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The Caste System in Contemporary Indian Democracy

Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that Indian society is still significantly plagued, not only by jāti itself, but also omnipresent caste-ridden politics. The aim of this essay is to analyze this social structure in terms of contemporary Indian democracy and explore how it is perceived and evaluated inside of India. I address questions of whether the word democracy is suitable for a country whose society is hierarchically organized, in which the egalitarian tradition remains very limited. This article contributes to the understanding of the coexistence of these seemingly contradicting concepts – Indian caste and democracy. In this article, I elaborate highly influential Dumont's theory of caste along with two different research studies of Indian scholars. My interpretation is also based on two months of field research during my voluntary work in north-western India in 2016/2017.

Keywords: *Caste system, India, Democracy*

1. Introduction

This article offers an analysis in the field of not only political and social science but also cultural anthropology. It focuses on casteism providing illuminating insights into social aspects of contemporary Indian democracy. What makes it even more unique is the field of research which still seems to be distant, unexplored and exotic for Polish scholars. India's

caste system is among the world's oldest forms of surviving social strat-ification. This essay explains also its complexities in the view of consoli-dating a democratic system. As India marks its seventy-second year of independence, it has become an even more important object of study for scholars of comparative democracy.

Also, the Indian paradox of the seemingly archaic caste system is tak-en into consideration. I address the questions of whether the word de-mocracy is suitable for a country whose society is hierarchically organized by the caste system, in which the egalitarian tradition is technically still very limited in scope. Indeed, there is a distinct lack of equalitarian back-ground when it comes to democracy throughout Indian history. How is it possible to establish democracy in a country with long-standing inequal-ity tradition in which the practice of ostracizing particular social groups by segregating them from the mainstream due to social customs, occurs to the present day[1]?

Although untouchability has been made illegal in post-independence India, much prejudice against them still continues (Berger & Heidemann 2013, p. 164). Can we reconcile and balance centuries-old Hindu tradi-tion with modern democracy following the example of western democratic systems? What is the actual impact of caste on Indian democracy? While studying such a multi-faceted issue we should also consider a question whether ancient philosophy is to be treated as a brake on development, a symbol of social backwardness or quite the reverse – it can be a fount of wisdom and universal values prevalent in Indian society. It is essential to analyze this issue thoroughly, including history of *jāti*[2] and the socio-political model of India.

This article provides information on different perceptions of Indian caste and its relevance in light of Indian democracy. There is no general comprehensive or concerted approach when speaking of caste today. This study argues that caste is an institution which has both positive and neg-ative, traditional and modern aspects. This article raises the important question of a reliable evaluation of the caste system today and its survival

1 About 300 million Indian citizens continue to remain victims of grave oppression and injustice because of low social status.
2 The term *jāti* literally means "a birth." Often mistaken with the word "caste" (por. *cas-ta*) it is a group of clans, tribes, communities and sub-communities in India. The caste system, as it actually works in India is called *jāti*. Each *jāti* typically has an association with a traditional job function or tribe. Nowadays there are perhaps more than 3000 *jātis* in Indian society.

as a deeply ingrained social institution in India – *Is the caste system still understandable or necessary from the true Hindu perspective?* Once we ask such a question, it turns out that there are no easy answers here. Being original cultural heritage of India, it does not have to be fully discarded and forgotten.

The dominant description of the caste system that we have today is, to a great extent, a result of a Eurocentric point of view and fully western patterns. They reflect European experiences of, and thinking about, Indian culture and society much more than the real state of society or its domestic understanding in India. I firmly believe the caste system in India still exists in everyday social life even though national law provides otherwise. My intention is to examine how deeply these cultural influences reach and what kind of values they bring. My aim is to focus on modern Indian democracy which remains strongly influenced by casteism. Much of my undergraduate coursework centered on aspects of Indian democracy. My previous bachelor's research concerned contemporary Indian democracy's condition and the process of democratization. However, I intend to take a step further and include the cultural anthropological context (such as influence of Hinduism on Indian perception of democracy).

To strive for an ideal form of government is to seek utopia, but nowadays, it is democracy which is considered the closest to perfection. It is said to be the best form of government, at least an already known one. Being distributed and well-known among western countries, it has been settled in India. "Democracy in India is only a top dressing in an Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic" So said dr Ambedkar, the Dalit leader who partook in creating India's republican constitution over 70 years ago. Can India be with certainty called a consolidating democracy? Is it legitimate in a hierarchic country where the caste system is essential for the culture and religion? How is it possible for India to reconcile the ideas of democracy and caste in theory and in practice? This political paradox is worth keeping a very close eye on to finally answer a crucial question: What is the political future of Indian democracy? My objective is to recognize this non-traditional type of democracy emerging in India today. There is an undeniable phenomenon of the influence of culture and Hinduism on the political system of India. This essay is an attempt to resolve and settle those issues.

2. Dumont's Theory of Caste

In this paragraph I highlight the theory of caste proposed in 1966 by a notable French sociologist Louis Dumont. Next, I elaborate two different research cases which provide a reliable baseline for the following caste studies. A comprehensive insight should be gained to understand how much the approaches to casteism can differ one from another (e.g. Hindu vis-à-vis non-Hindu perspective) and what are actually the most crucial scholarly perceptions of caste today. Nevertheless, within a broader topic of inquiry, I was obliged to narrow the field into a few outlooks on casteism that are of greater specificity and detail. A literature review brings clarity and focus to the research problem and broadens knowledge base in the research area. In addition, it is always worth being familiar with past studies which have been conducted before mine. What they do is to illuminate the vast research area, so that I could contribute new knowledge to what is already known from previous studies. In that case, it thoroughly improved the methodology and also helped me to contextualize my findings.

Louis Dumont's contribution has had a great impact on the study of casteism. Varnas and jatis are typically understood to make up the Indian caste system, which determines the social hierarchy in India. However, changes are taking place in India concerning how people view the caste system and how it shapes their lives. According to Dumont caste divides the whole Indian society into a larger number of hereditary groups distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics:

1) Caste system determines the matters of marriage and contact whether direct or indirect (for instance a Brahmin cannot consume food prepared by Shudra or any lower caste – *joo hā* means already-tasted, ritually unclean, contaminated)[3].

2) Division of labor (mostly hereditary), a profession from which their members can depart only within certain limits

3) Hierarchy of status which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to each other (Bougle 1971, p. 21).

The author of *Homo Hierarchicus* distinguishes between traditional and modern types of society. Of course, India is presented as an ideal example of a traditional society. Against this background the question arises whether "one society can validly make sense of another society? Can any-

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3 Anything (including food) ritually unclean or contaminated (by one's touch or saliva) is called *jūṭhā* (hindi जूठा) – already-tasted, ritually unclean, defiled.

one of one particular society completely delineate himself from within the cultural and conceptual framework that he understands and legitimately study another entirely different society?" (Viner, n.d.). In a nutshell, Dumont's theory is based on a division: traditional society is marked by an holistic attitude, whereas modern society is highly individualistic. The first one attaches particular importance to the *idea of society* whereas the second one accords the highest moral value to *the individual*. In modern society, traditional values give way to concepts of individualism, equality, for instance equality of status. Nowadays, hierarchy is usually perceived in terms of inequality. Consequently, any hierarchy or inequality would be viewed as exploitation and discrimination. According to Dumont, it is highly inappropriate to analyze this phenomenon selectively. To understand caste ideology properly, it needs to be viewed as a whole, including all the aspects and contexts. It is argued that traditional societies like India do not pay attention to equality. The holistic attitude gives new insight into the theory of caste. The major virtue of such an approach is the preservation of the society itself. As a matter of fact, as for the traditional society concept, hierarchy seems to be even a virtue. It is criticized by Dumont to impose a foreign value system of individualism while studying traditional societies. He claims quite ruthlessly that the modern mind is frequently closed-minded as it is caught within its own system of values, making it at any cost universal for everyone (Dumont 1980). Therefore, it is necessary to escape this medium of thought to analyze this complicated phenomenon effectively.

3. Selected Field Study on Caste

The study conducted by the Indian scholar Santokh Singh Anant in 1978 and published in his book *Caste Attitudes of College Students in India* sheds light on Indian college students' ways of thinking in terms of the caste system. It turns out their attitudes are more and more liberal. Basing on the research, the significance of the caste system has undoubtedly fallen. A study carried out among college students of Delhi, Bangalore and Calcutta clearly indicates that caste distinctions among townspeople are slowly coming to an end giving way more to the liberal views (Heninger 2006). As this study has revealed, pressures regarding caste, expectations for marrying within one's caste, and social rules for interacting with Untouchables have been largely disregarded. For instance, 67.5 percent of college students surveyed believe one's occupation, not caste, determines one's status (Anant

1978, p. 194). The study also indicates that 69.7 percent alienate themselves from the philosophy of karma, which says that deeds from a previous life can determine one's caste (Anant 1978, p. 196). It is also worth mentioning that 64.4 percent believe that not only the malpractice but also the whole caste system should be finally abolished. About 69 percent claim there is no problem with marrying someone from a different caste and 86 percent do not mind eating food that was touched by a Dalit (Anant 1978, p. 199). An interesting point from this research is a female trend which shows that women are generally more liberal in their attitudes than men (Anant 1978, p. 196). The results of the study suggest that even thirty-nine years ago, religion and the caste system were playing a less significant role in the lives of Indians, who instead stood for more liberal views. Data from college students in North and South India tend to support the earlier findings of a substantial impact of the educational level on the degree of liberalism among society (Anant 1972). With only a few exceptions, most of the respondents gave liberal responses to most of the questioned issues. A higher percentage of North and South Indian respondents showed quite liberal points of view toward the caste system and interaction with lower castes. Nevertheless, "the differences were reversed in the responses to items dealing with special privileges for the depressed castes" (Heninger 2008).

Next I analyze a field research conducted in 2004 by Smita Mathur and Gowri Parameswaram. One hundred and eighty – one Indian youths between the ages of 18 and 26 and middle – aged adults between the ages of 46 and 62 were interviewed about their consumption patterns, values and attitudes about dating and marriage, and their sense of pride in being Indian. All of the participants lived in New Delhi, the capital of India. Results revealed that though there were inter-cohort differences in consumption patterns, most participants reported using cultural products of both Indian and non-Indian origins. Attitudes towards romance and dating revealed a larger gulf. Cohort 1 subscribed to more traditional goals in marriage as compared to cohort 2. Cohort 2 did not profess to value many of the traditional traits considered important in the mate-selection process in Hindu society. However, both cohorts identified strongly with being Indian and taking pride in being Indian. When participants were asked if they would migrate to the West, the younger cohort indicated a greater willingness to do so (Mathur & Parameswaran 2004, p. 161). Implications of these findings on the discussion regarding the effects of globalization and nationalism are elaborated upon. The study shows how the effects

of globalization have changed the mindsets of youth in upper-class New Delhi, causing a drastic departure from the views of the older generation concerning issues such as marriage and religion.

A study, which was conducted more recently, also suggests that this trend is taking place among upper-middle class youths in the city of New Delhi. This particular study suggests the effects of globalization are causing western influences to manifest themselves among India's elite (Mathur & Parameswaran 2004, p. 161). The research presents views of young people from Delhi aged 18–26 and the middle-aged cohort (between 46–62 years old). "For example, 62 percent of the older group believed parents should choose their children's spouse, whereas 73 percent of the youth believed the children should decide" (Mathur & Parameswaran 2004, p. 167). The study also indicates that 64 percent of the older cohort is profoundly convinced that love is not a vital factor in getting married. Nevertheless, 57 percent of the younger cohort truly believe that love should be an essential condition while getting married. What is more, while 70 percent of the older cohort reckon one should marry within one's religion, only 25 percent of the young respondents agree with it. "An interesting finding in the study indicates that while 83 percent of the older generation are proud to be Indian, 95 percent of the youth feel the same way" (Heninger 2008). It is surprising that 59 percent of the younger cohort admit they would migrate to a more advanced, developed country than India if given the opportunity, whereas only 30 percent of the older generation would do the same (Mathur & Parameswaran 2004, p. 169). The author makes the argument that "increasing nationalism could be one of many responses to the erosion of one's cultural identity" (Mathur & Parameswaran 2004, p. 170). "The youth are not rejecting India, but what they consider outmoded in their culture" (Mathur & Parameswaran 2004, p. 177). From this study a conclusion may be drawn that "many of the elite youths surveyed here would have more in common with youths in advanced, developed countries than with their own parents" (Mathur & Parameswaran 2004, p. 170). That statement concludes the selected past caste studies section.

4. Research Report

In the following section I introduce my research report. The purpose of this study is to examine the caste system perceptions and approaches prevailing among contemporary Indian society. Attitudes to caste system

today, and the scope of modernism and liberalism in Indian points of view are the exact subjects of the investigation. The research seems to be even more relevant because of numerous past studies which are a tremendous baseline and should be brushed up and extended to new findings. In this context my research is an attempt at continuation powered by previous caste studies.

4.1. Methodology

The research was carried out for two months during my voluntary work in India in 2016/2017. Thirty respondents from five Indian states (Jammu and Kashmir, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh) between the ages of 18 and 64, both men and women were tested in their houses, workplace or office in several sessions. I used the snowball sampling technique, where participants recruit other participants for a test or study. Qualitative methods such as observation, particularly participant observation, interviewing and questionnaires have been employed in this research as a tool for collecting data about people and their opinions. Respondents were mixed with respect to caste. Only two of them refused to indicate their caste category. The questionnaires and interviews were conducted both in English and Hindi. The great majority of participants completed a questionnaire. To minimize the reading and writing demands, older respondents were read the questions as an interview and I was authorized to fill out the answer sheet for them. The rest of the participants read and responded on their own. Because of language difficulties some interviews were conducted in Hindi.

4.2. Results

Questions assessed explicit attitudes toward the caste system. The role of the caste system in Indian respondents' everyday lives was a major concern during the research. Interviewees were asked about the provenance of this social institution and how they understand and evaluate the system today. The central question was if they tend to see any advantage to that system and find it valuable to a certain extent. To end with, they were asked about the future of the caste system – if it is able to disappear from Indian soil soon. Even though we operate within the Indian cultural circle with its ancient traditions, I believe western patterns are of utmost importance

when we talk about phenomenon of caste system today. In fact, the research reveals the high scope of its relevance especially among young individuals. This trend among young people is quite visible. The great majority rejected the idea of casteism; for instance 24-year-old A. Karani from Maharashtra describing it this way: "Certainly, the caste system causes a lot of problems in the country and gives rise to some unforgivable actions by those ranked higher up in the system" or 37-year-old Dilip CG from Bangalore, Karnataka who claimed that "it's a discriminatory system promoting fractures in the social fabric of the society, oppression of the underprivileged and a crime against fundamental right to equality and dignity of human beings". Do you think that caste/varna system is still present in India? None of my respondents doubts that the caste system is still very present in India. Apart from that, more than 90% of them are convinced that it is a big difficulty to eradicate it from rural areas. My thirty-four-year old male interviewee, farmer and businessman P. Hanumant from a small village expressed it in the following way: "Yes, the caste system is present all over the India, it's like blood – in each and every vein and tissue". On the other hand, a considerable majority of participants admitted that the caste system could have made sense in the past and at that time was absolutely justified. 26-year-old P. Kabra from Indore, Madhya Pradesh acknowledged that in fact it was fruitful in the past and at that time it was required and according to 38-year-old S. S. Sharma there were also advantages of the caste system in India – "it maintained peaceful coexistence of people and nurturing growth in occupation. With times, where everyone has the right to openly compete, it has become meaningless". Therefore, a conclusion may be drawn that the cohort with higher education understands the caste system far better and is able to point to its assets too. What is more, the research indicates that regardless of the level of education, almost all participants do not have any idea where the caste system derived from. While interviewing, I also asked about the ancient holy scripture Manusmriti ("The Remembered Tradition of Manu") which is believed to have laid the foundations for the caste system. Among respondents this question was considered to be archaic and so was the caste system. The most exciting exception was the cohort of older people. 64-year-old housewife T. Jadhav (belonging to Brahmin Hindu Maratha caste) tried to convince me that there is no other world than caste- or hierarchy-oriented. In her opinion people belonging to particular *jatis* have different social roles and mentality. She also emphasized the role of the caste as a part of Indian identity. Finally, she admitted that we all are equal but at the same time she would not let her daughter have a Dalit husband.

It should be noted that conclusions drawn from this research study cannot be representative for the whole society of India. Although the research study is underpowered by a limited sample, it succeeded in reflecting the diversity of the selected rural population which was researched. In fact, the subjects belonged to different major caste groups and represented various socio-economic levels. Backward classes individuals (former Untouchables) were also included in this research. Despite being statistically insufficient to represent the whole, this research study still offers a better insight into small-scale society groups. Both participant observation and in-depth interviews allowed me to gain a rich understanding of social practices and attitudes towards the caste system among rural communities.

5. Caste and Democracy

Also worthy of note is the fascinating interface between caste and contemporary Indian democracy. To start with, I will quote a distinguished social anthropologist and ethnographer Gerard Toffin who said "the encounter of democracy with caste is a historical process accommodating two sets of opposed values" (Toffin 2014). It can be easily seen that caste and democracy are based on thoroughly different values. Throughout the years, Indian society was divided into unequal, hierarchic groups called castes based on purity and impurity rules. Certainly, *homo hierarchicus* seems to be a determined antithesis of *homo aequalis*. There is a lot of inconsistency when it comes to bringing together both institutions. The caste system is often depicted as an illness haunting each Hindu country, a clear cause of the weakening of the democratization process. Despite a lack of infrastructure and flagrant disparities between geographical regions and sectors of the economy, India, however, has succeeded in improving the standard of living of a large part of its citizens and in competing economically with Western capitalist countries. India has moved into the path to become a world economic superpower. The largest caste society in the world has successfully transformed itself, though all the while following its own models and upholding its cultural traditions. India has shown that high-growth-rate development can be compatible with caste. In fact, Indian democracy has absorbed the caste system which can also give rise to serious threats. Thanks to affirmative action policies that have been implemented on the subcontinent since the end of the nineteenth century, Dalits and "low" castes have benefited from numerous quotas and

are much more integrated today in the mainstream social structure. Reservations have conferred social privileges on Dalits and *Other Backward Castes* (OBCs) who have thereby reached high positions in the political sphere, including within the federal state structure. Narendra Modi, the new Indian prime minister, himself comes from an OBC caste (Gorringe & Jeffery & Waghmore 2015).

"In actual fact, positive discrimination has induced a complete change of the political elite, especially in the northern Hindu belt. Low- and middle-caste associations have become extremely powerful and play an important role at regional state levels, especially in the North. On the one hand, caste appears to be a positive instrument for democratising India" (Toffin, 2014).

It should be recalled that even if caste has changed over time, it has its roots in ancient India. Democracy as a political concept is also quite new among South Asian countries. "Democracy has been vernacularised and integrated in the caste language" (Toffin, 2014). However, we should note with concern that Indian politicians are often trying to hijack the caste and transform it into a corporate affirmative group. In a nutshell, caste seems to be in the process of being adapted to the new political game.

6. Conclusion

Lastly, there is a big political campaign against so called "jāti system" in India. The most active are young men and those related to left-wing politics (Samājvādī / Socialist Party). But it is even present in orthodox Hindu people. Also intellectuals and human rights activists fight to protect those poor people who are so cruelly ill-treated by some more affluent groups and deprived of the opportunity to rise. *Jātivād* (Eng. *caste system*) is blamed for that. It is a very negative notion nowadays and it would be unlikely to find somebody, who supports *jātivād.* Nowadays, it is a synonym of uncontrolled by law social discrimination, exclusion and nepotism. It is not something that can organize society in a positive way. Everybody knows that nepotism is all pervading, but how can anybody fight with it? It is because caring about one's family is in India the most important value and main motivation for work.

But in the turmoil of this politics *brāhmaṇas* have been made the sacrifice goats. Behind that it is an attack on Indian traditional intellectual and spiritual heritage, because *brāhmaṇas* are traditionally the deposi-

tories of learning. Hundreds of thousands of Sanskrit valuable texts are not taught at public schools only because they belonged to the class of *brāhmaṇas* and are proclaimed as only religious (in fact they are mainly spiritual and many are masterpieces of arts and literature).

Original *varṇa-vyavasthā* (Eng. *varna system*) in practice is not absent in Indian political consciousness. Just recently there was a public demonstration against *jātis-vāda* and burning up *Manusmṛti* by the Delhi University's students. It only reflects that it is young people who are against the so-called caste system.

I will paraphrase some parts of *Manusmṛti* here:

When a student who just completed his education goes along the road, even a king should get aside to let him go first.

One should step aside when a student, king, woman or brāhmaṇa is going along the way.

Very old śūdra should be respected even by brāhmaṇas. (Byrski, 1985)

This indicates how important were education, woman and elders according to *Manusmṛti*. So it can be also considered as a codex of good behavior. *Manusmṛti* is taken selectively in a negative way, it can be taken selectively in a positive way if one wishes. Like it is said in India: *ardhavidyā bhayankyarī* – "partial knowledge leads to a disaster". Looking down to others on the ground that they belong to a lower cast, it does not depend on age or place. It depends on his human feelings and sensitivity, as no rational system supports that. People are just politically manipulated and young people are most vulnerable to this manipulation.

At the beginning of this article a vital research question was asked if nowadays the caste system is to be treated only as a brake on development or if it should be considered as a valuable heritage of Indian culture and philosophy, also crucial for today's democratic system. A substantial amount of textual data and research findings suggest that although there are no easy answers to this problem, the caste system may be interpreted in a positive way. Education should be (and in fact nowadays is) for everyone without discrimination. Positive understanding of *jāti* and de-politicizing it can solve the debate. We should admit that people in India better understand their social problems than outsiders and can find better solutions by themselves, due to their rich cultural and intellectual heritage. But unfortunately they are already deprived to much extent of their intellectual heritage and follow Western trends and their own politics.

At the end of my research questionnaire I have formulated a question if the caste system will soon fully disappear from Indian soil. It looks like it will keep changing and will keep taking new forms. It has already changed. It often takes the form of a political instrument. Politics has transformed castes into competitive, corporate, substantialized bodies to the detriment of former links in the past. Likewise, reservation legitimizes caste and it poses a threat to Indian democracy. "Politics in these affairs is grounded in extremely parochial concerns. In order to cumulate advantages, groups can even compete for backwardness, which is obviously not the essence of democracy" (Toffin, 2014).

But this campaign against *brāhmaṇas* destroys the authority also of those who are the custodians of Indian rich, beautiful, diverse culture and of high universal moral values. Abrupt disappearance of this system may well have seriously detrimental consequences for Indian society.

In India it is believed that learning always has been open to all three varṇas – *kṣatriyas* and *vaiśyas* as well, as they all are *dvijas* (twice-born). So the rich heritage was never the domain of only *brāhmaṇas*, who are the main target of the *anti-jāti* movement. Of course, it is necessary to punish by law those who misuse their position and harm others, but at the same time any general campaign against *brāhmaṇas* is another kind of social discrimination. Until it stops totally, this *jāti* problem will not end. But it will not stop, because it is only a political play. When education and spirituality are given the highest focus – the *jāti* will still exist as an identification division, but it would no longer be a problem in the form of discrimination. As the motto of the Indian Constitution and the best social system is "unity in diversity".

In this article I argue that, apart from its major contribution to understanding the caste system and its interpretations, the phenomenon of coexistence of the caste system and democracy is an interesting case for exploring possible relations between them, a topic that is particularly prevalent in contemporary political anthropology and sociology.

To end with, I quote dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, the Dalit leader who wrote India's republican constitution over 60 years ago who said once: "Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line on barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion. It is a state of the mind" (Ambedkar 2008, p. 46).

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