

## Why Casteism Persists Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

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The theme of the 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Meet of MFC, to be held in Delhi on February 13-14, 2014 is 'Social Discrimination in Health'. In this Annual Meet, among other things we mean to explore in some detail, the role of casteism in health and health care. While there will be notes, papers on how casteism affects health and health care, this small piece is meant to explore in a simple and rather elementary manner, the issue of the role played by caste in pre-British era and in modern era in shaping the livelihood of people in daily life. Caste-hierarchy is not confined to social-cultural practices alone. Caste has been influencing this daily struggle to earn livelihood and this continues in a modified form and this explains why casteism persists even in 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the end are enlisted measures in the 'economic sphere' which are needed to abolish this basis of casteism. Sometimes simple considerations also help in clarifying certain basic issues. Hence this note.

From the viewpoint of liberal, democratic ideology, casteism is a pre-modern, obsolete ideology, which should not have any place in modern India. It is true that the older variety of feudal casteism has declined considerably. But however, casteism, the ideology which seeks to preserve the interests of particular groups of people as particular castes in a myriad of caste-based hierarchy, very much continues in its modern form. This note argues that this has happened because caste-system was and is not prevalent only in the form of caste-specific cultural-social practices, adoration of caste-specific deities, etc., but it was and is a crucial factor in shaping people's daily life in worldly matters. For example, caste decides which occupation would be undertaken by whom, that is caste-relations have a role in shaping the social division of labour, shaping social production. In every-day life, people experience that caste in which one is borne decides not only one's standing in cultural-social interactions but caste also decides one's social status in daily, worldly life. This every-day experience shapes the way people think. The hierarchical casteist values preached in the family and by social ideologues does influence the thinking of all people.

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But social ideology does not grip the minds of multitude of people for decades and centuries merely through preaching. Unless the daily experiences of people reinforce the values propagated through casteist preachings, casteism as an ideological system would not continue. The way and to the extent caste decides the daily life of ordinary people to that extent and manner people tend to believe in and act according to casteist-ideology.

There has been a tremendous difference in last 150 years, starting from the advent of British Raj, in how caste shapes social division of labour and the power-structure in the society. Some activists and analysts focus on the disappearance or drastic dwindling down of certain casteist practices such as untouchability or ban on education of the non-Brahmins, of women and say that “caste-system is now only present in vestigial form.” On the other hand, some people one-sidedly point to some of the casteist practices like intra-caste-marriages, caste-based housing, caste-based atrocities, etc., to say that “the changes are only skin-deep, in reality nothing has changed.” Let us explore what has changed, what has not changed and why.

### **Permanent Division of Labour and Labourers by Birth**

*In pre-British India*, caste was an overwhelming, dominating, all pervasive reality.<sup>1</sup> It was not merely part of the cultural-social world. Who would or would not get access to which profession or means of livelihood was very much decided by the caste in which people were borne. For example, each and every person borne in the carpenter caste was compulsorily tied to carpentry all his/her life. Same was the case with people in the barber caste or the tailor caste and so on. This 'division of labour' was laid down juridically also and it was a crime to try to break the caste-based rigid boundaries of hereditary profession. Secondly, marriages and housing which are very much earthly affairs were totally and rigidly based on caste-system. It is this daily experience of the people of the role of the caste in earning their living and leading their worldly life that formed the basis of acceptance of the casteist ideology formulated and perpetuated by the Brahmins.

This feudal, Brahminical caste system was a mechanism to pump off, in a step-ladder fashion, wealth from the most down-trodden to the rulers. In this Indian variety of feudal system, the rigid casteist, hierarchical division of labour was also division of labourers as Dr. Ambedkar put it, and that too a life-long division. This 'by birth permanent division of labour' continued for generations and formed the basis of caste-based cultural-social norms.

It should however be noted that the pre-British India was not an entirely a caste system. It was a caste/class society. Leaving aside various details, variations and at the risk of simplifying the complex, varied reality across India, it can be said that in the immediate pre-British period, in India there were basically four classes, each one of these were made up of a group of castes

The lowermost class, the 'ati-shudras' was formed by the group of 'untouchable' castes whose labour was exploited by the ruling class, composed of groups of castes. This was done through two routes. Firstly, it went directly to the exploiting class made up of the Brahmins and the royalty-castes. The 'untouchables' served the Brahmins and royalty-castes through forced, free/almost free labour on the farms of these ruling castes as well as by rendering them gratis, labour services of various kinds. Secondly, a part of their toil was funneled through the village system in which also they were exploited. In Maharashtra one form of this forced, unpaid labour was 'veth-bigaari'. Though there was some hierarchy within 'untouchable castes', they all belonged to a single class of the most exploited and oppressed toilers in India.

The Balutedar-castes, i.e., the artisan castes (barbers, carpenters, weavers, masons, etc.) together constituted the second exploited class of toilers. In social hierarchy balutedars were above the 'untouchables' but rendered various services to the peasants in exchange of whatever part of the produce the peasants would share with them at the end of harvesting. The social status and standard of living of balutedars was below that of the peasant class made up of peasant-castes because what they contributed to the peasants and the village system was more than what they received in exchange at the annual distribution of the agricultural produce. The balutedars also served the Brahmins and royalty-castes through rendering gratis, the respective services which these castes could provide. Though there was some hierarchy within 'balutedar castes', they all belonged to a single class of 'balutedars', the shudras.

The peasant castes together constituted the third class. The peasant castes on the one hand 'exploited' the balutedars and the 'untouchables' and functioned as a conduit for transferring part of the toil of the balutedars to Brahmins and the royalty-castes, the ruling class. On the other hand the peasants themselves were exploited; they had to pay the king taxes and also had to part with a portion of their produce to the local Brahmins and royalty castes or by tilting their farms through various unjust arrangements. The caste-hierarchy thus led to the siphoning of the surplus production (surplus beyond what is needed for mere existence at low level of consumption) in a step-wise fashion to the ruling class. Though there was some hierarchy within peasant castes and sub-castes, they all belonged to a single class of the 'peasantry'. The toiling peasants were also recognized as 'shudras.'

The ruling class was composed of the Brahmins and the royalty-castes. The non-Brahmin royalty-castes were different in different parts of India and in different periods whereas everywhere the Brahmins were part of the ruling class and in caste-hierarchy they were at the top. These ruling castes were appointed by the king as tax collectors and for this work they were allotted lands or were given a portion of the collected tax. In their own farms (given by the king) they exploited the toilers by extracting from them land-rent and free labour/service.

In the caste hierarchy, the Brahmins were at the top and had an overwhelming ideological influence over the rest of the society. In this sense it was Brahminical feudalism. It should be noted that in the feudal society in India and also in Europe, the toilers had in their possession, means of livelihood (land, artisan-instruments). Some extra-economic force was therefore needed to ensure that despite this, they serve the rulers. This explains why in feudalism the acceptance by toilers of the openly hierarchical ideology that service must be rendered gratis to Brahmins and other higher ups. The openly hierarchical political structure which was openly based on the supposedly inherent superiority of Brahmins and other higher castes, was necessary for the exploitation to take place. In general the apparent overwhelming ideological domination of the Pope in Europe and of Brahmins in India, is explained by this peculiar fact of toilers being in possession of means of livelihood and yet being subservient to the rulers who were composed of Brahmins and royalty-castes. This is contrast to the modern commodity economy in which everybody is equal in the market, free to sell or not sell things in the market; there is no political or ideological

compulsion that labourers have to work for and add to the profits of the employers yet they in fact do so 'voluntarily'. This is because in contrast to the erstwhile balutedars or peasants, they do not possess any means of self-employment, of livelihood and are forced to seek employment with the moneyed people.

I have outlined the pre-British caste-class relations in some detail because the point I want to make is – caste was not only a social-cultural entity, which it shaped how people could or could not earn their livelihood. Secondly, we need to grasp the inter-relation between caste and class. This is necessary if we want to understand why in pre-British India, certain group of people belonging to the same class had very different cultural-social practices or mythologies or if we want to understand why even if there were so many balutedar castes, why the relation of each balutedar caste was the same with the peasant castes. Thirdly, if we want to understand how surplus product was pumped off in a step-ladder fashion from the ati-shudras to the rulers this cannot be done without understanding the inter-relation between the Brahmin caste, the royalty and the toiling castes. Overall this complex Indian social structure cannot be grasped scientifically, adequately unless the importance caste-relations in shaping social division of labour is understood to be crucial in shaping this society.

Women were the most exploited, oppressed section of the society also because casteist hierarchy added additional dimension to her patriarchal exploitation by strictly restricting marriages within castes. Strictly restricting women to marry within the caste was necessary to maintain the 'purity' of the caste. Brahmins and upper castes were obsessed with property and with purity of caste. That is why these sexual taboos were stricter in Brahmins and in other upper castes. Secondly, upper caste women were hardly involved in any social production; their role was mostly restricted to the reproduction in the family. Hence they were left with no role in this world if the husband died. That is why sati-practice was prevalent in some areas among some upper castes. But more often than not, widows were allowed to survive in exchange of a lot of domestic labour they must do. In addition in some areas Brahmin widows were tonsured and could wear only dark brown/white plain clothes to make them sexually unattractive; underscoring the value that woman's sexuality is totally tied to her husband. The tradition in certain lower castes of

‘devoting’ a girl-child to a particular ‘deity’ meant in practice that (upper caste) men would use her for their sexual gratification. These ‘devoted’ girls generally came from certain ‘untouchable’ castes. A mere ‘class’ analysis cannot explain these differences. This analysis of the caste-class relations in pre-British India is necessary to understand what has changed and not changed in the last 150 years.

### **Modern Caste System**

The commodity-based market economy induced by the colonial rule and after, has broken down this totally water-tight and totally rigid by birth casteist division of labour. However, due to the peculiar mode of development of the modern society in India, a new caste-based division of labour has come-about. In this new caste system, unskilled, hard, labour is done mostly by people borne in Dalit and tribal castes. Dirty jobs are done by people belonging to the Dalit castes. Shameful manual scavenging is all done by people borne in the bhangi caste. Majority of people born in middle castes are generally confined to blue collar industrial jobs and to non-remunerative, hard farming work in the fields whereas people borne in higher castes have mostly occupied the white collar and managerial jobs. After Independence, thanks to the rapid spread of education and due to the reservation-policy earned by the democratic movement, increasing proportion of Dalits have got employed in white-collar jobs, positions of power and have also entered elite professions. But only about 10% of Dalits have thus been benefited. This above mentioned broad casteist division of labour in modern India is being reproduced and it constitutes the new material basis of the modern caste system in which the place in the hierarchy of the market economy and in the society is broadly decided by the caste in which one is borne.

In feudal India each and every individual was rigidly controlled by the Brahminical caste system. In modern India not every individual is rigidly tied by the caste-system to the traditional occupation. What explains this change is commodification of social relations and the consequent separation of the economic sphere from the political sphere. In the commodity economy your worth is decided not mainly by what you are, but how much you have. Whosoever has more money and property is valued more. Everybody is ‘free’ to sell whatever s/he has and in the market-competition for money-making, whether to just eke out a living or to make mountains of money. We see so many Dalits, lower caste people

becoming well to do and even rich. This was impossible in feudal society. But overwhelming majority of those borne in Dalit and other castes continue to lag far behind compared to those borne in upper castes. This is because in this market competition they have started from a starting point which is far behind and this is because of centuries of oppression. Secondly, their track in this competition is riddled with many obstacles created by continuing low economic, social status and continuing casteism. Wages for unorganised farm and non-farm labour are extremely low partly because these labourers come from Dalit, tribal castes. The caste system thus influences the wage-levels of the lower caste labourers.

Even 150 years after the British introduced modern market-based development in India and 60 years after Independence, not only that newer generations continue to be subjected to casteist division of labour, marriages continue to be largely intra-caste and housing colonies continue to be largely caste-based even in cities. This is despite the fact that on the one hand, the State's policy has been to promote inter-caste marriages and the quarters allotted to government, public sector employees are irrespective of caste and religion. Thus overall, the old, Brahminical caste-hierarchy has withered away, the modern caste-hierarchy, caste-based social division of labour has come about. It is this daily experience of caste angle to socio-economic hierarchy that continues to fuel casteist ideology.

This casteist ideology has its peculiar characteristic. It acts as vehicle to further narrow interests of upper layers in the competition for money and power. Even though money and power are supreme and more often than not over-ride caste-based identities, in all spheres, especially in politics, caste-based identities have strengthened. Caste-based social organisations continue to operate along with class-based social organisations and very strong influence of casteism in elections and other politics is a new phenomenon after Independence. Caste identity and caste-based organizations/alignments are now instruments to further narrow, sectional interests in the market-competition or political competition. There was no such competition in the feudal society. In this competition only a few members of the caste benefit though the name of the caste and the support of the caste as a whole is assumed and used. This is despite the fact that in the modern class divided society, caste-identity politics inevitably benefits primarily the upper layers in various castes.

Overall one can say that pre-modern relations like caste- and gender-based hierarchy have been transformed into their new avatar and they continue to be reproduced as part of the social structure based on class, caste, gender inequality. The new casteist division of labour mentioned above has been integrated into modern economy. The new caste system is central and not peripheral part of the current social order.

Unless the material roots mentioned above of the casteist hierarchy are eliminated, this casteist hierarchy in all walks of life will not be eliminated. Secondly, so long as the society is divided into narrow commercial interests pitted against each other in market-competition and in power-struggle, all kinds of identities including caste-identities are bound to be used to gain or retain hegemony. Hence unless the society is built around co-operative entities, there will be breeding ground for casteist ideology as a weapon in the market-competition. Given all this, along with cultural-social transformation, which itself is a huge task, following economic measures are needed to abolish the material basis of the modern caste system. So long as in day to day life people experience caste-based socio-economic inequality, equality preached and practised in social and political sphere will continue undermine the former.

### **Economic Measures for Undermining the Modern Caste System**

- 1) Inclusion of the landless labourers in *redistribution of land and water in the agrarian transformation*. Majority of the landless labourers come from Dalit castes. Their conscious inclusion (as well as those of deserted women) in the redistribution of ownership/control over productive resources, would empower them and would lay the material foundation for progressive abolition of caste-based hierarchy along with class-exploitation. After this redistribution, agrarian transformation would have to rapidly move towards cooperative agriculture. Erstwhile Dalits would have to be equal partners in these new co-operative ventures which become part of a planned economy geared not to market but to satisfaction of human needs.
- 2) With the help of modern technology of *organic farming, specific training* (free or subsidised) to the erstwhile Dalits and tribals to enhance and to improve upon their traditional knowledge of agriculture.

This is needed for the Dalit castes as they have been primarily used merely as labourers and hence their traditional knowledge and skill is limited compared to the peasant castes.

**3) *Special concession*** to erstwhile Dalit caste labourer *to access seeds, samplings, farm implementation, etc.* required for modern co-operative agriculture.

**4)** Toilers from erstwhile lower castes who were *artisan castes* (including those in Muslim community) would have to be given training to enhance with the help of modern appropriate technology, their traditional artisan knowledge, skills to move towards modern decentralised co-operative agro-industry.

**5)** Special *credits, encouragement packages* for these artisans will have to be designed and implemented. This policy would have to be applied also for majority of Muslims as majority of them belonged to Dalit castes and are part of the artisan community in India.

**6) *Reservations policy and special encouragement policy in education and other spheres*** will have to be continued so long as systemic, social differences exist, the reservation policy and special encouragement measures will have to continue in the framework of a planned socio-economic development.

**7) *Inter-caste marriages*** will have to be especially encouraged. Crimes against inter-caste marriages should be severely punished. Marriage and family relations are not merely cultural social relations. They are very much part of the material world in daily life and so long as inter-caste marriages are frowned upon, the daily experience of inequality would fuel casteist prejudices.

**8) *Inter-caste housing colonies*** will have to be created and caste-based segregation in housing colonies will have to be consciously broken down.

Opposing casteism in social, cultural, political sphere is absolutely essential. But to abolish casteism, the above mentioned measures are also necessary so that caste-based inequality in socio-economic life and casteism become a matter of history and preaching of humanist, egalitarian values is not contradicted by experience in the worldly life also.

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## ***Endnote***

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<sup>1</sup> It may be noted that the social relations in ancient India had their peculiar development spanning many centuries and took many forms in different periods in different areas. In this note we restrict ourselves to the immediate pre-British period in which a peculiar Indian variety of feudalism was prevailing in large parts of Indian subcontinent.