



The invisibilization and hyper-visibility of caste

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Abstract

This paper makes a distinction between overt (visible/manifested) and covert (invisible/latent) effects of caste realities in contemporary India. Covert realities, which have dominant cultural and psychological aspects, transcend the myth of Varna and Jati as the driving force behind the caste system. It rather uses 'stereotypes' produced through prolonged practice of caste to reproduce inequalities and discrimination. The overt realities of caste include the discussion on marriage, atrocities, untouchability and exclusion, voting patterns etc. The covert realities of caste influence life chances in much more complicated ways. The cultural, social and psychological aspects of caste can be seen in corporate hiring, constitution of students pursuing higher education, social media interactions, social networking and formulation of stereotypes. The paper analyses many ways in which caste plays a relevant role in influencing life chances of people, now categorized into 'General', 'Dalits', 'Adivasi' and 'Bahujan'. The paper attempts to address the issue of hyper-visibility of lower caste identities and invisibility of the upper caste identities. Here, caste is discussed as a resource, translated into effects. The focus is shifted on caste and its effect from caste as a system.

Keywords: invisibilization, hyper-visibility, caste

Introduction

The realities of caste do not constitute a monolithic abstraction. The presumed effects of caste in India give an incomplete picture in understanding its continuities and relevance into the modern society, given caste has been understood as a traditional institution. Contrary to the nationalist imagination, caste did not perish or stop exerting its effects in day-to-day lives of Indians with the modernization process, characterized by development in scientific temper, technological advancement, rationalization of institutions, democratization, liberalization of the economy and social welfare policies. The persistence of caste and its ability to adapt itself with modern values needed acknowledgment from the academia, which began in the 1950s (Béteille, 2012) ^[1].

A policy of benign neglect was out of question to see the caste system disappear on its own. Policy and legal intervention was necessary to create a level playing field and correct historical injustices. On the other hand, caste solidarity found shelter in democracy. Far from being antithetical to each other, the highest value of a modern society, democracy, infused caste politics to achieve greater political goals. Caste in political representation and Indian democracy will be discussed further under overt expression of caste identities. Caste underwent a restructuring in the legal constitutional imaginaries. Castes and sub-castes were grouped under different categories such as Scheduled caste, Scheduled tribes, other backward classes and unreserved castes. The re-conceptualization of caste in institutions has raised questions on hyper-visibility of caste especially of the low castes whereas the upper castes are claiming 'castelessness.' This precise argument is used to assess whether caste exists as a system or a resource translated into effects.

The disparities produced by prolonged practice of caste have caused consolidation of power, status, property and material resources among the dominant, upper castes. Caste

is practiced not only via social evils such as untouchability but also via propagating stereotypes pertaining to different caste attributes. Inhuman practices of caste such as untouchability and atrocities based on purity and pollution are not only condemned but also penalized. But 'seeing' or 'expressing' caste in marriages, occupations, hiring process, rituals, accommodations, associations, social networking, interactions, and merit is pervasive and unexamined. Caste practice through stereotypes has affected upward mobility of low castes in certain ways. Their mobility is restricted by an invisible glass ceiling as though their life chances are at the disposal of the upper castes. The new categories of caste intersecting with class, gender and social position have varied aspirations. The differences have transformed into different forms of hostility among new class-caste categories such as upper caste lower class generals, lower caste middle class Dalits etc. The animosity between these categories is based on unravelling each side's arguments and assertions against each other. The phenomenon of intensification of caste identities among the lower caste spurred by policies of social justice and caste politics on one hand and the general category clinging on to merit and castelessness has created a citizenship divide. The general category sees itself free from the effects of caste. The narrative is often twisted in a way the general category finds itself situated morally higher to follow the lines of modern values of equality of opportunity. Satish Deshpande argues, "Caste can be understood only if we pay as much attention to it when it is invisible or infra-visible as we do when it is hyper-visible or ultra-visible."

The Caste system

Every society has its own system of stratification. Yet these systems are unique from each other given the fact that every society has its own course of evolution through historical sequences. Caste as a system of stratification in Indian society with rigid categorization of people which derives

legitimacy from religious sanctions proposed by the myth of four Varnas. Such a particularistic and simplified understanding of caste is produced rather than deduced. Caste system as a pan Indian phenomena in practice is not based on empirical facts or rules. It is geographically impossible to have a monolithic understanding of caste by masses belonging to different socio- cultural setups, economies and faiths. It is an erroneous conception to assume uniform codification of caste all across the country. In different regions norms guiding social interaction of individuals have been varied though the notions of hierarchy and purity and pollution remained at the core of the caste system. The conventional wisdom about the caste system in India is a contribution of the British colonial rulers. This conventional wisdom inspired by the framework of the Varna hierarchy, as formulated by Manusmriti became the ultimate explanation of the caste system.

Metamorphosis of Caste

Caste is not limited to a person's religious life. Caste constitutes a social reality that further shapes the social, economic and political life of every individual born into it. The mere rejection of a myth or prescribed rituals doesn't help an individual to escape the effects of caste. The burning of Manusmriti by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as a part of the anti-caste movement he spearheaded, held symbolic importance. To him abolition of caste meant annihilation of caste and he believed to attack the ultimate foundations of caste one needs to disown Hindu religion and its revered scriptures. The dissemination of the Varna myth among the masses was upheld by the Brahmins who claimed exclusive access to Vedic knowledge.

The language of caste is so deeply embedded in social institutions and forms that even the denouement of scriptures wouldn't suffice for its complete annihilation. Caste system understood through the Varnas is rather misleading. 'The myth' not only fails to provide convincing ground for the categorization it demarcates, the majority of Indians prefer using the new emergent political and constitutional categories to identify with their caste. Caste system doesn't only yield sanctions but also power and status. Mobility, status and power are not open categories according to the rigid conception of caste systems but the dominant castes have historically changed the rules of the game. Very often power proceeds caste dominance in the hierarchy. All the caste and sub caste identities have been grouped under larger legal and political categories which exert relevance in contemporary times.

The term Dalit denotes the castes enumerated as untouchables (Achhoots), which were situated outside the Varna hierarchy known as the Shudras and Ati-Shudras. Previously these groups were classified based on ritual criteria depending upon varied degrees of purity and pollution. The criteria adopted for inclusion in the scheduled caste's list are social, educational and economic backwardness arising out of the stigma of untouchability. Hence the constitution of Dalits is not the direct equivalent of the constitution of untouchables as accorded by the rules of Varna hierarchy. Rather Dalit caste groups are characterized by being at the receiving end of discriminatory caste system. Dalit caste groups fall under the Scheduled Castes under the Indian constitution.

The history of formation of Schedule castes or depressed castes trace its origin back to the Simon commission in 1927. The modern Indian constitution defines who would be

Scheduled Castes and Tribes according to article 341 and 342. There is a growing consciousness among oppressed castes to identify themselves as Bahujan. Bahujan meaning 'the majority of the people' uses the term in a bid to get rid of the 6 language used by the oppressors. The term Bahujan which refers to present day Scheduled Castes (Dalits), Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis/indigenous) and Shudra (peasant) castes cutting across religion, ethnicities and geographies. It asserts that caste discrimination is not a Dalit question alone. The popularization of the term is attributed to Kanshi Ram a charismatic Bahujan leader, who founded the Bahujan Samaj Party. The Bahujan movement he spearheaded produced a new language for Dalits to articulate themselves, turning "the logic of caste from its existing vertical frame to a horizontal one". It was more than a political movement, it was cultural.

The movement focused on 'debunking the myths of Brahmanism' and breaking cultural hegemony. With growing identity consciousness based on castes among the depressed castes another phenomenon of embracing castelessness is gaining acceptance among the upper castes. Dissociating with caste doesn't help the upper caste to break ties with caste privileges. As upper caste Hindus monopolize the general category and claim castelessness they produce an image of Bahujans fighting against a dummy which has been dead for a long time. Paradoxically upper castes also take immense pride in their castes which they conceive to be the harbinger of purity and a rich cultural history. The rise of Hindutva has positively affected upper castes to re associate themselves with their caste identity and history.

While caste based census is still being contested on various grounds, a paper titled "Wealth Inequality, Class and Caste in India, 1961-2012" published in 2018 found in matters of wealth ownership: 50% of the Brahmin, 31% of Rajputs, 44% of Bania and 57% of Kayasth fall in richest category. For other caste groups, only 5% ST, 10% SC and 16% OBC fall in the richest category (Why a Caste Census Is the Need of the Hour, The Wire). The over representation of the upper caste in the top segment despite following the rules of an open market and economy indicates the structure of wealth distribution in India mirrors the hierarchy of the caste structure. Though studies have also found relative improvement in Dalits' economic position with the combined effect of migration, shift from traditional occupations and change in agriculture. Affirmative action also has played a major role in strengthening the lower castes with reservations in government jobs and higher education.

Social scientists have variously examined the political encashment of caste such as the consolidation of caste ties into political gains, emergence of dominant castes. Upper castes have been increasingly talking about middle class Bahujans as 'benefactors of reservations' projecting the image of caste identity being used as a resource. When caste is understood as a resource, a form of social capital, its endurance throughout years makes sense. Even in the face of weakening traditional upholds on Indian society, caste survived in alternative forms. Upper castes who doubled up as dominant castes in different regions have capitalized on the power and exclusive accessibility to various material resources. Upper caste dominance produced means by which work and occupations came under their full control. The dirty, menial labor was reserved for the people belonging to the lower strata of the society. Further, ritual sanctions made mobility virtually impossible.

Caste is undeniably an important variable in influencing Indian political processes. At this juncture it is almost impossible to keep caste out of question in determining electoral outcome. In fact caste plays a much more active role in the political life of Indians now than it has ever done in the past. India still remains a thriving democracy, despite the predictions of the national leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru and B.R. Ambedkar who were deeply skeptical about the compatibility between caste and democratic political process. Caste politics becomes the new form of identity politics in India which is functional and not an evil as it is often made out to be. The emergence of regional parties managed to break one party dominance in Indian politics. These regional parties rely on numerically large middle and lower castes for support. Regional parties and caste politics has enabled lower castes to see themselves as competing agents for power. Badri Narayan attempts to understand the history of the marginalised through the processes of politicization of the marginalised.

The history of emergence of Dalit politics, aspirations, dreams and desires among Dalits in rural India and its impact on social, political, and democratic development is often overlooked. The political consciousness of the upper caste and class becomes an overarching reality for Indian politics. Whereas the emergence of political consciousness amongst the subalterns caused by their own local, grassroots social movements has yet to develop as a perspective. Badri Narayan is of the opinion that such a perspective can break new ground in our understanding of the history of contemporary politics of empowerment and change. Data procured by India Human Development Survey has analyzed direct measures of civic and political participation among different households belonging to different caste groups.

In *Caste in 21st Century India: Competing Narratives*, Desai and Dubey concluded, referring to the same data, “in the 21st century are far more politically active than the forward castes. While Adivasis are somewhat less active than Dalits, they also seem more politically engaged than the forward castes.” The result was an overarching indicator of growing civic culture among the low castes, which challenges the archaic conception of Dumont’s sense of ingrained subordination or sense of disenfranchisement. Very often it is contested that the subordinated groups willingly accept the conditions of subjugation due to the internalization of the ideology of purity and pollution. Whereas it has also been argued that exploitation of marginalised groups is key to the success of the dominant group (Omvedt, 2006). Moreover the critique of orientalist discourse has shifted the focus on alternate sources of legitimacy contesting the notion of internalization of brahminical values without interrogation by the lower castes altogether. Further political development has given the lower castes to dissent against the orientalist conception of willing subjugation.

It is to be observed that lower castes feel relatively safer to express their caste identity in the political sphere. Whereas the translation of this new found democratic will that gives Dalits a sense of being on par with upper castes in exerting influence over collective decision making, is absent in economic and social spheres. In the political sphere the vertical form of hierarchy in caste is becoming more and more irrelevant establishing the horizontal constitution of communities. The status of equality among these castes therefore becomes a pertinent question. Fuller writes in his book *Caste Today*, “That caste hierarchy can no longer be legitimately defended in public has itself contributed to the

emergence of a more or less acceptable public discourse about status coded as cultural difference. Because people cannot openly speak of castes as unequal, they describe them as different.”

Covert realities of caste: (disparities and outcomes)

A public conception of caste assumes caste remains relevant in modern India only in the limited sense that of endogamous marriages. The democratization and liberalization of all other spheres of individual lives makes the practice of caste condemnable. However the constitution of ‘social backgrounds’ of individuals is in many ways affected by caste and it still persists in the production of disparities in education, income and social networks. The assessment of material wellbeing of different caste groups can give helpful data in understanding the debate of upper caste control over ideological and material resources. Though unravelling the argument of social exclusion needs a more nuanced qualitative assessment of day to day lives of each group. The ex-untouchables face social exclusion in many different ways other than the rules of purity and pollution. Social behavior is always inspired by some stereotypes.

Government policies such as affirmative action are often critiqued for solidifying caste identities, especially among the lower castes. The onus of proof of marginalization falls on the lower castes whereas the open general category doesn’t explicitly acknowledge privilege of the upper castes. Caste is often imagined as absent in the upper caste population otherwise known as the general category. There is no certificate or public notice issued for the castes categorized as the upper caste. The seemingly open category of general category is monopolized by the upper castes. But can the upper caste actually claim themselves as casteless citizens? Has caste never mattered to them negatively or positively?

The upper caste category is also a diverse category. As it has remained untouched by the ‘solidifying’ process of caste categories by policy, the open nature of the category should present lesser differences between castes within the general category. The quoted IHDS report has revealed “While Brahmins form only 6% of the sample, they appear to be uniquely privileged.” The continuation of Brahmin domination proves hypervisibilisation of lower castes has been less likely to have crippling effects on their mobility. Neither a casteless category is likely to produce more equalities due to invisibilization of community identities. The effects of caste have spread across through varied channels which take covert forms to manifest itself into material realities. The effects of covert realities of caste influence the opportunity structures or life chances and outcomes based on inequality.

Lower level of education, lack of social capital and connections, lack of access to nutrition are some of the founding categories producing inequalities among the upper and lower castes. These seem like results of class inequalities but the presence of caste and social discrimination cannot be ignored. Contemporary media reportage has exposed social discrimination that is pervasive in attaining these means of development and modernity for the lower castes. A growing number of cases of Dalit students being brutally treated, even murdered came into light for 12 transgression of superficial boundaries of purity and pollution. While a large number of cases remain

unreported, it is apparent that untouchability has not been abolished from the minds of the Savarnas. In higher education, caste based break ups have shown greater social inequalities than in elementary education.

Interestingly one study in the book *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination and Social Exclusion in Modern India* authors Thorat and Lee analyzed there was discriminatory behavior against Dalits by the Public Distribution System staff in respect of prices in 28 per cent of villages and in respect of quality in 40 per cent. In 26 per cent of the villages, dealers practiced untouchability “by dropping goods from above into cupped Dalit hands below, so as to avoid ‘polluting contact’.” The new age social media interactions have also exposed a different reality of discrimination on the basis of stereotypes influenced by caste. People belonging to lower castes still over-represent the section that is variedly discriminated against due to the combined variables of lower class, regional disparity, inaccessibility to standard English medium education, high skilled jobs and high status social networks. The phenomena of posting content on various social media applications intentionally promotes a desirable lifestyle. This is always followed by a punching down effect where the section overrepresented by upper castes tend to make fun of an undesired, ‘uncool’ lifestyle. A stronghold of the upper castes in the digital space is a reflection of the yet unequal Indian society which manages to marginalize a large section of underprivileged people.

Reverting the focus back to educational disparities, it produces pre market inequalities. That is the inaccessibility to quality education fundamentally affects inter caste disparities in earnings. Studies have also found discrimination in corporate hiring. Surinder S Jodhka writes “While ‘caste- blinding’ appears to be an aspect of modern work practice, a kind of ideological commitment for the hiring manager, it is also shaped by their own upper-caste upbringing, with strong prejudice against those who are educated through the quota system, the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.” Those who imagined the erosion of caste in modern social practices prove themselves partially true. It is a truism especially for the upper 13 castes as there is a growing notion among them that, “upper caste identity is such that it can be completely overwritten by modern professional identities of choice” (Deshpande, 2013).

Whereas the caste identity of the lower castes become antithetical to merit. For private corporate hiring merit mattered along with ‘soft skills’. The acquisition of desired soft skills needs a particular kind of socialization and that social context is “urban, invariably upper caste, and requires educated parents.” Caste also dictates marriages, food habits and dress codes in subtle forms. In the absence of surnames, caste can still be identified via the stereotypes society has produced against the lower castes. These stereotypes run deep into the fundamental structure of social stratification in India. Caste needs to be seen as the machinery controlling the status and honor of people in the society.

Conclusion

A large number of scholarships have analyzed how caste produces predicaments for the lower and middle castes. Equal attention needs to be given to how privilege is shaped among various Jatis among the forward castes. In the lieu of going casteless, the general category has practiced caste

blindness in reproducing inequalities and criteria of ‘touch ability’ or inclusion. Hyper visibility of caste has been put under criticism for upholding the caste system while invisibility of caste remains unexamined. Whereas hyper visibility of caste in fact can be seen as lower castes asserting their identities beyond humiliation. Invisibility of caste expresses conversion of traditional caste capital into secular modern casteless capital that previous generations effected.

Modern conditions in a society has a tendency to privilege historically wealthy castes more than producing conditions for rendering caste irrelevant. Caste seen through its effects can explain why caste-like pre conditions and social hierarchy are produced in the modernizing society of India, despite the presence of variables capable of creating class-like realities. Backwardness, inequalities and destitution are not preordained ideals of a caste society, rather the result of a society which used caste as a resource to give shape to material realities. Caste (capital) and social evils (untouchability, atrocities) need to be seen in two different categories to formulate better explanations. While the former continues to shape lives of both upper and lower castes in many different ways, the latter needs to be considered standalone criminal acts of violence which find justification in neither myths nor rituals.

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