

Caste Classification in India: A Re-look at the Problems

Dr. Kavitha P N

Dept. of Political Science

Karnatak University, Dharwad, Karnataka, India.

Abstract: Researchers in the domain of social science do not dispute the existence of castes in Indian society; they say that caste system is a salient feature of this society and the division of castes into sub-castes is one of the elements of this system. This understanding of Indian society has provided a framework for many scholars to classify the different 'human groups' into castes and sub-castes. As a result we now have numerous research studies on classification of castes with different explanations and interpretations. Such explanations have themselves become a problem seeking solution rather than offering a solution to the already existing complex problem of understanding of caste classification. This peculiar situation establishes the need for reassessing the explanation and the associated confusions in order to clarify the misconceptions about caste based classification of Indian society.

Keywords: Caste, Sub-castes, Caste System, Endogamy, Exogamy, Jati, Upa-pangada, Upa-jati, Kula, Pangada etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Numerous research studies have been conducted in the past about the nature and characteristics of Indian society, as a result of which varied explanation and interpretations are drawn. As the scholars from the domain of social sciences have rightly noticed, Indian society has diverse groups and its salient feature is caste system. In order to explicate the nature of caste system, scholars have taken recourse to classificatory model. They have attempted to classify the Indian social structure using various terms such as caste, sub-caste, sub-sub-caste, tribe, exterior caste, etc. This kind of classification, as one would believe, is intended to offer a tool to understand the society better. However, it has complicated the matter, instead of explicating the nature of caste system.

Although on a superficial level, any further division of caste, into sub and sub-sub-castes etc., seems to be a simple exercise of splitting, it is not as simple as it seemed. It in fact, brings out the problem of defining 'caste' and the incoherent relationship that exists between its sub-categories (i.e. caste and sub-castes) under any existing definition.

Scholars engaged in studying the nature of caste system for many decades, have not been successful in reaching a consensus with regard to nature of caste, sub-caste and the inter-relationship between the two. On the contrary, such studies have resulted in multiple descriptions and varied understanding of the structure of Indian society in general and caste in particular. It is argued that, these 'more-than-one' kind of descriptions have become convenient tools to consider a human group either as caste or as sub-caste to suit ones argument. Thus, such descriptions instead of resolving the complexity surrounding 'caste-classification', have themselves transformed into problems. Why there is non-clarity with regard to caste classification? How and where from does this non-clarity emerge?-are some of the key questions that continue to be the focal elements of social science research in India. This peculiar situation establishes the need for re-

looking at such descriptions in order to clarify the misconceptions. This paper is an attempt in this direction and it re-looks at various descriptions of caste put forth by different scholars in the past. While doing so, I will attempt to trace the history and nature of this problem.

II. BASIC PROBLEMS

As already mentioned, studies on Indian caste system have produced different sets of understanding of caste and sub-castes, which have their origin in 4 major sources: i) Missionary accounts, ii) Anthropological & Ethnographical studies, iii) Administrative & Census reports, and iv) Social science studies. When we attempt to go through the descriptions found in these accounts, we confront with some basic problems regarding caste and sub-caste model. They are:

- Terminological problems
- Problems in identifying the constituent properties of caste and sub-castes
- Incoherent connection between caste and sub-castes

1. Terminological Problems

Almost all the researchers, beginning from the missionaries to 20th century social scientists, presume that the Indian society is characterized by caste system. As a result, they strive to classify the Indian society using terms such as sub-caste, divisions and sub divisions etc. However, there is neither clarity nor unanimity among the missionaries and ethnographers regarding the appropriate term to be applied to these divisions. For instance, Abbe Dubois a missionary in the beginning of 19th century who came to the erstwhile princely state of Mysore, had observed three kinds of divisions, viz., 'a) Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra - the original four caste divisions which have further divisions and sub-divisions, b) Sects, and c) left and right hand divisions', Later ethnographers and sociologists introduced new terms like caste, class, nation, sub-division, branch, sub-caste, sub-sub-caste, tribe, sect, minor sub-caste and main sub-caste, right hand and left hand castes, exterior caste. . . etc. Hunter, an ethnographer of 19th century, used different terms such as ". . . caste, class, nation and tribe synonymously to indicate the sub-divisions"

Twentieth century scholars recognized this lack of clarity in the descriptions of castes and their sub-divisions as a terminological problem. Some scholars have attempted to understand and resolve the problem by taking recourse to terms like Jati, Upa-jati, etc.,. However, these terms are mere translation of caste and sub-caste. Thus, the social scientists have not succeeded in resolving the problem, neither have they clarified, which certain properties of a human group make it into a Jati and Upa-jati OR caste and sub-caste.

Yet, another interesting thing is seen: apart from Jati and Upa-jati, many other indigenous terms such as Kula, Paiki, Pangada, are in use. However, there seems to be non clarity among the people and social scientists about the function and nature of these terms. Yet, such indigenous terms continue to be the essential elements of the experiential reality of the people, while not forming a part of the theoretical understanding put forth by the social scientists. This dual nature re-establishes the need for further research in this direction.

Quigley rightly pointed out this complex nature of the local terms, ". . .the reference point of the term Jati changes according to the context in Indian society and it causes as much problem as the English word caste"

This observation highlights the difficulty faced by the scholars who strive to establish a link between caste, Jatis and the system. However, the problem looks like a terminological one. Sometimes, deciding Jati membership is extremely difficult and the boundaries of castes are extremely fuzzy. Thus, by using terms Jati and Upa-jati also do not resolve the problem until these terms continue to refer to the concept of caste and sub-caste.

2. Difficulty in Identifying the Constituent Properties of Caste and Sub-castes

Difficulty in identifying the constituent properties of a caste and a sub-caste is another problem. Scholars while categorizing the human groups seem to have attributed certain constituent properties to describe these groups- which include endogamy, hypergamy, exogamy, occupation, ethnicity, territorial and linguistic boundaries, customs and traditions, sectarian affiliations, etc. However, none of these studies has been able to show the difference between the constituent property of a caste and that of a sub-caste, and such sub-divisions.

Let us take a few examples to illustrate this point: endogamy is generally cited as a fundamental property of caste. However, this property is sometimes attributed to a main caste, while at some other time it is attributed to a sub-caste and to its further sub-divisions. For instance, Abbe Dubois observed that "...marriage alliance is a property of Indian castes, which created familial affiliation among the members of the respective caste" Likewise, Strickland identified "calling of his/her father is constituent property of sub-division of a caste". For Francis "...prohibition of eating together and inter-marriages seemed as properties that make sub-divisions"

Thurston while describing Lingayats of south India, identified "Lingayats being divided into astavarana and non-astavarana divisions, the former has been sub-divided into two, i.e. Panchamasali and non- Panchamasali. ... Panchamasali division and non-Panchamasali have many hypergamous units, which have no restrictions to eating and marriage with each other. Yet, sub-divisions of non-astavarana consist of functional groups, which are strictly endogamous".

According to this description, marital practices do not act as the deciding principles of sub-division. Enthoven also provides a similar description of the divisions of Lingayats, but his observation differs from that of Thurston as he describes "...the absence of hypergamy among the non-Panchamasalis".

Russell's observation and identification of properties of a caste and sub-castes is entirely different. According to him, "...caste is largely divided into several endogamous units' i.e. main sub-caste and minor sub-caste". Further, he says that "...minor sub-castes were mainly formed by migration and the main sub-caste formed by provincial affiliation".

The present generations of social scientists have strived to recognize the constituent property of caste, sub-castes. For instance, Ghurye identified more than five such criteria. They are; "...territorial, mixed origin, occupational, sectarian, dissimilarity of customs . . . etc.,".

That, one or the other such criterion can be applied to describe a sub-caste is a fact, but it is clear that those criteria cannot be constituent property of caste-caste, if they can be equally associated with the main, and sub castes. Moreover, the implication of these criteria is such that, if sub-castes are endogamous, then castes cannot be endogamous, if castes are endogamous; endogamy ceases to be a characterizing feature of the sub-caste. Both cannot happen at the same time. This very nature of these criteria would disqualify them to be the guiding principles of caste and sub-castes.

3. Incoherent Connections between Caste and Sub-castes

This is another important problem regarding the sub-divisions. Sociologists were aware of the problems of classifying the diverse human groups in India in a single framework. This has generated a debate regarding how these different divisions are structured. There exist mutually opposite views regarding this issue. Concerning this issue, let us examine the perspectives of Ghurye and Irawati Karve who have extensively studied caste classification.

Ghurye has attempted to present a pattern of hierarchical division of different social groups. Accordingly, "...a caste is divided and sub-divided, and divided further into smaller units". Further, he says that "...status or hierarchy of a sub-caste depends on the main caste or major group it is connected with. To put it in simple words, the caste system is composed of 'systematically' divided groups".

However, Karve disagrees with Ghurye and proposes a drastically different model to understand the pattern. Her contention is that "...main caste is a set of castes or castes cluster rather than a systematically divided entity". Further, she argues that "...larger unit (main caste) is occupational castes cluster and sub-units are the real castes". She considers "...the sub-castes as "ultimate units" of analysis". In her article, she clearly states that "...the sub-caste should be considered as the caste both in name and in characteristics", and "...sub-castes are endogamous units, each caste is sub-divided into many sub-castes which in their turn form a hierarchy within the caste... Each sub-caste is generally an endogamous group spread over one linguistic region".

Weber has also made this observation: "Today one caste frequently contains several hundred sub-castes. In such cases, these sub-castes may be related to one another exactly or almost exactly, as are different castes. If this is the case, the sub-castes, in reality, are castes; the caste name common to all of them has merely historical significance, or almost so. . .".

However, the above solution will not resolve the problem of classification of caste groups completely, since it leaves out variety of caste classification; castes are systematically divided or caste is a set of cluster of castes. Therefore, only we can notice that varied descriptions fail to provide an overall framework of caste classification.

III. MULTITUDE OF QUERIES

It is quite evident from the foregoing discussion that although several scholars have studied this problem, they have not been able to arrive at a common and unanimous explanation. A quick glance at these multiple descriptions leaves us with several intriguing questions and puzzles of the concept of caste and sub-caste.

- a) Why do different kinds of explanations emerge on the properties of caste and sub-caste? Does it indicate that there is no common consensus among scholars, OR is it that we have failed to identify the constituent properties of a caste and a sub-caste?
- b) If Indian society is systematically ordered based on caste system, why do sociologists come out with such a variety of descriptions? It is very evident that different kinds of classifications came out from the so-called colonial writers. They identified branch, sub-division, and sub-castes, nation . . . etc. besides attributing different properties to a caste.
- c) On what basis sub-caste and sub-sub-caste are distinguished? Have the scholars identified those properties which make a human group into a caste, are also to be the properties of the so-called sub-castes? If so, why are then the sub-castes, which possess those constituent properties of the main castes, would be considered as a sub-caste instead of caste?
- d) Do theory and the corresponding reality exhibit an incomprehensible gap? Some scholars claim that this division of classification represents the ground reality, while on the contrary, other scholars argue that the concept of sub-caste only exists in theory.

IV. DISCUSSION

To provide a better description of caste I would like to propose the following hypotheses: The pre theoretical assumption of colonial scholars that 'caste system' exists in India, compel them to arrange the diverse human groups of India in a systematic manner, which is the main source of confusion in their descriptions.

When the colonizers arrived in India, they saw diverse human groups in Indian culture, which were being differently identified as jatis, pangada, mata, sampradaya...etc. with several practices that distinguished them from others. Thus, to the colonizers, this culture looked very chaotic. Incapable of understanding India's multiple human groups, they came to a conclusion that the Indian society itself is chaotic.

To resolve this problem they needed a systematic understanding of Indian culture. Their prior cultural experience taught them to look at Indian culture in a way familiar to them i.e. Western theological understanding, otherwise, Indian society would have become unintelligible to them. Consequently, they presupposed the existence of Hinduism as a religion. This prompted them to take recourse to 'texts' as the source behind belief systems guiding and regulating the social practices. Regarding caste classification, the British administrators had taken help of the Varna model for classifying human groups of the Indian culture. Consequently, they had reduced and classified different human groups into certain categories i.e. caste and sub-caste, and tried to systematize the seemingly chaotic diversity through main and sub units. In this process, different human groups and their nature, function were thought to be a part of single, abstract category called caste, with multiple characteristic features randomly derived from these groups. However, the problems regarding caste, sub-caste classification arises when one starts testing this classification with the empirical data.

V. CONCLUSION

The above discussion provides but a glimpse of confusions in the colonial as well as the later social scientific writings. All these problems lead to an inevitable question: Is the caste classification of Indian society, believed to be the Indian reality, just an imaginary description of the scholarly world? If so, how do we account for the diversity of human groups found in the Indian society? Such questions cannot be resolved unless the above hypothesis is supported by substantial research and empirical proofs so that the errors in early theories are clearly brought out.

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