

A STUDY OF CASTE SYSTEM AND DALIT MOVEMENT DURING BRITISH EMPIRE IN INDIA

Vaishali *

Introduction

The sub-continent or India is a huge part of Asia. Although it is separated from the rest of the continent by the Himalayan mountain range in the north and big deserts in the west, it is also an important part of the continental history. At a time when Mesopotamian cultures were at their peak, as literary and urban culture, India, too had a literal and urban society. Because of its suitable environment for human life it had always been a center for civilization.

These beliefs also had a great effect over the entire human population. Brahmanism, Jainism, Sikhism are all originated from this subcontinent. Perhaps the most important of all Buddhism is originated from India. If one mentions those populations who believe in these religions, one would interestingly be able to see that, nearly half of the human population believes in religions which originated in India. And the other half of the human population believes in Judeo-Christian beliefs like Christianity, Islam and Jew. Even this example shows us the importance of India. Because of its importance it had always been the subject of interest of other societies.

On the other hand for non-Indians the most striking point of Indian society is its caste system. Caste, which is a Portuguese word in origin, is a social structure whose origins lie of three and a half millennia ago. Besides, the most striking specification of the caste system is not its age. The most striking point is the structure itself. Caste system is a social structure where virtually little social mobility exists.

The castes are closed to outer castes so much that every one of them has its own language version which others do not understand, considering they speak mostly the same language.

The Caste system is a unique structure, but it is not the only social structure which divides the society between priests, noble, soldiers and craftsmen. Before the enlightenment and industrialization ages it was common for the whole world societies to have such social divisions. What makes the caste system unique is its system of inter-class relations.

British Rule

The caste system in India during the British rule extended beyond being hereditary phenomenon. Some people could apply to be re-classified into a caste they preferred. For example, the above order issued in 1937 shows a Mali (gardener-agriculturist) being legally awarded the Kshatriya: a warrior caste in ancient India, by British officials. Similarly, many laws such as the Stamp Act required Indians to declare their caste in official documents to be granted lease or license.

The role of the British on the caste system in India is controversial. Some sources suggest that the caste system became formally rigid during the British Raj, when the British started to enumerate castes during the ten-year census and meticulously codified the system under their rule. Zwart, for example, notes in his review article that the caste system used to be thought of as an ancient fact of Hindu life, but

* Research Scholar, CMJ University, Shillong.

contemporary scholars argue that the system was constructed by the British colonial regime ex hypothesi. Other sources suggest that the caste system existed in India prior to the arrival of the British, and enumerating classes and castes do not constitute the act of constructing it. Bouglé, for example, used 17th to 19th century historical reports by Christian missionaries and some Europeans on Indian society to suggest that a rigid caste system existed in India during and before British ruled India, quite similar in many respects to the social stratification found in 17th to 19th century Europe.

Changes in the Caste System

Despite many problems, the caste system has operated successfully for centuries, providing goods and services to India's many millions of citizens. The system continues to operate, but changes are occurring. India's constitution guarantees basic rights to all its citizens, including the right to equality and equal protection before the law. The practice of untouchability, as well as discrimination on the basis of caste, race, sex, or religion, has been legally abolished. All citizens have the right to vote, and political competition is lively. Voters from every stratum of society have formed interest groups, overlapping and crosscutting castes, creating an evolving new style of integrating Indian society.

Caste associations have expanded their areas of concern beyond traditional elite emulation and local politics into the wider political arenas of state and national politics. Finding power in numbers within India's democratic system, caste groups are pulling together closely allied subcastes in their quest for political influence. In efforts to solidify caste bonds, some caste associations have organized marriage fairs where families can make matches for their children. Traditional hierarchical concerns are being minimized in favor of strengthening horizontal unity. Thus, while pollution observances are declining, caste consciousness is not.

References

1. Bearce, George D. *British Attitudes Towards India 1784-1858*. London: Oxford University Press, 1961.
2. Belteshazzar, "The Ancient City of Babylon", <http://www.belteshazzar.com/article.php?id=65>.
3. Black, Jeremy. *Smithsonian History of Warfare: Warfare in the Eighteenth Century*. Edited by John Keegan. New York: Harper Collin's Publisher, 2005.
4. Braudel, Fernand. "Maddi Uygarlik, Mübadele Oyunlari", Ankara:Imge Kitabevi,2004.
5. Burke, Edmund. "Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies, 22 March 1775," Works 1:464-71.
6. Burke, Edmund. *Selected Writings of Edmund Burke*. Edited by W.J. Bate. New York: Random House, 1960.
7. Burt, Alfred LeRoy. *The Evolution of the British Empire and Commonwealth from the American Revolution*. Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1956.
8. Char, S.V. Desika. "Caste, Religion and Country", New Delhi: Sangam Books, 1993.
9. Chirol, Valentine. *India Old and New*. London: Macmillan and Company, 1921.
10. Churchill, Winston. *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples: The Age of Revolution*. Vol. III. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005.
11. Churchill, Winston. *Churchill's History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. Edited by Henry Steele Commager. New York: Greenwich House, 1983.
12. Churchill, Winston. *Never Give In: The Best of Winston Churchill's Speeches*. Edited by Winston S. Churchill. New York: Pimlico, 2003.
13. Cohen, Stephen P. *India: Emerging Power*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001.
14. Cook, Don. *The Long Fuse: How England Lost the American Colonies, 1760-1785*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995.
15. Davids, T. W. Rhys. "Buddhist India", New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1999.
16. Della Valle, Pietro. ed. Grey, Edward. "The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India", New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991.
17. Dubois, J. A. "Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies", New York:Dover Publications, 1905.
18. *Età Moderna e Contemporanea, STRUMENTI 12*, Giuseppe Motta (editor), Farwell, Byron. *Queen Victoria's Little Wars*. New York: W.W. & Norton Company, 1972.
19. Ferguson, Niall. *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.