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Prof. K.N. Shelke

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A detailed still-life composition featuring a white quill pen resting on a scroll of aged parchment. The scroll is secured with a red wax seal and a red ribbon. In the background, a lit candle in a brass holder casts a warm glow. In the foreground, a glass inkwell with a quill inside sits on a wooden surface, alongside a red wax seal and a wooden galleypiece.

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Caste System: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

There already exists a mass of literature on the Hindu caste system and some work has also been done on the historical perspective. Caste system of hierarchical, social and cultural relation among groups defined by birth, caste was a major pre occupation of the dharma texts from the early centuries of the present era onward. The main objectives of this paper are to examine Historical changes in Caste system like prevalence of caste system in different society in different period of time in India. It also includes the factors which have been playing a significant and vital role for its continuity and change in different contemporary societies in India.

Key Words: Caste System, Hindu, Odisha, Varna, Dharma

Introduction

At all times and every society there are certain disadvantaged groups. The history of the caste system shows that belief in putative biological differences (Gupta 131). Prof. J. H. Hutton in his book, *Caste in India* states that caste a term used by sociologists and Anthropologists working in and concerned with India borrowed it from the term, 'caste' of Portuguese origin signifying breed, race or kind (Hutton 1-2). Caste system of hierarchical, social and cultural relation among groups defined by birth, caste was a major pre occupation of the dharma texts from the early centuries of the present era onward. The *Dharmashastras* took caste as a social totality and defined relations among persons according to their *Varna*, a Sanskrit term literally meaning colour. The Hindu society on the eve of the Turkish invasion was based on caste system, in fact the Hindu society was divided were *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Sudras*. Though initially the caste system was evolved for the harmonious working

of the society as a single social unit but in course of time caste became more ramified and rigid. It was given a religious tinge, H. G. Rawlinson has rightly said "caste for the Hindu is part of Divine order of universe; a man's cast is determined by his conduct in previous existence (Srinivas 46-48).

Position of Caste in Different Ages

The caste system or *Varna-Vayavastha*, which has dominated Indian society for over 3000 years, was developed by *Brahmins* to maintain their superiority over less educated, less skilled and lower castes (Ghurya 1-5). Caste system was formalized into four distinct social groups called castes or *Varnas*, which was organized in hierarchical manner. At the top of the social hierarchy were the *Brahmins*, who were considered arbiters in the matters of teaching, learning and religion. Next the hierarchy have been the *Kshatriyas* who were warriors and administrators. The third and fourth hierarchy have been the *Vaisyas* who constituted the commercial class and the

Sudras who have been the peasants and farmers, respectively. The four castes are socially and religiously important because they are said to have divine origin. The *Dharam Shastras* and the Epics mention the Nishada, Chandala, Pulkasas as degraded ones. The outcaste people were mainly bounded labourers and could do only menial jobs. They were denied access to temples, wells and schools. Manu's work is full of inhuman codification of caste rules. He supported the supremacy of *Brahmins* and other dominating communities and fully condemned the Non-Arya *sudras* and *chandalas* (Singh 13-15). The position of *Chandalas* was very critical at that time. *Chandalas* could not live in the villages; they could perform the menial and unskilled labour particularly the ritually unclean works. So they were out of the Hindu caste system cut off from the rest of the society. Chinese pilgrim Fahien, a contemporary of Chandra Gupta-II, visited and lived in India between 405 A.D. and 411 A.D. He stated that *Chandalas* lived apart from others, in separate quarter. The other Chinese traveller Yuan Chau, who visited India in 629 A.D., reiterated that "these people were forced to live outside the city." In Buddha and Mahavira, period the condition of the dalits was not worse. Both Buddha and Mahavira admitted untouchables in their administration and social order, during their life time they condemned caste system. By the time of medieval period, the practice of untouchability had set in. In the beginning of the eleventh century Al-Brunie visited India and left some valuable accounts of the life of the people during that period. He said that *sudras* followed by a section of people, *antyaja* or *achhut* were engaged in eight varieties of crafts and trades.

Those were sailor, fisherman, juggler, basket maker, weaver, shoemakers and hunter of birds and wild animals. During thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Hindu religion was promoted at high level. Medieval period, the Arab invasions started, one after another and plundered the country followed by massacres and destruction of religious sites. During Sultanate period and Mughal regime, the *sudras* and untouchables suffered very badly. With the emergence of Kabir, Ravidas, Dadu, Nanak etc., it almost became a movement of social awakening and unity among lower castes. Bhakti movement condemned the social odds and oppressive features of Hindu society and also attacked Muslim orthodoxy. It opposed caste system and practice of untouchability. At that time society was consisted of poor and rich, the master and the slave. The Bhakti movement rejected the authority of *Vedas*, *Brahmin* priesthood and ritual practices but failed to recover the lost identify. It was continued in various forms till the 18th century. During the 19th century during British rule the condition of caste was not as worse as it was in ancient time and during Bhakti period (Dev 11-27). The emergence of British power made a lot of difference for downtrodden people. They brought a sense of liberty for the marginalized communities. The British strongly opposed the rituals as *sati pratha* and untouchability.

Historical Position

During The Vedic times, when the caste system was not defined on the basis of birth rather on the basis of the occupation pursued by an individual. In *Vedas* especially the first reference only once appears in the *Rigved*, 10th *Mandal*, *Hymn*

No.90, Verse Slok No.12 where the four *Varnas* are mentioned and a divine status is given to the creation of Varna system by proclaiming that the *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya* and *Shudra* were respectively produced from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of the Almighty God (Kane 33). The Purans contains all mythological stories about various God and Goddesses. Actually it is the *Smriti* period when all discrimination and distortion of social order seems to have taken their roots. Almost all *Smritis* contain adverse references against *Shudras* and other low *Varnas, Avarnas, Antyajas, Chandals* etc. The epic period of *Ramayan* also contains references about discriminatory practices followed by higher *Varnas* against the *Shudras* and other low born ones. Though there are umpteen numbers of examples about Anulom marriages but the social harmony, equality and social justice seem to be absent even during *Ramayan* period when Lord Ram ruled the land. His father Dasharath had four queens as against popularly known three i.e. Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. The fourth queen named Parivriti was from Shudra Varna. Even Lord Rama's preceptor Vashishta's wife Arundhati, original name Akshamala, was originally from a Scheduled Tribe and was renamed as Arundhati after marriage with Vashishta. Even Shravan, when he was shot by Dasharath under mistaken identity, thinking him to be deer, when he was filling water in his pot from a lake, revealed to the sorrowful Dasharath while taking his last breath that, "O best among men, please do not worry that a Brahmahatya (Killing of Brahmin) has taken place by you as I am *Shudra*, produced by *Vaishya* father and *Shudra* mother and not a *Brahmin*. Examples of Pratilom marriages are very rare and most

negligible. Even though such inter-varna marriages took place, Varna based injustice seems to be order of the day and used to take place even on slightest pretext. The glaring example is the merciless killing of Shambook by Lord Rama on most flimsy ground or no ground at all. The *Mahabharata* period also seems to have the same tendency as *Ramayan* as many Varna based discriminatory references are available in epic *Mahabharat* and other literature of the day. The *Smristi* period tightened the narrow mindedness about *Varnas* and Manu *Smriti* is main among other *Smritis* in advocating discriminatory practices against the *Shudras* and other so called low born *Varnas*. In *Bhagwad Gita* Lord Krishna advocated principles of equality not only among all men but also among all living entities. He said that there is no difference between a Brahmin and a cow, elephant, dog and dog eater i.e. Chandal. (Gita, Chapter-5, verse-18) It seems that evil of discriminatory Varna System might have had raised its most ugly face in the period preceding and during *Mahabharat* times which seems to have compelled Lord Krishna to denounce the in equal treatment meted out to certain *Varnas*. In ancient time Lord Buddha was first to attack *Varnashram Dharma*, Caste System and discrimination arising out of both the systems. He preached equality of all human beings irrespective of their status in *Varna* or Caste hierarchy. He attacked the ritual purity which went a long way annihilating the division of human beings into watertight compartments of castes. However, the revival of the *Vedic* movement during and after Gupta period in ancient India suppressed the movement led by Lord Buddha and further aggravated the caste multiplication in India. In

medieval period in India Saints and their Bhakti Cult preached equality of human beings before God (Singh 119-202). They advocated that even the low caste person can attain the bliss of God and salvation through faith in God. The Saints spread the knowledge to common masses by preaching in common, local languages rather than in Sanskrit (Bayly 66). This was very important because, hitherto all religious precepts and knowledge was in Sanskrit which was not common man's language. It was known to *Brahmins* and few people belonging to the *Dwijias' varna*, while a vast majority of the masses in general and *Shudras* and *Ati Shudras* or *Panchamas* in particular were prohibited from even learning Sanskrit and religious verses. However the Saints did not preach strongly the necessity of social equality. They bothered only about the salvation after death and did not bother much about the sufferings in this life. As a result they laid emphasis on the equality of souls, salvation and heaven. In Modern period Mahatma Phule, the first Indian social reformer from Maharashtra in 19th century, who had not only attacked the caste system and untouchability but led a movement in an organised way through his "Satya Shodhak Samaj". Satya Shodhak Samaj was actively engaged in anti untouchability movement (Singh 205-206). This movement was the first of its kind to organise the masses and gain

confidence for abolishing caste system and untouchability. The movement was a considerable force in Maharashtra till early part of the 20th century. In modern times Caste is used for *Jati* and also *Varna*. The term, caste was used by the British who ruled India until 1947 (Kripalani 383). Indian communities used two terms to describe Indian communities, Caste and tribes. The term caste was used for *jats* and also for *Varna*. Tribes were those communities who lived deep in jungles, forests and mountains far away from the main population and also communities who were hard to be defined as castes (Ketkar 95).

Discussion

Caste made the *trivarnas* or the 'dwijs, conscious of their religions pre-eminence, pride of ancestry, of family, and personal position. Hence the position and condition of caste was very critical in ancient and in medieval periods. But when the western ruler held the power in India, the position of caste was improved in Modern time. Their condition still improving due to the legislative and executive has also played and vital role in this side. In this globalization era, the interaction between the men has increased new things, new ideas, new law, and new technology has changed the mind of upper Caste and high level society's people.

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