



Theory of Uniqueness of Indian Caste System

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Abstract- Classical studies on pre-modern Indian social structure have suggested apparent differences between the Indian caste system and social stratification as one can discern in other parts of the world. However, one needs to question such dogmatic assertions that such vast differences really existed. An endeavour is made in this research paper to reflect on the nature of caste hierarchy in pre-modern India. The caste system forms the significant basis of pre-modern Indian social structure. Early writers conceived the caste system of pre-modern India as something unique to India. An attempt is made to question this application of theory of uniqueness in the case of India.

Keywords: Caste system, Social stratification, Hierarchy, Caste mobility.

I. INTRODUCTION

An endeavour is made in this research paper to reflect on the nature of caste hierarchy in pre-modern India. The caste system forms the significant basis of pre-modern Indian social structure. Early writers conceived the caste system of pre-modern India as something unique to India. An attempt is made to question this application of theory of uniqueness in the case of India.

We discern from classical Indian sociological discourse that there existed significant differences between the nature of social stratification in pre-modern India and other regions of the world. This is generally referred to as the theory of uniqueness pertaining to Indian caste system. However, the hierarchies found in the Indian caste system suggest that social stratification, as found in pre-modern India, was not totally dissimilar from the social stratification found in other parts of the world. An attempt is made to provide the theoretical and logical explanation regarding the emergence of caste hierarchies in pre-modern India. The study utilises the contributions of earlier theorists in attempting to critically analyze their views based on logical analysis and deduction.

II. A SURVEY OF THEORIES OF CASTE IN INDIAN HISTORY

Beginning from the very ancient period, social scientists have attempted to contemplate on the origin of caste in early India. Colonial social historians were the first to realise the importance of assessment of the social institutions of pre-modern India. They embarked upon a colossal project to cull useful information regarding typical social institutions of India.

However, even before this attempt, we find that many foreign travellers had visited India during the pre-modern period and had also attempted to wonder about social institutions in India. They visited India as individual tourists and as scholars interested in divergent cultural systems found in India. These foreign tourists had left their impressions regarding society, customs and traditions of India in their writings. The Greeks were the first such foreign travellers who visited India perhaps before or after the 'invasion' of Alexander of India (Kosambi, 1956). During the Mauryan period, it was the Greek ambassador, Megasthenes, who left his account of India in his book 'Indica'. In particular, he referred to social stratification in ancient India and about the existence of seven classes including Brahmans and peasants in early India. However, while he does not mention the existence of different Varnas and Jatis, he does indicate his awareness of the existence of different social classes in early India by highlighting the mode of life of Brahmans and peasants. His underlying assumption is that there existed watertight social class compartments in ancient India. Other early Greek authors imitated this assumption in their texts concerning the social institutions of early India later.

After Megasthenes, several foreign travellers visited India and they have left their own account of India. These

foreigners visited India with the motive of understanding Indian culture and religion. In particular, Chinese travellers came with the objective of accumulating knowledge regarding Buddhism. Their writings, in comparison with Megasthenes, suggest that significant changes had occurred in the social structure from the early period to pre-modern period in the social history of India indicating certain dynamism. This dynamism, an inherent quality of Indian social institutions, led to its survival for several centuries in spite of the invasion of foreign political and intellectual forces.

III. BRITISH COLONIAL LITERATURE AND CASTE SYSTEM

With the arrival of the British colonialism in India, an attempt was made to systematically study the nature of social structures in India. These earlier attempts were framed via 'exoticism' and were the foundations of modern 'orientalism'. This attempt to study this exotic world led to the establishment of voluntary organisations such as the Asiatic Society with its branches in Calcutta and Bombay. Those who studied Indian culture and society (Indologists) considerably enriched the knowledge base regarding social institutions of pre-modern India.

However, demands of colonial mastery and social control of India perhaps pressurised these Indologists to suggest that the Indian caste system was entirely different from social stratification systems found in other parts of the world. Consequently, there were attempts made to suggest that India possessed social, economic and political institutions that were mostly static and unchanging. This view led to the propagation of the theories such as Oriental Despotism and Asiatic Mode of Production. Significantly, the latter theory, which was propounded by Karl Marx himself, assumes that there existed different mode of productions for Asia including India. It explicitly indicates that India did not possess the experience of the same stages of social and economic development as that found in Europe. These different stages of production were: slave mode of production, feudal mode of production, and capitalist mode of production. Contrary to this, in India there existed only one mode of production, which has been dubbed as Asiatic mode of Production. An important part of this thesis was to suggest that despotic rulers ruled Indians and that there was not much of economic and social advancement in this region.

This uniqueness thesis was also applied in the case of caste system of pre-modern India. It was thought that the caste system was something unchanging, static, and not dynamic. This conclusion was based on faulty evidence and erroneous logical argument. In fact, it was found that Karl Marx himself depended on the sources supplied by the statistics available with the British parliament. As such, Karl Marx erred in his judgment of pre-modern social realities as they relate to early India. This argument of Karl Marx has since been dumped by his successors and they have successfully resisted any attempts made to suggest that India did not possess dynamic social institutions. Recent contributions in Indian classical sociology, rejecting such earlier simplistic notions, have proved the complex nature of caste hierarchies in of pre-modern India.

In the post-independence period, there have been several additions to concepts relating to caste formation. One important concept is that of 'dominant caste' presented by Dumont (Dumont, 1970). Another significant addition to sociological study of Indian caste system is the concept of 'sanskritization' which argues how the previously, non-sanskritic social groups came under the influence of the "greater culture" (Srinivasan, 1989). Sociological studies undertaken have provided for the theoretical and conceptual basis to the study of social hierarchies in the pre-modern period.

Regarding the emergence of social stratification with reference to the emergence of concepts such as varna and jati, socio-historical studies suggest that the evolution of varna and jati was a slow and steady process. In fact, during the earliest times, there is evidence of the interchange between castes, which meant that society was not as rigid as found during the post-Mauryan period.

IV. FEATURES OF INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM

It has been suggested that the Indian caste system consisted of certain typical features, which distinguished them from other societies. According to Ghurye, the caste system of India consisted of following features: (1)

segmental division of society, (2) hierarchy, (3) restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, (4) civil and religious privileges, (5) lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and (6) restrictions on marriage.

However, during the course of several years of pre-modern history, there were many exceptions to the above indicating that not all these features or rules of the caste system were strictly applied. For instance, there were marriages between people belonging to different Varnas and jatis, and changes in the profession of both individuals and groups of people.

V. DEFINING CASTE HIERARCHIES

We may define caste hierarchies as differentiation of divergent social groups, and this differentiation might not be due to deliberate attempt of one particular caste group. It is within this context that Sharma (1980) refutes the suggestion that Brahmans deliberately propounded the theory of varna and jati to consciously further their social interests. In simple terms, caste hierarchies have different forms of social stratification. Some amount of social stratification is found even in tribal societies. Even in ancient Greece, there existed social differentiation between the masters and slaves. The Greek travellers were in fact surprised by the fact that there did not exist much of antagonism between different social classes of India particularly the masters and slaves. Thus, social hierarchies and stratification is found in all societies of the world, despite being casteless societies.

VI. UNIQUENESS OF INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM

Having said that Indian caste system consisted of caste hierarchies and that at the same time, one can discern similarities between social stratification between India and other parts of the world, we should also consider the factors that gave rise to the impression of uniqueness of Indian caste system:

1. Indian theological works like Manusmriti and Yajnavalkyasmriti provided the 'ideal' form of society, which was seen as dominated by different caste hierarchies. This idealistic notion of society does not necessarily provide realistic representations,
2. Social taboos, customs and traditions are other factors that gave the impression of uniqueness of Indian caste system. However, similar customs and traditions may be found in many non-European societies of Asia and Africa,
3. An exaggerated view of otherworldly matters that made Indian social institutions entirely metaphysical and devoid of material desires. This indicated that Indians gave too much importance to spiritual demands rather than satisfying their material needs,
4. Critique of ancient Indian literature with modern sociological methodology.

Some of the above factors resulted in the presentation of the argument that the Indian caste system was unique. It is true that there are significant differences between the Indian caste system and social stratification systems found in other parts of the world. However, one should also see the similarities between the two kinds of social organisations and that hierarchic social stratification of the population into classes is practically universal.

Uniqueness of Indian social systems is also found in the debate regarding Indian feudalism. Some Indian historians have suggested that there existed similarities between western and Indian social and economic institutions, while others argue that in India there was an absence of feudalism. Nevertheless, feudalistic institutions were found in pre-modern India with certain modifications. Obviously, there were significant differences between Indian feudalism and western feudalism. However, to state that there was complete absence of these kinds of social institutions is a misnomer.

VII. CASTE AND CLASS

In studies of pre-modern Indian society, the term 'caste' has often replaced by the term 'class' as found in other societies of the world. Sometimes both the terms are used to imply similar connotations. However, there are certain differences between the two terms. 'Class' has more economic connotations rather than social meanings, and 'caste' has more social meanings rather than economic connotations. Nevertheless, caste may have economic origins.

However, there may be two different classes in a single caste. Caste is very much deeply rooted in Indian social and historical tradition. Even among modernised or religious converts, one can see the existence of castes. For instance, among the Christians of Goa there are significant caste differences. Even among the Muslims one can discern the prevalence of caste system. Also, at times, different castes belong to different social classes. The elite castes like Brahmans and Kayasthas may be considered as belonging to upper class, while the backwards castes may be considered as belonging to lower classes. Thus, it is possible to use both caste and class to mean the same thing although there are obvious differences between the two.

VIII. CASTE MOBILITY

In the pre-modern period, we also discern the upward and downward mobility of different castes. This is similar to the class system of developed world. In India, a person with economic ability was given a better social status. On certain occasions, it was even possible for a person to change his/her caste. Thus, a non Brahman could become a Brahman and a Brahman could become Kshatriya depending on his/her social and political power.

IX. INDIA AND WORLD SOCIETIES

Within classical Indian sociology, scholars are often tempted to compare the pre-modern Indian caste system and its features with the modern social institutions of other parts of the world. However, when such comparisons are made, we need to be mindful of the need to compare between two societies of the same context. That is, one should compare modern Indian society with modern societies of the world. We cannot commit the mistake of comparing ancient Indian social institutions with modern world society. Even when comparisons are made between the Indian caste system and social stratification of other societies, one cannot deny the fact the prevalence of similarities between the two.

X. CONCLUSION

Many scholars have suggested that the pre-modern Indian caste system was unique when compared with the modern societies of the west. However, one can find logical evidence to suggest the presence of significant similarities between pre-modern caste system of India and the west. Social and economic differentiation was the basic factor leading to such social stratification. It is erroneous to compare the pre-modern Indian caste system with modern social structure. The current Indian caste system is also undergoing tremendous metamorphosis and has not escaped the revolution of modernisation. It is inevitable that in the future there would be subtle and apparent mutations in the Indian caste system.

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