caste middle classes who feared their displacement by the lower castes³³. It led to a host of reports in newspapers and books on the physical violence, atrocities and human rights violations committed against Dalits³⁴. It also brought out that the ways in which discrimination is carried on in new ways, involving often petty, everyday, covert prejudice that is often not at all obvious. Often, it is the symbolic or psychological violence that hurts more than physical violence³⁵. This is particularly the case in the modern urban environment. However, this 'symbolic' or 'psychological' violence remains largely unexplored by scholars. In certain respects, such violence is more corrosive and harmful than physical violence, as it permeates deep into the conscious and the sub-conscious, instilling a sense of insecurity and inferiority. Today, this social and cultural violence is experienced as often being more dehumanizing than economic exploitation as such³⁶.

Galanter, 'The Abolition of disabilities-untouchability and the law, ' in Mahar (ed) *The Untouchables in contemporary India*, p. 284.

³⁰ I am referring to some works which deal with such acceptance and accommodation. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in colonial India: the Namasudras of Bengal, 1827-1947* (Richmond, 1997); Tapan Basu, *Translating Caste* (New Delhi, 2002), p. xv.

³¹ www.slideshare.net/susvar/wrap-thesis-paik2007

³² The Mandal Commission report recommended 27% reservation in government service for the 'socially and economically backward classes' (Other Backward Classes). This decision to implement more reservations in 1990 by the then Prime Minister V. P. Singh led to a series of violent riots among caste student population.

³³ Also see discussion on the same lines by Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Problems for a contemporary theory of gender' in Nivedita Menon (ed.), *Gender and Politics in India* (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 499-503; M. N. Srinivas (ed), *Caste: Its Twentieth century avatar* (New Delhi, 1996) and *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley, 1996); Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind* (Princeton, 2001); Anupama Rao, *Gender and Caste* (New Delhi, 2003).

³⁴ Smita Narula, *Broken People: Caste violence against India's 'untouchables'* (New York; London, 0999), is a good example in human rights work.

³⁵ wrap.warwick.ac.uk/1157/1/WRAP_THESIS_Paik_2007.pdf

³⁶ It is also underlined by Uma Chakravarti in *Gendering Caste* (Calcutta, 2003), pp. 8,17.