

THE NATURE OF CLASS AND CASTE IN INDIA

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Abstract

The present paper tries to show the presentation of the inter-caste relations which is one of the important subjects in Indo-English novels. The issue of caste and class has fundamental significance in Indian society. From time immemorial, Indian society and literature have been organized around caste considerations. Even our epics have characters like Shambuk and Ekalvya who come from lower castes. Caste and class played a crucial role to determine Indian social set up and attitudes. Caste controls the social relations even in modern India. Some of the existing theories of caste and class are inadequate to explain the different aspects of caste and class system. We try to get rid of the system but it is unbreakable into Indian social life. Several existing studies of the caste and class system attempt to explore the problem from ideological positions. The matter of caste and class in the field of literature, sociology or cultural anthropology find a different mode of expression. Literature permits freedom of expression but other academic fields cannot. Caste and class system is deeply rooted in Indian society. It has become a theme in an Indian English novel. Extensive fieldwork was done to determine a true picture of the inter-caste relations which are seen in different parts of the country. Many writers in India provided valuable insights into the nature of inter-caste and class system prevailing in villages and towns in different parts of India.

Key Words: *inter-caste relations, caste and class, modern India, class system, cultural anthropology.*

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Untouchability and slavery symbolize the deprivation, disgrace, and inhuman oppression on a section of human beings. Men become hostile against one another. Social, political, economic, racial and cultural prejudices are seen at many places. All human beings are born equal but there discrimination among them is created by people with vested interests. The need to define the social, moral and ideological perspectives leads to concern the social dilemma of the underprivileged and exploited in society. Untouchables in India are an oppressed section and they are treated with religious prejudices in India. Such inhuman treatment was given in different ways. Economic misery is one of the causes behind their social dishonor and humiliation. Caste and class discrimination and racial prejudices are the fundamental reasons for a problem in the Indian society.

The social group of Indian untouchables changed the pattern of human living by reason of their caste, class and racial oppression. Different cultures and their sufferings are seen in our literature. In India, untouchability is the by-product of the caste system. Caste oppression is a glaring feature of the Hindu society. In ancient India, the Aryan and *Anaryan* (Dravidian) races created a sense of the high and the low.

There are only two kinds of people in the world; the rich and the poor. There is no connection between them. The differences have erected a wall between them. They are divided into two different classes on the basis of their economic conditions. As an effect the pattern of ruling class and the ruled class were formed. The ruling class became the masters and the poor people became slaves. The rich people became the owner and the poor depended on them. Due to this, exploiter and the exploited sections have emerged. They have their different attitudes to look at each other.

The structure of class forms three sections of upper class, middle class, and the lower class. The mentality of every section of society is different. The upper class is supposed to be a strong and powerful class of people. This class maintains the middle class and lower class. The upper class people support the middle class to secure their economic interests. They provide religious, cultural and moral support to the middle classes. It is because they want the middle class people to keep the record of their property and daily income. Upper class people needed the middle class as their representatives. In such situation lower class people have no importance to them. Capitalist, professional creators and the working class automatically came forth by the realization of classes. The differences can be built up according to the degree of superiority and inferiority. Upper class has the higher state, middle class is given the secondary rank and the lower class is at the bottom of the society. Superior group of upper class and middle class become the cause of pathetic condition of the inferior class of the society.

The nature of class and caste system in India and its meaning and existence can be studied from different angles. The selected topic takes into consideration two basic angles. First, the study observes the issue from the top of the social order. It will understand the nature of class and caste of privileged Indians. It can also be studied from the bottom of the social structure. It sees the system and the way sufferer suffers. A number of Western studies of the system understand the issue from the same point of view. The theoretical basis for such studies has the Western liberal humanist notion. The study tries to examine their positions and their social implications.

The caste system presents the problem in the framework of Varna scheme. To an average reader Varna means the division of Hindu society into four orders viz. *Bharmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Sudra*. The untouchables are kept outside the Varna system. There are some problems with this kind of division. Sociological studies show that Indian people were discriminated on the basis of their caste, rather than their class. The concept of class as it emerged in 20th century did not exist in Indian subcontinents for a long time. Caste was a vivid element in Indian society. A person was respected or disrespected not due to his

richness or property as much as due to his caste. There are examples in Indian epics that show the role that caste played in the social status. Ekalvya was denied the opportunity to upgrade himself simply because of his caste. Shabari in Ramayana acquired inverse fame due to her caste. It is not Shabari who is glorified in Ramayana. It is Rama who has been glorified.

Lower caste people were prohibited from gaining wealth. Hence there was no question of low caste person to be respected due to wealth. Another factor that is socially relevant is the skills that persons possess. Person may be poor; he may come from lower caste. But if he has remarkable skills, he is upheld today. This was not so in the past.

I would explain the concept of class inside and outside India. Various people have defined class in different ways. Carl Marx was the first person to theoretic the concept of class. In India there are socio political thinkers like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule and Shahu Maharaj who provided Indian angel to the concept of class.

In a social system person is judged by the degree of respect that he or she acquires. It is an action of respect or honor that is associated with the feeling of equality. The feeling of priority is also understood by the respect. It is an act of implied judgment of the dignity of a person. It is simultaneously an act of judgment regarding the person judged and the person judging.

It is a judgment of a person by other person that reveals the position of the judging and the judged. Person judges and is judged on the level of language, education, economic conditions, family, religion, morality, culture, locality and knowledge. An aggregate of persons possessing approximately the same status belong to the same class.

There are some theoretical and practical concepts related to classes all over the world. Socio-economic conditions vary from countries to countries from societies to societies. If we compare rural base of Indian economy in the past up to the Indian independence in 1947, we can say that Indian economy did not have much money in it. For

a long time barter system was the major medium of transaction in India. When large scale industrialization was taking place in England in the 18th and the 19th century, money became the mediator of exchange of goods and services.

Carl Marx talks about the class of labors as against the capitalist class. Marx does not consider farmers or peasants in agrarian Indian society. Thus the concept of class perceived by the western world is largely different from the concept of class as understood by the east. It is remarkable to note that India has a whole lot of social political thinkers who strove hard to remove the social inequality that was created by the caste. The economist in the real sense of the term is a recent development in Indian state. Money was considered to be an obstacle on the way to salvation. Indian people thought about life before birth and after death more than the present life. Metaphysical life occupied their entire being more than the physical one. Naturally class was out of purview of life for them. There were two ways to look at caste, however. It was considered to be a gift from the previous birth and secondly it was the wish of the God. Caste was a reality for them; class was utopian concept.

Whenever we think about classes and their effects on people, we are reminded of the concept of class promoted by Marx and his followers. It is true that Marx's impact in western countries and other countries lasted for about a century. Many political and literary theories started using Marx's economic model for the analysis of society. The world in the 20th century was divided between two ideologies. One of them was advocated by Marx and the other reaction to Marx. One can say that world is either based on Marxist theory or anti-Marxist theory.

Class is visible in people's attitude to life, religion and God. Most of the poor people have fatalistic approach to life. Unfortunately they do not plan for their future. Consequently most of the poor people have a large number of children born in their family. They believe that the child that is born in the family is an additional labor available to them. Hence they avoid the family planning. They do not worry about growing number of mouths

in the family. This prevents them from better education, shelter and clothes. Opportunities are snatched away from the poor people because of the continuous birth in the family. This does not mean that upper class people do not have more children. But there is a sharp difference between the purposes of life of children in two different classes of society. Poor children are expected to work for the others. Whereas the children in the upper class society will be needed to cater to the growing needs and services of their own business.

Gods have special place in the Indian hearts irrespective of poverty or richness. Poor people have inferior deities like *Khandoba* or *Mhasoba*. Most of these gods are oily dirty stone images. They are placed outside the main temple, mostly on the gate of the temple. This is an indication of the fact that the gods and goddesses of the poor people are made to serve and guard the main God. Rich people also believe in the gods and goddesses of the higher order in a very different way. If we think deep we can easily understand that the rich classes of the society combine fatalism with effort. It is to be noticed here that rich people will not walk hundreds of kilometers in *Palkhi*. They do not spend more than required time for the gods and pilgrimages.

The attitude to life of the poor people and that of the rich people are separate many times. Poverty prevents people to grow and belong to the higher stage of the society. It restricts them to enjoy the future opportunities in life. As a result they do not look for better education, better medical facilities and better habitat. The children belonging to the poor classes generally go to government aided schools. On the other hand rich children prefer private schools. It is true to some extent that poor people cannot afford to pay for the children's education. In reality they are not ready to spend much money on education. They cannot get better education and better job opportunities in future. They remain in a mean circle. Rich people are never a part of mean circle. In fact they overcome it. Sometimes ignorance and lack of awareness of the poor people is responsible for their miserable conditions. I feel that the circumstances are responsible for the creation and continuation of poor classes in the society. But more than that person himself is

responsible for the poverty. That is what Shakespeare perhaps meant when he said 'character is destiny' in his early writings.

The fall of feudalism and the rise of capitalism gave birth to social mobility. Industrial revolution was not mere change in the development of technology. It was also a change of economic, political, social and cultural attitude of human being towards one another. It was the change in the ownership of the means of production which changed the thinking of human beings. It was re-orientation of social, cultural and religious thinking of human being. It was the transformation of society. This was the confrontation between feudalism and capitalism as a class system. It is social mobility in which the possession of means of production has fixed the pattern of the ruling and the ruled.

I will explain the nature of caste system in India. The present study will take view of theories of caste and its history. Caste system has been deeply rooted in Indian society since ancient time. The meaning of caste changed from time to time. Generation to generation it changes its meaning. So the study plans to see whether this change has taken the side of the exploited or it favored the exploiters.

The word 'caste' has its origins in Spain and Portuguese. 'Casta' means lineage or race. It is derived from the Latin word 'castus'. It means 'pure'. The Spaniards were the first to use it. But its Indian application is from the Portuguese. They were applied in the middle of the fifteenth century. The current spelling of the word is after the French word "Caste" which appears in 1740 in the "academies." It was spelt as 'cast' before. As Sridhar Ketkar observes, "caste" was used in the sense of race or breed as early as 1555 A.D. (12)

The Spanish word "Caste" was applied to the mixed breed between Europeans, Red Indians and Negroes. But 'caste' was not used in its Indian sense till the seventeenth century. There are references to castes in our national epics. Mahabharata writes about Eklavya and Ramayan about Shabari. This means that caste was a social reality during epic period. Its nature may be different. But its existence cannot be denied.

Logical question that follows this reality is what the scenario of caste was in non-Hindu regions outside Indus valley. Caste in India had a direct link with the traditional professions and occupations. Carpenter's son became a carpenter by default, Goldsmith's son goldsmith and blacksmith's son blacksmith. Due to negligible mobility in people, there was a rare chance of changing a job. Conditions in other parts of the world were different. People could migrate from one place to another due to the island nature of the region. This allowed people to change their profession.

Recent studies in genetics can help us to find out the reasons behind the continuation of profession of specific caste gens are transmitted from parents to children. If the gens have carpentry in them, it is natural that carpenter's son became carpenter. Castes thus had a scientific base in the ancient time. Things went wrong when hierarchy in caste was interpolated by the people with vested interests. They divided the society into castes to suit their selfish designs.

It is clear from the above definitions that caste is a group of people. It has certain characteristics. They abide by a set of norms within the group. A group is a caste or sub-caste in comparison with smaller or larger groups. When we talk about Maratha Brahmin and Konkani Brahmin, it is recorded as sub-castes of the same caste. Maratha Brahmins would be called a sub-caste of the Southern or Dravidian Brahmins. Several castes and sub-castes are put together to make Hindu society.

It is necessary to study the facts of the genesis of the caste system from a historical point of view. The nature of caste system and its origin can be thought about through historical order. According to sociologists, Dravidians came to settle down in India before the Aryans from different parts of the world. Pre-Dravidian settlers were the natives of India. The northern part of Australia was linked with the southern part of India. The eastern part of Africa was enjoined with the western part of India. The equator passes through the center of this connected area.

Those people who refused to become slaves were driven away into forests. They remained natives with their social, economic and cultural distinctions. They could not mix with any other race. In course of time, these people were divided into two castes. Some became nomadic tribes and others roaming from place to place.

Ancient Indian society was divided into four parts, the Aryans, the *Anaryans*, the natives and the nomadic criminal tribes. In the early Vedic period, there were only two main classes. These were Aryans and *Anaryans*. Their culture differed but there was not much difference between their mutual relationships. Feelings of social superiority were present in the minds of the Aryans. Being the rulers, they believed in exploitation.

Only two classes existed during the Rig-Vedic times. The *Anaryans* were opposite of the Aryans. The references of '*Dasa*' for the *Anaryans* and '*Naga*' for the Aryans are found in the Vedas.

The people who are called *Dasyusor Dasas* in the Vedas are '*Shudras*'. Rig-Veda says the *Dasas* were mostly of black skin. Color and physical build determined the class of a person even in the Vedic period. The Mahabharata distinguishes Brahmins from *Shudras* on the basis of color. It seems that the concept Varna was related to the color of the skin. Fair colored person may have been placed at the top rung of the ladder. Brown, light brown and dark brown must have followed the fair color. They might have been called Brahmin, Kshatriya, *Vaishya* and *Shudras* respectively. Since inter-Varna marriages were prohibited *Shudra's* children became *Shudra* and Brahmin's children became Brahmin. Something that started so casually acquired a serious proportion in the later times. As mentioned earlier a person was honored or dishonored due to his/her complexion. Consequently, fair colored person did light work; the brown was assigned the job of protecting the society so on and so forth. This was regulated by a principle of division of labor in the initial period.

Things turned to alarming direction when *Varna-Vyavastha* was changed to hierarchical caste system. Society which had been horizontal for a long time became a

vertical reality. Personalities clashed against each other selfishly. It was reflected in the literature of the time.

The *Varna-Vyavastha* was established with the '*Dasa Pratha*' (slave system). There were inter-Varna marriages in the Vedic period. Many of the *Dasas* women were used as wives by the people of different *Varnas*. For *Shudra*, there was no well-known form of caste by birth in Vedic period. There was no restriction on intermingling of *Arya*, *Anarya*, *Dwij* and *Adwij* in practical life. Any man could become a *Shudra* by virtue of his own karma. But there was a furious struggle between *Arya* and *Anarya*. *Anarya* could be made a slave after being defeated in struggle. Though the *Varna* system was fully established, there was no compulsion of caste by birth to exchange the caste of people. For example, *Arya* could become a *Shudra* or a *Dasa*.

The age of the *Brahmanas*, *Upanishada* and *Sutras* came after the end of Vedic period. The *Varna-Vyavastha* in this age became a permanent social institution. And in that time, it grew so rigid that the discrimination was never bridged up. During the *Ramayana* age, the *Varna-Vyavastha* became more rigid and the conditions of the *Shudras* become miserable.

During the *Ramayana* period the *Varnas* were based on Karma and not on birth. *Varna* was acquired through one's deeds. A *Kshatriya* was called a *Kshatriya* by virtue of his bravery and not by virtue of his birth. All could become *Brahmins* by good character. If a *Shudra* had a good character, he could attain *Brahmanatva*. *Vyas* was born from the daughter of a *Mallah* (boatman), *Parasara* from a *Bhangi* (sweeper caste), *Vashishtha* from a *Veishyaa* (prostitute), *Vishwamitra* from a *Kshatriyani*, *Agastya* from a pitcher (*Ghara*). None of them was *Brahmin*. Yet they were accepted as *Brahmins* because of their meritorious karmas.

The foreign forces started invading India. The Muslims invaded India after some time. The castes assumed greater rigidity in the social and religious spheres during the Muslim regime. During the British rule too, there were no changes in the conditions of the

Shudras and the untouchables. Even their shadow and sight were considered to be a source of pollution. Mere talking with them caused pollution. The touch of their footprints was taken as the cause of pollution. Every sphere of life was then shadowed by caste and untouchability. The toe of a Brahmin's foot was regarded more sacred than the head of a *Shudra* in religious functions.

Social interaction on the basis of caste continued in the post-independence era. It changed due to the work of social reformers and some constitutional rights. The lower caste people get more educational and economic facilities today which uplift their standard of living. Though attitude on the basis of caste is not thoroughly eradicated the attitude to interact with such people has changed.

A voluminous literature on class and caste has been published over the period of the last two centuries. The origin and development of class and caste system has been extensively discussed by the social thinkers and reformers. Though it is difficult to conclude the discussion on firm note, it can be said that the division of society which started as a matter of convenience, took a ghastly form of personal discrimination. Hierarchical arrangements of the society led to exploitation of the lower class and caste people. Indian writers in English wrote on these issues repeatedly.

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