

Why Caste Matters in Neoliberal India

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Introduction

In her latest work *"The Violence In Our Bones: Mapping The Deadly Fault Lines Within Indian Society"* political theorist Neera Chandhoke asks: "Do 'We, the People of India, 'have violence in our bones?" One can raise similar question vis-a-vis caste in India. Is caste there in our bones? It is imperative to raise such a question because caste is showing no sign of disappearance and have endured for centuries. It has remained persistent and been the key variable to understand and explain the relations of domination and subordination even in contemporary India. Nicholas Dirks is quite right when he says:

Caste did not die, it did not fade away, and it could no longer be diagnosed as benign. At the same time, caste remains the single most powerful category for reminding the nation of the resilience of poverty, oppression, domination, exclusion, and the social life of privilege (2001, 16)

Arguing on the similar lines, Anand Teltumbde rightly pointed out: "Indeed, caste has shown an amazing resilience. It has survived feudalism, capitalist industrialization, a republican Constitution, and today, despite all denial, is well alive under neoliberal globalization" (2010: 10). "But all that could not kill caste, which proved more than capable of adjusting to the new reality" (Ibid., 9). For him caste is a 'vicious' institution. For Neera Chandhoke caste is essentially a violent system which has deprived and humiliated dalits for centuries and continues to do so. Ironically in her account, only Dalits are depicted as the sufferers of caste and other lower castes have been sidelined, reasons for which are not properly spelled out. In this regard, Jodkha argues that "while the much has changed over the last four or five decades in the ways in which caste is experienced and articulated, the reality of caste shows no sign of dissolving or disappearing". Moreover, "There is a plenty of evidence to show that the old structure of caste-based hierarchies and economies of dependency have significantly weakened over the years" 226. ..However, despite this 'secularization 'of caste or its desacralisation, it continues to structure social inequalities (See, Surinder S. Jodhka 2018, 226).

The persistence of caste has casted doubt over the very idea of its annihilation. The romance

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of a casteless society appears to be a utopia that has very few takers in contemporary times, which is no longer desirable nor possible. Undesirable because even the sufferers of caste system has latched onto it and caste competition has displaced the project of social transformation. Not possible because very few are really interested in investing energies to realise that goal. It is this endurability of caste which has troubled the social scientists the most. The question is: what is it which makes caste so endurable? Why has anti-caste politics failed to dismantle the central logic of caste? Can it ever be annihilated? Are we too naive to assume that one of the most entrenched forms of social organisation, such as caste, would disappear one day? Or is it the case that caste can mutate according to circumstances but will survive for centuries to come

If the task of the social justice is twin; that is, a) eliminating inequalities, and b) promoting equality of opportunity, then one must need to interrogate the fundamental constraints in stifling opportunities and life chances of the millions of underprivileged people. Therefore, need is to understand caste as an institution which is biggest hindrance in ensuring social justice. Caste is a problem as the essence of caste is hierarchy and not identity:

Identity integrates people sharing that identity. The racial identity of Blacks, for instance, brings coloured people together to make a common cause. Yet, there is nothing to differentiate them from the shades of darkness within that identity. When the sexual identity of gays or lesbians is invoked, all who identify as such are expected to come together and it is unlikely that any further divisions will emerge within the identity to fragment them. The essence of caste, it may be seen, is not an identity but a hierarchy. Under exogenous pressure, caste feigns as identity but once the pressure is removed, it seeks hierarchy within and begins splitting. This in part explains why the ethnic identities constructed on the basis of caste in the emancipation project have not worked. The Dalit constructed by the Ambedkarite movement as a pan-Indian identity of the ex-untouchables appeared viable at one time, but in reality failed to bring all the untouchables together. Now it is getting further splintered along sub-caste lines. All the ethnic identities, both earlier and now, which used caste as their basis have met or will meet the same fate (Teltumbde 2010).

How to ensure social justice into a socially cruel, unjust, and tyrannical society? What would be the modality and instrument of intervention to ensure an egalitarian society? These questions form the backbone of this article. Because Ambedkar and Lohia were heavily concerned with making the democratic transition smooth and entrenched. Their chief complaint was lack of democracy in society due to the caste system. It tries to situate a debate over the nature of social and political change. The fundamental issue in this regard is this; whether political change precede social change or not? Both of these thinkers were of the opinion that the fundamental contradiction of Indian society lies in caste system therefore, social transformation is more urgent than political reforms. Why did they think so? What makes social change more urgent than political change? What are the dark side of such a reliance on instrumentality of the state? I would try to spell out the role which these thinkers have assigned to the instrumentality of state in social transformation, i.e., annihilation of caste. Why is

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state so central to their conceptualisation of the caste system? The task of making an unjust and cruel society just and decent requires some deliberative efforts. Thus, the role of the politics and state becomes instrumental.

As a response to the rejection of a serious engagement with questions of caste, communal and gender, one can explain that caste as an ideational factor is as relevant today as it was in Phule's times and still influences intersubjective identities of the people of India to a large extent. And it has serious political and economic implications for larger sections of society. Jettisoning the caste factor out of socio-political analysis in India is misleading, since it is mainly on the lines of caste that political articulation and mobilisation takes place. Economic distribution of country's wealth is ensured roughly again on caste lines. One has only to take a cursory look on the state of ownership of industry, mining, telecommunications, banking, education, health, media and entertainment sectors to realise the extent of concentration of wealth in fewer hands (predominantly among the upper and dominant castes), the sorry state of affairs which the constitution of India so strongly exhorts our political leadership to prevent from taking place. Not to mention the near monopoly of control and management of national political parties and the control of the 'Hindu' church.

A lay Indian is told that as compared to pre-independence times, she has her basic requirements of food, housing, clothing, health and education met. And that one has to take solace in it. But how adequately these bare minimum needs are met? The answer is far from satisfactory as is pointed out by the economist and Nobel Laurette Amartya Sen. Discussing the nature of socialism and globalisation in India, Gail Omvedt aptly puts the prefix of 'Brahmanic', to terminologies such as socialism and globalisation, to make them read 'Brahmanic Socialism' and 'Brahmanic Globalisation' (Omvedt, 2013: p.67). For instance, the 'Nehru Model of Development' which relied heavily on industrialisation and state sector has not been accommodative of the large swathes of lower caste Hindus, Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims.

Reiterating the same argument as recently as in 2023 is Ashoka Mody, the Stanford University professor and economist, who soberly establishes the bleak economic fact that all the Prime ministers beginning from Nehru (with his fake socialism) till today have seriously failed India's economy and it may not be possible at all (even if one is willing to do) to put the economy on sound track, so that it makes the world 'working' for more than a billion population in India. Although he discounts the caste factor in his analysis of Indian economy's hopeless situation, he still explains India's economic failure by pointing two policy factors that were not seriously considered by nation's political leadership since independence. These are the policy options of not devising labour intensive development projects giving employment for every working hand and educating women (half of country's population) so they could contribute to the economy as did the women in Asian economies of Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and China in 1970s (Mody, 2023: p.14-17). He says, the country has miserably failed, leaving the masses – the numerically large unorganised sector – on their own for subsistence and survival. Successive governments have been no different from the previous ones and in the name of economic reforms (globalisation) of 1980s and 90s, governments have only pandered

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to the skewed interests of middle classes (though he doesn't mention the fact that a large chunk of it is composed of upper castes).

It should be noted that the roots of coercion and dispossession of the masses in modern times also parallels with colonial rule in India – a rule that relatively emboldens dominant native elites, by inscribing their identity as national culture and scripting out the identities of others from nationalist narratives. This denies the dispossessed their agency – the power to frame their own lives individually and that of nation's collectively. The postcolonial or late modern situation, in other words, postindependence times in India may not be a genuine condition of freedom for the majority. Citing Partha Chatterjee's argument that colonial discourse's view of Indian population as a motley mix of disparate caste and ethnic communities, incapable of constituting a united political community, Vivienne Jabri reiterates that the anti-colonial discourse was capable of conceiving a nation based on the discourse of development, at least in principle (Jabri, 2013: p.93).

However, it should be noted that the exclusionary character of nationalist discourse continuing well into the postindependence times with the inheritance of a colonial state apparatus, the freedom of the majority population and their 'claim to politics' is far from being realised. Fragmented through the categories of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, other backward classes, minorities, unorganised sector, small ethnic groups, transgenders, etc, the peoples' 'political agency' – the power to do, or to be as one wills – can only be achieved by understanding the 'matrices of power' that reproduce the national and 'global structure of inequality' in the present times (Jabri, 2013: p. 131). Precisely because Jyotiba Phule could perform this role in the discursive field of history and praxis by interpreting history in empowering terms for Shudratishudras during colonial times, he becomes as important and relevant for our own times, that is, times characterised by postcolonial hierarchical grading of citizens with unequal access to both material and ideational resources for a life of substantive equality of opportunity and well-being, irrespective of one's identity as a Dalit, Shudra, woman, minority (religious, ethnic and sexual) citizen.

Conclusion

At a time when the economic policies of the ruling elites in the pre- and post-economic reforms of 1990s haven't done much in terms of state providing adequate nourishment, housing, health, education, employment, and farming facilities for the masses – refer to successive United Nation's Human Development Reports and dismal Indian performance with regard to basic development parameters – Fundamental Rights guaranteed in the Constitution of India become meaningless. Indeed, they become meaningless because they were to be co-implemented by another set of 'fundamental Rights', namely, Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSPs). DPSPs are, in other words, positive social and economic rights which create a condition of equity in an otherwise unequal society that India is and ensure the enjoyment of negative "fundamental Rights" enshrined in the constitution. It is also important to take note of the gaping gap that is getting larger between the rich and the poor. The 'Shetji-Bhatji' (the priestly and the merchant castes) combination that Phule

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identified during colonial times as oppressors of the majority, now translates into the nexus between upper caste party high commands and Bania industrialists and entrepreneurs who are constantly enriching themselves. In order that we prevent a complete disenchantment of the masses with the *status quo*, leading to gross violations of human rights, it is time that Jyotiba Phule's humanitarian vision is taken seriously for an all-inclusive and developed India.

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