

Caste and Ideology in Indian Society

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Abstract: Nation building is a continuous process and our constant endeavour to build up India as a powerful nation state, caste and ideology poses major challenges. The contemporary Indian society is undergoing several transformations with ideological conflict and divisive politics. The caste and ideology which is unique to Indian social structure and its functioning have deeply rooted in its religion and culture. Now the rigidity of caste move from governing principle to functional unit to maintain the social order and challenging the caste and ideological hegemony. In this juncture there is the need to explore and build our knowledge about Indian society based on rationality and scientific method where cause and effect could be appropriately linked and truth can be established. If we consider caste as a social construction and as a knowledge product, now it is moulded with dominant ideological hegemony with hierarchy and graded inequality in each sphere of social life.

Keywords: Caste, Ideology, Knowledge, Indian Society, Hegemony

Introduction

In the wake of competitive ideology, constitutional amendments, structural violence, divisive politics in internal dynamics of contemporary India in the process of our nation building, it is felt there is the need to explore and build our knowledge about Indian society based on rationality and scientific method where cause and effect could be appropriately linked and truth can be established. Now the time has come to refine our thought and knowledge system and examine the hidden truth in it. Caste and religion are integral part of culture interrelated in the structural and functional order of Indian society, very nicely complement with each other and became instrumental in shaping up of the dominant ideological hegemony¹. The epistemology of caste falls under fallacy for failing to establish relationship with truth, belief and justification. The Supreme Court of India has got rid off with the use of the word “Dalit” which was earlier in practice in the public domain referring to lower ladder of people in Indian society. The stereotypical construction of the word “Dalit” in the form of caste practices with its derogatory behaviour and differential attitude continues to exist. The term caste or jati itself is a well intended enquiry about social identity. The word “Caste” or “Jati” is more dangerous and derogatory than the word “Dalit”. Our democracy, our legislation, our judiciary, our society should get rid off with the word “Caste” along with the word “Dalit”. People falling under same caste group feel more comfortable to share their views, have their social exchange and live in a community life. They feel insecure and feel uncomfortable to live with the other caste group. That’s why they create identity politics for remaining to be there in the power, impose their ideological hegemony to translate their thought into actions ensuring their safety, security and sustainability. Caste is the core ingredient in fixing marriage, business transactions, politics, all development plans and programmes, reservations in education and employment, religion and ritual practices, Indian legislation, governance, judiciary, and media and many more activities. Caste is everything and Indians social life is revolving round the principles of caste practices only. It seems caste as a unique form of social inequality continues to exist because of its ideological orientation.

Caste as an objective of scientific research in Indian society with reference to August Comte’s Positive Philosophy, it is very much true that caste is an integral part of Indian society. Therefore, the intrinsic meaning and knowledge about caste is needed to be explored for the better understanding about the Indian society. Knowledge is always questionable for its validity and truth. We need to know the fact about caste and ideology in Indian Society and culture. There is specific historical root about Indian society and culture. Now the question is if history is a form of documented knowledge of past events, as we know history itself has its own subjective biasness. Therefore, the existing concepts, theories, definitions and meanings of caste are under the scanner of scientific knowledge.

If we look at from postmodern perspectives, the epistemology of entire Indian society is subjected to be under scrutiny on the grounds for the uses of various words, concepts and terminologies like caste, tribe, varna, hindu as a religion, untouchability, rituals, customs, traditions and values which is unique to Indian society. The deeper investigations on these words put questions like from where, how and when these words come to society and who introduced such words and for what purposes such words are being used. The further question may also arise how long the caste and its associated words will continue to exist? The very simple answer is as long as people in the society desires and nation state supports. Now the question is do the Indian society or Indian

nation would like to curb caste practices. If yes in the form democratic principle “equality” as it is enshrined in Indian Constitution, then why it has not been adhered?

Proliferation of Knowledge about the Caste

With the presence of multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious community along with cultural pluralism, it may not be wrong to consider India as a global capital of diversity today. Any ideology would be good and widely accepted if it has the rational features and guided with democratic principles taking care about its structural elements and functional arrangement of the society. The word “dalit” or “harijan” is used to refer the lower ladder of people in the Indian society. I am not going to discuss more about the etymological meaning of the word “Dalit” and “Caste”.

What is knowledge? Knowledge is something which exists there. Exploration of facts and truth can be established by connecting with the evidence is knowledge. There may be various sources for generation of knowledge. But knowledge may be produced through the human curiosity to know something. All the forms of knowledge come through common sense of human being. Human beings common sense guided by their thinking, perception, experience, feelings, interaction with nature and various individuals in the society. Basically human thought about its curiosity to know the mysterious world covert as knowledge product. Human being as knowledge producer updates the existing knowledge for the larger interest of the society and updated knowledge is always useful. Knowledge is always questionable for its validity and truth.

The ignorance about social world and reality allows our mind to capture the imaginations, blind beliefs and superstitions. We need to understand the social facts in a very scientific method like the way natural science does. The point of argument is that we are living in the era of post-industrial, post-modern and globalized world. In the process of social transformation many of the existing knowledge has been rejected, modified, improvised, altered or reproduced. It is an ongoing process, for instance the existing technology is replacing with new technology immediately for the comfortable life style of the people. Therefore there is the need to have a proliferation of knowledge about society and culture for the larger interest of the society.

Author's concern in this section is firstly to understand the Indian society and culture by applying the positivistic approach developed by Auguste Comte.² And secondly bridge the gap of missing linkages and connect it with the world view for wider dissemination.

Positive philosophy is developed by Auguste Comte for the scientific study of human society in the discipline sociology. It is the view that social phenomena ought to be studied the way how the natural science is studied. Positivism is considered as an appropriate methodology of sociology for empirical understanding about the study of social science. In another way we are seeking the truth about the society. Being a learner of sociology it strikes in my mind are we really truth seekers? What is the truth about caste, religion and culture of India? There is specific historical root about Indian society and culture. Now the question is if history is a form of documented knowledge of past events, as we know history itself has its own subjective biasness and whether the subject matter of history was rational or irrational?

In India, historically caste and religion are integral part of culture interrelated in the structural and functional order of Indian society, very nicely complement with each other and became instrumental in shaping up of the dominant ideological hegemony. If we look at caste now and then there are the missing linkages of evidences between dominant ideological hegemony and the social reality. If we look at caste, and examine the various theories of caste today the divine origin of caste and varna, the birth of different category people from mouth, arm, belly and feet has no causal connections and can't be merely possible as the positivist methodology rejects on the ground of lack of evidence. Whereas the racial theory of caste³ has the valid argument and causal connections could be established among the different category of the people. But undoubtedly graded inequality in the form of caste practices is highly irrational and has a subjective biasness. If we look at from postmodern perspectives, the epistemology of entire Indian society is subjected to be under scrutiny on the grounds the uses of various words and terminologies like caste, tribe, varna, hindu as a religion, untochability, rituals, customs, traditions and values which is unique to India is irrational. Because there is no mention of Hindu as a word in any of the ancient scripture, veda, or epics. Both the words the “Hindu” and “India” are of foreign origin and capitulated in India for shaping up of dominant ideological constructions for political purposes. If we relocate the discourse analysis of India's Caste, Religion and Culture in the frame of Karl Popper's philosophy of science⁴ which talks about general scientific methodology and theory choice, it distinguishes science and non science. We may reach to the conclusion that the basic irrational and unscientific principle in the form of imaginary gods, stories, myth and faith system inherently lying in the foundation of Indian society and culture is subjected to be challenged and refuted. It suggests that India as one of the ancient civilization of the world, the creation of caste as a form of graded inequality nicely affiliated with religion and substantially created a vague culture based on the basis of dominant ideological hegemony.

The C.H. Cooley's occupational theory of caste⁵ also come into suffer with a remark that the caste based hereditary occupation was forcibly imposed upon the people to restrict their social mobility. With the coming up of democracy now occupation is no more remain confine within the caste. As we know India is gradually coming out from the clutches of caste ridden governing principles but yet to liberate people from the caste oppression. The most ridicules principles of caste is that, if someone is born within the caste means he or she is subjected to die within the caste itself? It seems as if the Indians cannot survive without the caste but religion and ideology can be changed like a butterfly wherever it is fitted. Property and resources can be transferred from one caste to another caste. That apart there are many socio-political and economic institutions in India which really hypnotised with false conscious knowledge entangle with our very historical root of ideological formation that has really ruining Indian society and culminating humanity by degenerating individual as a unit of abstract category in the form of caste.

In the domain of knowledge, all over the world India is known for its diversity and caste practices. The knowledge about India remains incomplete if we do not understand one of its basic structural units operates in its social order in the form of caste relations. That's why sociologist Louis Dumont⁶ has pointed out the ideological orientation of caste in his study in *Homo Hierarchicus*. If we deconstruct the caste in India in a frame of dominant ideology by applying Jacques Derrida's⁷ philosophy, the uses of the term caste itself represents a derogatory meaning having racial remarks to degenerate individuals birth in a particular abstract category of people in Indian society and for which the notion of caste is questioned. In the context of caste practices, Indian society and culture may be criticized referring Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critical theory. The caste and religion may be questioned with reference to the work of great physicist Stephen Hawking's works of "A Brief History of Time".⁸

Caste and Ideological Hegemony

Caste as a discrete form of practice in India, even after several reformations and implementations of Indian Constitution envisaged in its preamble and fundamental rights, the stigma associated with the caste with stereotypical ideological construction reflects in the daily life of majority of Indian population. Caste prejudices are found in every nook and corner of India except few exemplary in public spaces, democratic institutions and urban community life where the caste principles are functional. In the socio-cultural domain of the Indian society caste practices are deeply rooted and the notion of caste operates in the mind of the people, it is seen in each and every spheres of social life including the places where caste is accepted as a functional principle. In India the democratic principles have been accepted in certain political context only up to exercising voting rights and mere participation in decision making processes. The spirits of democratic principles have not been extended in the sphere of socio-cultural life and economic activities in Indian society due strong presence of irrational ideological hegemony. As we know that irrationality has no space in democracy unless it is legitimized. Here in the case of India due to internal dynamics where caste practice (irrational) meets with democratic (rational) principles failing to provide a stable social life. Therefore, a healthy platform is not been able to be created for the making of our nation states progressive and taking it in the new level of developments.

The adulterated Manusmriti in its discussion on dharma of the four varna may be considered principles of hierarchical division of labour to maintain the social order by taking people as an abstract category according to the rule of varnashrama. Irrationally and unethical, Manusmriti found merit of performance in particular category of people in assigning a monotonous type of work without giving any scope for other choice of occupation, that substantial developed the closed type of society giving less or either no chance for the further social mobility. Referring ideological hegemony, if we look at the puranas and epics in dialectical relations, hindu social world was divided into two groups i.e. gods and demons. Historically, demons how powerful may be but subjected to be killed or defeated and subjugated by the god and Goddess only.

Caste is undoubtedly racial and ideological because all the people who are falling under the category of SC, ST and OBCs (constituting majority of Dravidian origin) are in the different layer of social strata. Noted sociologist G.S. Ghurye's book on Caste and Race in India and M. N. Srinivasan's works on caste gives an idea about India's caste and race encompass social structure.

Caste means hierarchy and without hierarchy caste has no existence and without caste the hindutwa is meaningless. The continuation of caste practice in India suggests that the people of India are not ready to get rid off with caste and are accepting hierarchy with graded inequality. It is true that in the dialectical context the suppressive category are voice less and experienced a very inhuman social practices which was imposed upon them and still struggling to challenge the dominant ideology.

We are living in the era of globalization and the way how we have adopted globalization absolutely it is irreversible now. It may not be wrong to consider India as a global capital of diversity now. I have absolutely no problem with any ideology but as an academician I must point out that any ideology would be good and

widely accepted if it has the rational features and democratic principles taking care about its structural elements of the society. Therefore, there is the need to adopt such ideology that will be fitted into India's diversity and accordingly ideological protagonist may improvise or modified or altered and adopt it for the larger interest of making up of India as a wealthy and prosperous nation state in this era of uncertainties.

What we study about the social structure of India by applying Positivism need to understand the internal, external and universal settings and its connectivity with rational principles is more important to establish the truth with evidence. Established perceived knowledge about India's Mythology, Puranas, and Epics are inadequate to address the emerging questions the way how it was perceived by the Hindu religious protagonist.

Ceasing the use of word "dalit" or "harijan" as racist view is not going to solve the problem of India in its socio-cultural, political and economic discourses. Rather the use of the word "Caste" or "Jati" may be taken care of with adopting the democratic principles may really help to shape up the Indian society in this new age of science and technology. I have absolutely no problem with any ideology but as a citizen I must point out that any ideology would be good and widely accepted if it has the rational features and democratic principles taking care about its structural elements of the society. In this era of globalization, the entire world is moving in the direction of pluralism, therefore, Indian ideologues may improvise their respective ideologies and make them fitted into their respective philosophy in a scientific knowledge system in the making up of Indian nation state.

¹ Antonio Gramsci's concept of ideological hegemony taken from the works of Valeriano Ramos Jr. in his work "The Concept of Ideology, Hegemony, and Organic Intellectuals in Gramsci's Marxism.

² The idea about positivistic approach taken from "Positive Philosophy" written by August Comte and translated by Harriet Martineau

³ Herbert Risley Racial Theory of Caste explain in "The Study of Ethnology in India, 1891" in support of Thomas Trautmann's study on Indian Society

⁴ Karl Popper Philosophy of Science learnt from "Conjectures and Refutations, 1963" and "The Philosophy of Karl Popper, 1974"

⁵ Occupational theory of Caste drawn from C.H. Cooley's work "Social Organization, 1909

⁶ Hierarchical ideology encrusted in ancient religious text how influence contemporary Caste structure in India drawn from the works of Louis Dumont's "Homo Hierarchicus", 1970

⁷ Jacques Derrida's idea about deconstruction referred to understand the inherent meaning attached with the word caste in Indian social structure

⁸ The scientific knowledge about the universe and the idea about caste is not necessarily created by God drawn from Stephen Hawking's work "A Brief History of Times", 1988