



The Changing Face of Caste in India: Reform, Struggle and the Politics of Power an Analytical Study

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Abstract

The question of caste remains a thought-provoking subject for scholars of Indian political, legal, and social history even today. The origin of the caste system, caste-based discrimination, the efforts made to eliminate it, and the struggle culminating in the Indian Constitution's proclamation of equality have been significant endeavours in this direction. However, over time, the movement for caste equality took on an aggressive character. Historical exploitation began to be used as a tool to secure privileges. Political parties converted caste into an instrument of caste-based polarisation to gain power. Factionalism based on caste emerged as a means to obtain caste-based benefits, which further entrenched casteism and caste identity. This research study examines the origin of the caste system, its historical dimensions, various reform movements, constitutional aspects, and the multiple facets of self-interest in obtaining privileges through caste mobilisation and the misuse of legal provisions created to eliminate exploitation.

Keywords: Caste, Varna, Satyashodhak Samaj, Arya Samaj, Mandal Commission, Reservation

Introduction

The caste system is a defining feature of Indian society. However, the question of when and how the caste system originated has remained controversial. The word 'jati' (caste) is derived from the root word 'jan', meaning to be born.¹ Many scholars trace the origin of the caste system to the varna system, citing the Purusha Sukta of the Rigveda in this context, which speaks of the four varnas being born from the four limbs of the Cosmic Being (Virat Purusha).² However, as is clear from the 11th and 12th mantras of the Purusha Sukta, the intent is an allegorical depiction of the social body — describing which part of the 'social being' corresponds to the mouth, arms, thighs, and feet respectively — rather than a literal description of the origin of varnas from physical limbs.³ Swami Dayananda Saraswati clarifies this very point in the Fourth Chapter



(Chaturtha Samullasa) of his treatise Satyarth Prakash. The varna system was based on qualities and deeds (guna and karma). It was not rigid, and varna change was possible in the Vedic era, as Manu himself wrote: 'A Shudra may attain Brahmanhood, and a Brahman may descend to Shudra status.'⁴

If one examines the epic period, caste-denoting surnames are conspicuously absent — names like Rama, Krishna, Dronacharya, Vidura, etc., carry no caste markers. Megasthenes, in his account of India, mentions seven 'jatis', but upon closer examination, he appears to be describing functional occupational groups rather than hereditary castes.⁵ This is why historians continue to debate the caste identities of Maurya and Gupta rulers. Regarding the account of Fa-Hien, he describes people living peacefully, being pious, abstaining from meat, alcohol, onions, and garlic, and not killing living beings. His description of Chandalas⁶ has been interpreted by many scholars as evidence of caste-based untouchability; however, the account itself suggests that the basis of such separation was occupational and hygienic rather than birth-based. This does not mean caste-based inequality did not exist in society. Several verses of Manusmriti describe inhumane treatment of Shudras,⁷ but many scholars do not accept the interpolated (prakshipta) verses of Manusmriti as authoritative evidence. Maharshi Dayananda Saraswati had cautioned against interpolations in religious texts such as Manusmriti and the epics, and did not consider the interpolated portions as proof. Nevertheless, such interpolations suggest that a segment of society did hold degrading views of social discrimination — views that no rational, justice-loving person can accept. An important point is that Manusmriti or other such texts never fully formed the basis of governance, as A. L. Basham has also opined.⁸

2.0 Various Theories on the Origin of the Caste System and British Colonial Policies

Various scholars have proposed different theories on the origin of the caste system. Risley was the first to attempt an explanation based on racial differences, the Aryan invasion, and inter-marriage with conquered peoples. J. H. Hutton traced the origin of the caste system to the superstitions of aboriginal inhabitants, their belief in a primal force called 'mana', fear-driven food taboos and untouchability, and geographical isolation. He argued that when these tribes came into contact with Hindu society, they were absorbed into the caste system without losing their distinct identities, and that occupational guilds also contributed to caste formation. When the Aryans arrived in India, they brought the varna system with them and systematised the already-existing notions of untouchability and social hierarchy into a formal hierarchy. Hutton's conclusion was that the caste system was an organic result of India's geographical conditions, which allowed different groups to coexist without losing their identities.⁹ Nesfield attributed caste formation to occupational factors; Gilbert to geographical elements. Certain castes evidently did originate on occupational lines (e.g., lohar — blacksmiths, sunar — goldsmiths), and some on geographical bases (e.g., Gaur of Bengal, Tiwari of Trivargram). Ghurye, on the other hand, described the caste system as a creation of the Brahmins. Thus, scholars have differed widely on the subject.



As for the Aryan invasion theory, no credible evidence has been found for it. Maharshi Dayananda Saraswati writes in Satyarth Prakash that the Aryan people, shortly after creation began, came directly from Tibet to this very land — that no one lived here before them — and that no Sanskrit text or history records the Aryans coming from Iran.¹⁰ Thus, the caste system had multiple causes, but whatever those causes may have been, caste-based discrimination — which separated human beings from one another — cannot be justified.

3.0 Caste During the British Period

To understand the caste system, the eminent sociologist M. N. Srinivas introduced the concept of 'Sanskritisation', through which he demonstrated that the caste system was not always a rigid structure but a flexible one, in which a lower caste or tribe could claim higher status by adopting the rituals, ideology, and practices of a twice-born (dvija) caste and would receive recognition after a generation or two.¹¹ However, in British India, caste assumed a permanent and rigid form. When the census was conducted in 1901 under Census Commissioner Risley, castes were officially classified into hierarchical categories on the basis of racial elements such as anthropometry — with upper castes categorised as Aryan and lower castes as Dravidian in racial terms.¹² The most brutal manifestation of colonial racism was the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, under which certain communities were branded as congenital criminals. In 1952, the Government of India declared them as 'De-notified Tribes'. On the other hand, various factors in the British period — Western education and thought, industrialisation, the development of railways, and the new legal system — helped to some extent in loosening the bonds of the caste system.

4.0 Efforts by Upper-Caste Reformers to Establish Caste Equality

In the modern era, individuals from upper-caste backgrounds made significant efforts to establish social equality and oppose caste-based discrimination. Among these reformers, the contributions of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj founded by him; Swami Vivekananda, disciple of Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa; Mahadev Govind Ranade and the Prarthana Samaj; Maharshi Dayananda Saraswati and the Arya Samaj founded by him; Lala Lajpat Rai, Mahatma Hansraj, Swami Shraddhananda (all influenced by the Arya Samaj and its ideology); Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj of Kolhapur; and other luminaries such as Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and Mahatma Gandhi — all deserve recognition.

4.1 Resistance by Leaders from Lower and Untouchable Castes Against Caste Discrimination

Against caste discrimination, many great leaders from lower and untouchable castes took the struggle into their own hands. Jyotiba Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873, and in his book Gulamgiri (Slavery), he strongly opposed caste-based discrimination. In Kerala, Narayana Guru gave the rallying call of 'One Caste, One Religion, One God' for all humanity. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a foremost leader of the untouchable castes, and he was a strong advocate for the political rights of Dalits and for separate electorates.



5.0 The Indian Constitution and the Right to Equality

The Indian Constitution came into force on 26 January 1950. It was drafted by the Constituent Assembly, in which approximately 299 members participated actively. The Right to Equality was granted under Articles 14 to 18 of the Indian Constitution. Article 17 abolished untouchability. Articles 14, 15, and 16 applied the principle of equality, establishing fundamental rights such as equality before the law, prohibition of discrimination on grounds of birth, caste, sex, race, place of birth, etc., and equality of opportunity in public employment. Article 23 abolished forced labour (begar). Article 46 directs the State to promote the educational and economic interests of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other weaker sections.

To give effect to Article 17 of the Constitution, the Untouchability (Offences) Act was passed in 1955. It was amended in 1976 and renamed the Civil Rights Protection Act. Under Articles 15(4), 16(4), 330, and 332 of the Constitution, provisions were made for reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. Initially, this reservation was for 10 years, but it has been extended through successive constitutional amendments. Currently, reservations of 15% for SC, 7.5% for ST, and 27% for OBC are in force in public services and educational institutions. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 completely banned the practice of manual scavenging. Thus, the Indian Constitution and the legal framework played a vital role in the direction of establishing caste equality in India.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's contribution as Chairman of the Drafting Committee in the framing of the Constitution was immense. But the Constitution was not the work of any single individual — it was framed by the Constituent Assembly of 299 members. The first draft of the Constitution was prepared by Sir B. N. Rau. Members from all castes contributed to its creation and to the provision of equal rights. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel chaired the Fundamental Rights and Minorities Committee. J. B. Kripalani played a key role as chairman of the Fundamental Rights Sub-Committee. Dr. Ambedkar himself, in his final speech to the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949, stated that the Constitution was not the work of any one person, but the contribution of Sir B. N. Rau, other members of the Drafting Committee, the chief draftsman S. N. Mukerji, and all members of the Constituent Assembly.¹³

A study of the Constituent Assembly debates of 29 November 1948 reveals that when 'Article 11' (which later became Article 17 of the Constitution) was being debated, it was welcomed with unanimous acclamation by all caste members, and slogans of 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai' (Victory to Mahatma Gandhi) were raised.¹⁴ This is testament to the collective resolve for Gandhian social reform prevailing. Thus, through the collective efforts of all castes, the Indian Constitution worked to bring equality to India.

6.0 The Militant and Reactionary Character of the Dalit and Bahujan Movement

Over time, the Dalit and lower-caste movement for social equality took on an aggressive and religiously and culturally rebellious character. This included the boycott of upper-caste culture



and their deities, the renunciation of Hinduism, and the use of aggressive and provocative slogans to seize political power.

On 14 October 1956 in Nagpur, when Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism along with hundreds of thousands of followers, he administered his famous '22 Vows'.¹⁵ This was not merely a demand for equality — it was a complete and aggressive ideological renunciation of the symbols of upper-caste Hinduism. Under the leadership of E. V. Ramasamy Periyar, the Justice Party and the Dravida Kazhagam's self-respect movement focused directly on opposition to Brahmins and the desecration of Hindu deities' idols.

In the 1980s, the Bahujan Samaj Party, in its early phase, used highly inflammatory slogans to create aggression among Dalits and backward communities (Bahujans) and foster systematic hatred against upper castes in order to convert them into a vote bank.¹⁶ Along with this, on the basis of the so-called 'indigenous theory', declaring upper castes as foreign invaders, celebrating 'Mahishasur Martyrdom Day', burning Manusmriti — these became the central themes of anti-upper-caste Dalit discourse.

It cannot be denied that 'historical oppression' is used as a victim card. Any criticism is dismissed as 'anti-Dalit' or a 'casteist mentality'. This mindset, rather than increasing social harmony, has created a permanent divide and mistrust between castes. On one hand, upper-caste individuals are still held guilty for the exploitation perpetrated by their ancestors; on the other hand, the affluent among the reserved categories are reaping all the benefits of reservation. The truly needy — from any caste — those who can genuinely be called the 'real Dalits' — continue to live in destitution.

7.0 Political Casteism and Legal Provisions

Over time, caste politics became a means to attain power. The pursuit of caste equality was replaced by the use of the victim card to obtain legal benefits. Caste politics became the foundation for electoral victory. Today, caste is no longer a social stigma — it has become 'political capital'.

Reservation, which was once considered temporarily necessary for social justice, has become a tool for political self-interest. In 1990, then Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh suddenly announced the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations in order to salvage his declining political position and weaken the farmer's movement led by Devi Lal. Following the Mandal Commission's recommendations, a backward class was constituted on the basis of caste. In northern India, many upper-caste youth, feeling aggrieved by this decision, died by suicide or attempted suicide. In *Indira Sawhney v. Union of India*,¹⁷ a nine-judge constitutional bench upheld the 27% OBC reservation but introduced the concept of the 'creamy layer', while also capping the maximum reservation at 50%. Currently, some states have exceeded this limit by a significant margin.

Similarly, through the 77th Constitutional Amendment of 1995, the P. V. Narasimha Rao government introduced reservations in promotions, and through the 85th Amendment of 2001,



the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government granted consequential seniority to SC/ST employees. In 1989, the Congress government under Rajiv Gandhi, under pressure from the Bofors scam allegations and with the emergence of the BSP's caste-polarisation politics in northern India, hastily got the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act passed by Parliament just before elections. In March 2018, the Supreme Court of India (Subhash Kashinath Mahajan v. State of Maharashtra)¹⁸ expressed concern over the misuse of this Act and stayed immediate arrests without a preliminary inquiry. The Court held that innocent people were becoming victims of this law in many cases. However, subsequently, under political pressure and due to protests, Parliament passed an amendment reversing the Supreme Court's judgment. This decision of the Modi government is an example of a policy of appeasement of caste pressure rather than caste equality.

The irony in the history of law and jurisprudence is that even so many years after independence and the commencement of the Constitution, oppressors and the oppressed are defined solely on the basis of caste for the sake of vote banks — data on atrocities committed in favour of specific castes is maintained, while no one feels any need to keep records of caste-based discrimination against the general or unreserved category. Thus, based on such data, exploitation will always be recorded as belonging to one particular caste, and the data will remain perpetually one-sided. Another dimension of caste exploitation is that its blame is always placed on Brahmins and the so-called other upper castes, even though in reality, other influential backward castes are often also involved in exploitation. The UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, implemented in January 2026, included only SC, ST, and OBC students within the definition of 'caste-based discrimination'. This one-sided legal framework created a situation of 'reverse discrimination' for general category students. Caste-based legal frameworks and the race to obtain caste-based privileges have, instead of establishing a casteless society, completely moulded society in the framework of casteism.

8.0 Conclusion

The above analysis makes the following points clear:

1. Caste is an ancient institution with multiple causes for its origin.
2. The caste system, during a certain historical period, created conditions of social disparity.
3. To eliminate the inequalities of the caste system and establish social equality, many reformers from so-called upper castes led wide-ranging campaigns. Great personalities from so-called lower castes also strongly opposed caste-based discrimination.
4. In the framing of the Indian Constitution, members from all castes unanimously implemented the principle of equality and abolished untouchability.
5. The movement for caste equality took on an aggressive character and transformed into a movement for insulting upper-caste luminaries and securing legal privileges — causing irreparable damage to social harmony. Political parties shamelessly turned this into a vehicle for caste polarisation and remaining in power, with even honourable Supreme Court judgments being reversed for this purpose.



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