



CASTE AS DISCOURSE

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Introduction

Caste is ubiquitous whether we discuss it or not. It is engraved in the psyche and culture of our society. Every person is affiliated to his/ her caste in one way or the other. Caste has become the most prominent symbol of our identity. For most of the people, it is the source of respect, social position, and belongingness. The first or second question from a stranger is always about caste. This exhibits the caste consciousness in our society. Caste plays a very significant role in our day to day life. Almost, each and every discourse of life is permeated with the odour of caste. So, in this scenario, it becomes necessary to understand and explore the present notion of caste seriously. Now, the question arises what this present notion of caste is.

Caste is a phenomenon. It has its own dynamics. That's why it survives against so many challenges. Caste as a construct is believed to be the creation of the upper castes only. But, this is only one-sided picture. Caste works as an oppressive marker for all caste people. Each caste survives by its own system of learning, responsibilities, dos' and donts', accountability, and transparency. It's the caste as a category that is responsible for discrimination. But, here, the researcher is trying to unravel the process through which each caste was provided with a particular notion. What does it mean by the particular caste notions? The present notion of caste is that there is a specific image about each caste in everybody's mind or we can say that each caste is characterized by some specific characteristics. All the members of a particular caste are judged through the lens of these distinctive characteristics, that's another matter whether they possess these features or not. For example, why Ahir is a 'kagla khani jaat' or Dhanak 'na maa ka na bahan ka'? Why Jats are considered to be brave hearted people while others like Baniyas, or people from other backward classes to be 'meek and coward'? Why people from scheduled castes are thought to be dirty and typically women as morally loose or characterless? Why Brahmins are thought to be greedy, gluttonous, and pious? Why Punjabis (Refugees) are taken as mean and unfaithful persons? One can witness these assumptions or typical patterns in day to day life which have also been used in literary works by different writers. This implies that each caste or the persons belonging to these castes have a typical identity. This new identity shapes their personal and social lives. That's why, people remain so much eager to know each other's caste. They behave or at least think in prejudiced manner. And this also defines their social roles. In a way, we can assume that this notion of caste has associated with the psyche of people. At this point, one can ask whether this notion of caste is real or imaginary. Is it really possible for the members of a particular caste to have the same set of beliefs and ideas? Do they practice the same traditions, customs, and rituals? Do they really possess the same qualities or attributes assigned to them? Are these attributes natural or concocted?

If we take a look in ancient times, we find that society was divided into four major groups, each group incorporating various sub-groups based on work or occupation. But, with the advent of Brahmins, caste was transformed as the basis of Hindu religion as quoted in Dirks, "Caste had existed as a purely civil institution before the coming of the Brahmins, who had made of it something sacred and immutable" (27). They created the concepts of purity and impurity, restricted the knowledge of scriptures to themselves, and created numerous myths to support their cause. For persuading people or to maintain this hegemony, different traditions, customs, and rituals were established in the society. These so called traditions and customs were full of intricate designs that served the interest of upper castes or Brahmins especially.

Caste, in its present form, is the result of numerous manipulations done by outside forces like Mughals and British who came to India for various purposes. Though Mughal kings were never interested in the caste system of Hindus but they favoured different assumptions about it that were in the interest of their rule. They also



conceded what Brahmins told them. In the same vein, if we talk about the British period, caste was manipulated a lot. The present form or nature of the caste system is the contribution of the British as Prof. Dirks argues, “Caste (again, as we know it today) is a modern phenomenon, that it is, specifically, the product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule” (5). Though, after the Great Rebellion of 1857, British Crown announced the policy of non-interference in the culture, tradition, and religion of the natives. But, this opposition to British rule also compelled rulers to understand the Indian social structure far better as Gauri Viswanathan explains, “The acquisition of knowledge about those whom it governs is clearly perceived to be of vital importance to the state for purposes of domination and control” (29). In this effort, caste was recognized as the vital component of Indian society. For its thorough knowledge, they started the decennial census of the natives in 1872. In the light of this census, British government documented the caste for the first time in the history of Indian sub-continent. It also worked as a tool in categorizing the castes. Caste was ingrained deeply in a systematic way in the official documents of the colonial government. Prof. Dirks rightly clarifies:

It was the decennial census that played the most important institutional role not only in providing the “facts” but also in installing caste as the fundamental unit of India’s social structure (49).

The British gave ethnic colour to castes by cataloguing each caste’s characteristics. In a way, they tried to reinvent the caste for the convenience of their administrative purposes.

As a result of this experiment, the notion of caste changed drastically. Each caste was provided with a typical identity with the help of some characteristics. By taking account of this new identity, the rulers could do more policing. All this exercise of characterization was done with the help of so called educated people, i.e. Brahmins. They provided the colonial government numerous stories about different castes which were full of intricate designs and typical patterns. Brahmins were always in fine tuning with the government officials. They worked as the assistants to many surveyors and guided them in the construction of typical notion about a particular caste as quoted in Dirks, “Priests, as they rose into consequence, began to combine and act in concert: that they invented the genealogy of castes, and other fables, to support the existing institutions” (37). Brahminical notion of caste was always dominant in the creation of these narratives:

Despite the demise of Orientalism, high Sanskritic texts and Brahmanic testimonies were taken, with the help of a new generation of Orientalist administrators, as the basis on which to decide what would count as Hindu religion and what could be consigned to a world of custom (150).

Hinduism with all its traditions, customs, and rituals was also reorganized in the course of caste manipulation. Hinduism and casteism, both were reciprocal in their re-emergence. This process of characterization of caste was further enhanced at the time of first official census by the British in 1901. With the inclusion of caste in this census, many caste sabhas or associations sprang up to claim better position in the official records. They tried to support their arguments for upper lineage through various myths, stories, and other related documents. Resultantly, this census made the people more aware about their caste consciousness as delineated by Dirks:

And Risley had dramatic influence on the rise of caste organizations and the exploding production of literature about the caste system and its principles or order by Indians from all over the subcontinent (224).

Colonial regime dubbed some castes as Marshal Races, while others were designated as burglar, thief, and so on. L.S. Viswanath in his research paper “Female Infanticide: The Colonial Experience” explained that in the beginning of nineteenth century, Rajput, Jat, and Ahir castes were recorded as female infanticidal castes. Colonial notion of caste was to associate specific attributes with every caste as explained by Dirks:

The construction of entire castes by the British in colonial India as “criminal castes” was part of a larger discourse in which caste determined the occupational and social character of all its constituent members, though criminal castes were seen simultaneously as typical and deviant. The colonial notion of caste was that each group had an essential quality that was expressed in



its occupational profile and its position in the social hierarchy, as well as in a whole set of moral and cultural characteristics that adhered to each group qua group (181).

In this way, efforts were done by the British rule to transform and essentialize the notion of caste. Brahmins helped the government by situating it in the Hindu religion. To explicate it more, for a Hindu person, caste position is fixed even before his/ her birth. S/he belongs to a particular caste that is imposed upon her/ him. It is not a matter of choice for a person in the Hindu society. S/he has to live with this 'casteist disposition' not only for whole of his life but also after her/ his death. No one in a Hindu family can take the liberty of saying that I don't believe in caste or I have no caste, but caste has made you what you are. This position is not available for a Hindu. Caste is always with us whether we accept it or not. We have no choice but to accept the grim reality of caste. It's all-embracing, pervasive, assertive, and constitutes the major part of our identity today. What remains is the struggle against this present notion of caste.

All this discussion also suggests that caste is an imaginary construct of the mind of human beings. There is nothing natural in it. These imaginary ideas about castes were propagated and strengthened in the masses through numerous caste stories with typical patterns or structures. Most of these narratives were derogatory. The relevant point is why these caste narratives are negative. Why are these stories being spread and with what purpose? Who is doing this politics? When you marry someone from other caste, people look at you, take pleasure in your situation, and also criticize it. Isn't it so? In this way, typical Hindu psyche has been created. Numerous caste stories are available in anecdotal form in the British documents. Do they tell something about caste? So, it is also of vital importance to understand the psychology of caste for its thorough investigation.

Now, it is evident that our understanding of ourselves is based on their (outsiders') understanding of ourselves. Rulers' main concern was to control its subjects through social control. For this purpose, they manipulated the notion of caste to divide the society. This same notion of caste was imbibed by the posterity. Writers were also not immune from this manipulated idea of caste. They also absorbed the same idea. We can take any writer like Prem Chand, Ananthamurthy, Mulk Raj Anand, Omprakash Valmiki, Mahasweta Devi, Balbir Madhopuri, Kashinath Singh, etc. For example, in *Samskara* by Ananthamurthy, Brahmins have been presented as greedy, gluttonous, and hypocrites whose women are dry, withered, and asexual – "Dasacharya lived entirely on the meals that Brahmins get at death-rites and anniversaries. He would walk ten miles for such a meal any day (9)." Brahmins are also considered to be pious and superior souls from whom any low caste woman is ready to be pregnant as shown by Chandri, "Her mother used to say: prostitutes should get pregnant by such holy men. Such a man was the Acharya, he had such looks, virtues; he glowed. But one had to be lucky to be blessed by such people (40)." In his another novel *Bharathipura*, Ananthamurthy depicts the same imaginary notion about lower caste people as Shetty declares,

All in all, these people have no morals, Saar', he said, 'you know the saying, the distant hill is smooth. It's true, Saar. You must get close enough to them to know them. These illiterate sons of widows have no scruples at all, whatsoever. They keep their own daughters, their daughters-in-law. No sense of dharmic responsibility that she belongs to another man. (57)

Premchand also gives us the true picture of the caste-ridden society. He deals with different castes and exhibits the particular treatment that each caste receives in society. In his novels like *Godan* and *Karmabhumi*, he shows the interplay between different castes and how they affect each other in this process. In the same way, short stories like "Thakur Ka Kuan", "Ghaswali", "Veshya", "Doodh Ka Daam", "Shudra", "Kafan", etc., various imaginary strands of caste can be seen that prove the researcher's point of view. Mulk Raj Anand describes the same hollow and unfounded notion of caste in his novels. For example, in *Untouchable*, lower caste people have been depicted as dirty and impious, and Brahmins as licentious. Bakha recounts the incidents of a day in this manner,



They would ill-treat us even if we shouted. They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt. That pundit in the temple tried to molest Sohini and then came shouting: 'Polluted, polluted.' The woman of the big house in the silversmith's gully threw the bread at me from the fourth story. I won't go down to the town again. I have done with this job. (70)

One can also witness in Balbir Madhopuri's work *Changiya Rukh Against the Night* the same imaginary constructions about caste or various social groups. For example, a Jat vents his anger on the writer's family in this way:

You will come to your senses – all of you who talk so aggressively now, when you are thrashed with boots! A widow's son (this was directed at my aunt) and a merchant's horse, never follow a straight path!' 'Thoo-thoo' vented his spleen yet again. After a short pause, and in a lower tone, he said, 'Saale! Sparrow, mice, and Chamars, all increase at a very fast rate!' (31)

There is no doubt that it was the reality of the society of that time, but not caste itself. Dealings of caste also helped in catapulting the status of caste itself. As discussed earlier, caste had no definite shape or form before the arrival of Mughals and British people. Later on, slowly and gradually, caste was transformed into a prominent entity which was impossible to avoid for any ruler to rule smoothly. Though writers had sincere concerns for the society but they also propagated the particular notions about different castes unconsciously. All have made the same representation of caste as envisaged by the colonial regime. They have depicted the same caste structures or patterns in their writings. These structures contribute in consolidating the imaginary notions about castes. Actually, we have taken the distorted glass through which we look at the things. Though, it is ironical but not unconvincing. The researcher also intends to study these underlying structures of caste in various caste narratives.

Caste is dealt with in public life as if it is a static entity. People take it for granted. They behave with each other in the light of set beliefs and ideas about each caste. For them, each caste has its own peculiarities and specifications, and these characteristics are shared by all the members of a particular caste. Most of us believe these traits to be natural. So, all this understanding of caste plays a very significant role in the dynamics of our society and nation as a whole.

The proposed research work is an effort to understand the exact nature of caste itself. As we have discussed, the present notion of caste is concocted, manipulated, and misrepresented. The question is why and how caste was manoeuvred by outside forces. It would of much interest to highlight the process through which each caste was provided with particular notions and how this helped them to rule over the people. What's been the role of writers in propagating this distorted understanding? Overall, the researcher wants to prove that the present understanding of caste is the outcome of various factors. It's an imaginary construction of human mind. The researcher also wants to understand the ancient notion of caste that was present before Mughals and British raj. All this would help people to understand the patterns or structures underlying various caste stories or narratives. I hope this study would add one more dimension in the realm of caste and would give new insights to the scholars.

There is no doubt that caste has been discussed from religious, social, political, economic and Dalit point of views. Many scholars have tried to understand the concept of caste or caste system in various contexts. Only a few have written some articles about numerous manipulations done during the British time or earlier. To the best of my knowledge, no full-fledged work has been carried out to understand the present notion of caste in the context of British colonialism, how they manipulated and constructed the current notion of caste, how different caste groups have flourished with a specific identity, what has been the role of human mind in creating various caste narratives, what type of these caste narratives are, why these caste stories were circulated in the public domain, how caste was presented in literary works by the writers of different languages, and so on.

The researcher thinks that it will be a novel aspect in the study of caste and caste narratives.



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