



Ethnocentrism and social exclusion of weaker section in India

Mahmudul Hasan Laskar

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India

Abstract

India is known for its unique feature and image that is unity in diversity or magnificent pot of blending diversified elements. Until unity and integration prevails, India manifests its order and tranquility in social environment. Unfortunately, some divisive mechanisms and social malfunctions often encroach in the very order of Indian society. Ethnocentrism is one such misfortune causing greatest hindrance to the idea of egalitarianism in Indian society; and modernism's basic requirement is egalitarian social structure, which has not been able to establish. Dipankar Gupta mentioned that modernity is characterised by an attitude of equality with others and respect for others. The manifestations of ethnocentrism have been the symbolic mark of deliberate process of social exclusion in Indian society. Egalitarian society has remained an ideal type or utopia. In actual social relationship, the flame of casteism encountered the path of establishing modern social values. It has been revealed through an insightful sociological investigation that society in Assam is also stratified in caste line despite being its common ethnic identity. It has been claimed on the basis of materialistic development like occupational mobility, political participation and ethnicity that Assam is free from caste differentiation but the essence of caste is inherently surviving in the mental state of the Brahmins and other higher castes. Therefore it has to be assessed that the claim of being modern on the basis of artifact has been concealing the traditional values.

Keywords: ethnocentrism, caste, social exclusion, modernity

1. Introduction

The phenomena of ethnocentrism rest in the mental consciousness of individuals. It is difficult to quantify the extent of the feeling of superiority and inferiority among the people. Hence we are not using any quantitative techniques to understand the phenomena. The paper is tried to understand the underlying fact of social exclusion in Indian society; it is ethnocentrism that works beneath the social exclusion process. The paper focused on caste based social exclusion. We are yet to claim a caste free society and culture. Officially India abolished caste but there is constant surveillance and institutional monitor to see the incidences of caste discrimination, which actually indicates proneness of caste inequality, imbibed in Indian social structure. Though Assam has been layered by tribal culture, ethnicity and neo-Vaishnavite culture, caste has remained the essential institution since primordial time. The nature of caste stratification in Assam is discussed in the paper to highlight the actual degree of caste distinction and to see whether any sign of untouchability exists. In the Cachar district of Assam, a case study carried out in a village to give insight into the matter of extreme social exclusion of Muchi caste.

And lastly the paper focused on a very important issue that is modernity, which always been wrongly interpreted in the environment of Indian techno-cities. Common people come under the influence of the elite discourse of these techno-cities and tend to direct their life accordingly. It ultimately deviate the real essence of modernity. People living with stereotypical attitude and in-egalitarian value surprisingly see them as the torch bearer of modernity and make down to those who wants to have an egalitarian society. Hence the paper tried to illustrate the discussion on the nature of modernity in India.

2. Materials and Methods

The study is descriptive in nature. The qualitative analysis has carried out with the help of existing literature and case study conducted in a village of Cachar district, Assam. The study intends to develop research questions regarding contradiction between modernity and India's tradition of caste and cultural lag in Indian society.

3. Results and Discussion

It has been found that ethnocentrism is inherently attached with social exclusion of dalits and minorities. Caste abolished only in theory but value of caste or casteism is fully surviving in the mind and personality of the high caste people particularly Brahmins, who are more concerned about their identity. Higher castes and particularly Brahmins are ethnocentric, which make it almost impossible to eradicate the mental construction.

Indian society has not been able to achieve the egalitarian social condition due to caste-oriented socialization.

Caste stratification is apparently visible in Assam with certain variation as compared to north and south India.

Caste based ethnocentrism in present era has created confusion over India's position in the line of modern societies. Discussion is elaborately carried out under the following headings.

4. Ethnocentric attitude and in-egalitarian social relationship in Indian society

Ethnocentrism was defined by William Sumner as "the view of things in which one's own group is the centre of everything and all others are scaled and rated, in reference to one's group. Each group thinks that its own folkways are the only right

ones. And if it observes that other people have other folkways, these excite its scorn" (John Robert, 2002, p.1). Franz Boas wrote in 1945: "History shows us every society as a self-contained group that recognizes mutual obligations but is hostile to outsiders, ready to advance its own interests and disregard those of other groups" (John Robert, 2002, p.2). It was considered in Pre-World War II that in the British Empire or on European and American peoples the sun never set. Colonialism was an extension, or expression, of ethnocentrism. Western ethnocentrism used to play as powerful social force behind imperial political rule and action until the post-World War II period. But this western imperialism was resented by nationalism emerged in all the countries during World War II, which further reinforced ethnocentrism. Nationalism even emerged in the "internationalist" Soviet Union for the Great Patriotic War, the defense of Mother Russia (John Robert, 2002, p.5). John stated the essence of ethnocentrism at the time of crisis in British Empire. He mentioned that, *calling the threat of invasion the "Battle of Britain," Winston Churchill rallied the British people in a broadcast on June 18, 1940: "Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British way of life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire."* Nationalism in Germany in war period even made an ethnocentric appeal to Germans. It attempted to consolidate an ethnocentric foundation for a German nation-state that glorified fraternity rather than the Marxist doctrine of class struggle that was dividing the people of other European nation-states (John Robert, 2002, p.5). Thus ethnocentrism in this context perceive as unifying mechanism or driving force against imperialistic stumbling block in many countries.

The micro sociological perspective like interactionism is best relevant for analyzing ethnocentrism, which is an abstract reality ^[1]. Ethnocentrism is the state of consciousness in individual behavior develops prejudices, hereditary privileges of few over whole and elite culture. It has developed due to undemocratic politics of power and power of politics in colonial era. India's nationalism emerged because of xenophobic consciousness among people against colonial rule ^[2]. English people used to look down the Indians and they justified it by means of showing racial superiority and civilizational advancement of English. Once India got independence various dimensions of ethnocentrism started to emerge in the mind of Indians. Feeling of superiority, in-group loyalty, non-acceptance of out-group etc. have become very features of Indian society. The existence of various religious groups, denominations and cults further paved the way for ethnocentrism among people. Though constitution instructed strictly to abolish caste system, ethnocentric attitude of higher castes remained undermined in Indian social structure. It can be argued that casteism or value of caste identity is still lively because of ethnocentrism. Brahmins find it very difficult to

accept the lower castes on par with them due to age-old religious legitimation of their high status. The equal status of dalits has been a popular political dialogue to manifest pseudo egalitarianism. The facility of reservation always use as an instrument to show equality among all, which actually does not ensure equal social status. The ethnocentric attitude of higher castes particularly of Brahmins towards dalits is a never ending social reality because socialization reproduces it in generation after generation. It can be noted that the caste culture and related racism is resilient and pervading, which has been visible in advertisement for arranged marriages. In the newspaper and other online advertisements of matrimony, criteria of caste, sub-caste and gotra clearly includes in the profile of the requirement of groom or bride. This important fact generally ignores by so called flag bearers of modernity. Though caste is abolished by law, hatred towards dalits and their living with anguish have not been overcome. Dalits are the largest among landless population in the country. They still live in separated, usually disadvantaged parts of the villages and even to walk in caste Hindu streets is dangerous for them (Scuto, 2008, p-6). Dalits are discriminated from access to common wells and burial grounds. Their children in school usually sit separately in the back of classrooms. In many villages dalits are still face the extreme untouchability like separate glasses for serving tea stalls, banned from entry into temples and barber's refusal to cut them the hair etc. Forced prostitution, *devadasi* practice (a girl dedicated to a temple god and eventually auctioned into a brothel) is still common practice, notably in the south (Scuto, 2008, p-6). The serious matter is institutional failure in ensuring justice and there is also lack of political will to abolish untouchability particularly in those rural regions where the main part of the population (and over 80 per cent of the dalits) is living (Scuto, 2008, p-10). The ugliest side of casteism in contemporary India is the open activities of caste mafia. They are the local militant organizations to protect the domination of higher caste and enjoy the illegitimate power over the dalits. There is report quoted from Giuseppe Scuto's paper on 'Caste Violence in Contemporary India':

On the night of December 1, 1997, an upper-caste landlord militia called the Ranvir shot dead sixteen children, twenty-seven women, and eighteen men in the village Laxmanpur-Bathe, Jehanabad district Bihar. Five teenage girls were raped and mutilated before being shot in the chest. The villagers were alleged to have been sympathetic guerrilla group known as Naxalites that had been demanding more equitable land redistribution in the area. When asked why the sena killed children and women, one member told Human Rights Watch, We kill children because they will grow up to Naxalites. We kill women because they will give birth to Naxalites.

There are innumerable cases of dalit's humiliation and adjudication in contemporary India. Casteism is visible in a Higher Primary School in Kupegala village, 35 km from Mysuru. It has been reported that Vokkaligas from the village stopped sending their children to school because one of the three cooks making the mid-day meal is a Dalit woman. It is so peculiar that even the School Development Management Committee (SDMC) chairman, himself stopped sending his

¹ Ethnocentrism is the consciousness of mind regarding the superiority of own self being member of a particular group, which determines individual's behaviour in society.

² Indians were in fear of losing identity at the hands of British, who wanted to establish western culture. For nationalists western culture was the curse for Indian traditional values and culture. This move was more like fight against dominant culture.

son to the school. Dalit member of the SDMC stated that just because a Dalit woman was appointed as cook, Vokkaliga children are not coming to school anymore. It has also been reported by members of dalit community that "Dalits are not allowed to enter village temples and once they tried to enter the temple with the help of the police and officials, it was abandoned by the upper castes (Dalit Cry, December, 2014). It was reported that at a public hearing organised jointly by the Centre for Dalit Rights and National Dalit Movement for Justice (NDMJ) in Jaipur, the cases highlighted were like separate sitting arrangement for Dalit and tribal children in schools, denial of admission in schools, punishment without any reason and forced to perform humiliating tasks etc. About a dozen children from seven districts of Rajasthan narrated their stories on the occasion (Dalit Post, January 31, 2018). (Discrimination against kids)

The political discourse in India tends to give deliberate dictation to others^[3]. Religious and ethnic identities have become the objects of political socialization and in this ground ethnocentrism gets its political expression. Large numbers of common people, who are just subject of political ideology, are actually layman in political plot and vision of the parties usually happens to be manipulated and misguided mass. Ethnocentrism has been deliberately imbibing in the mind of the people belonging to certain religious communities by political elites to achieve political mileage. Social or religious groups are being made conscious through religious expression of social and political activities.

Communal sentiment or feeling of bitterness towards each other is not the result of religiosity but the by-product of masked religious fundamentalism with political goal and ambition. There still exists the rigid nature of caste stratification, as caste is officially abolished but the value or attitude of caste superiority surviving fully in the mental construction of the members of high castes. Numbers of caste violence against dalits in different parts of the country is bearing the mark of pre-modern social practices in the contemporary democratic society.

As a sociological observer if we look into the recent upheaval in AMU, it is clearly understood that politically determined expression of ethnocentric attitude and subsequent xenophobic actions was floating in socio-political environment. A tendency to awaken people in the name of nationalism and religion has been observed in India, which gradually tries to label the large number of people as deviants. Somehow, it has been convinced by elite nationalist that the nationalism is attached with certain religious and cultural values, which tends to subjugate the rest of population.

Mutual respect for each other and humanistic outlook are seems to go in astray. Modernity in India has wrongly associated with accumulation of physical beauty and material artifacts to hide the traditional forms of inequality or may be to justify the prevalent social condition. Egalitarianism seems to remain a utopian state of condition in Indian society. The real social equality is absent because of value of caste

stratification^[4]. The constitutional provisions and parliamentary acts have provided the prescription and proscription for equality but these have not been able to erase the caste consciousness of the people. It seems society is progressing towards equality and we justify this by highlighting reservation facility, wealth even among some dalits, political participation of dalits, and entry of dalits in corporate environment and so on, but on the other hand underlying attitude of the higher castes can undermine all materialistic progress. Minds with hatred and bitterness towards others or ethnocentric mind can never be the bridge between social gaps rather digs the discriminatory social condition.

5. Nature of caste stratification in Assam

The study revealed that in Assam untouchability and untouchable castes don't exist in true sense of the term. There is no evidence of restriction in public well or tank of any school for any caste or class. In fact, caste stratification is prevalent in Assam but it does not connote what in other parts of the country. The social distance is not very violent as it has been observed in north and south India. But social distinction exists as numbers of reports from empirical experience shows that Brahmin and other higher caste members don't accept water from certain lower castes in certain cases. The higher caste Hindus don't accept the water of some local castes and communities in Assam valley such as *Bhumali, Boria, Chutiyas, Chamars, Dhobi, Dholi, Dum, Yogi, Kamar, Kaibarta, Kachari, Koch, Malo, Mech, Muchi, Miri, Nadiyals, Namasudra, Patni, Rajbanshi, Saha and Sutradhar*. C.S Mullan noted about the depressed castes in the Assam Valley: "These people are generally speaking not now depressed classes as their society is still good enough for them but the moment they aspire to any sort of recognized social position in real Hindu society they will probably become depressed". However caste endogamy has been rigidly practiced, maintained and safeguarded. The depressed castes in Assam face the ill-treatment because of their inferior social status (Dev & Lahiri, 1984, p-163). Though caste is not very rigid as it is in other parts of India, Assam is not free from caste distinction and differentiation. The caste stratification may not be visible in modern professional sectors, where people from different castes and communities' works together and even it can be observed that they are staying, eating and drinking together. But when there is matter of marriage, performance of religious ritual and moreover maintenance of social relationship, higher castes doesn't violate the distinctive line. In fact, depressed castes are the most deprived category in social relationship. People of low castes can realize the attitude of Brahmins and higher castes in social relationships and even in professional arena. In short we can say that feeling of superiority among high caste people and tendency of low caste people to attain equal status though it is not possible are actually the operated phenomena of ethnocentrism and xenocentrism respectively.

³ Political discourses in India rarely present any constructive dialogue for social development; it is mostly manipulative remarks on caste, religion or communities.

⁴ Merely public demonstration of equal opportunity is not sufficient to establish egalitarian value. Society need to be caste free and free from all stereotypical beliefs and practices.

The advent of *Vaishnavism* movement led by Shankardeva gave hope to lower castes because of its egalitarian principles. Shankardeva even accepted the socially depressed castes, tribals and *Muhamedan* in his fold. In this religious order people of all castes and religion had the same privileges and equal status in a congregation of worshippers. Reading sacred books and chants the hymns of God were open to anyone and everyone. He established *Namghars* (Temple or chanting house), which kept open for all Classes. But after the death of Shankardeva, his followers split into two factions, namely, *Bamun Gossains* and *Mahapurusias*. The *Bamun Gossains* were in favours of the observance of caste and argued for necessity of Brahmin teachers. *Mahapurusias* under the guidance of Madhabdeva did not recognise the supremacy of the Brahmins. So caste distinction encompassed even the neo-Vaishnavites under its fold. Depressed castes in Assam valley suffer numbers of social disabilities. Though their position is better than the position of their counterpart in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, depressed castes rests in the lowest rank in socio-economic status. Brahmins are more concerned to maintain social distinction and feeling of superiority (Das, 1986, pp-22-23). Due to democratic provisions it is quite conducive for scheduled cast boys and girls to educate them. But they are still facing the social disabilities. Their position in the context of offering drinking water and food to the higher castes and availing priestly service is still prevalent as it was in 500 years ago (Das, 1986, p-24). The practice of endogamy is the most rigid and widely prevalent aspect of caste in Assam like any other parts of India. Economic upliftment, educational achievement and even political empowerment can't ensure inter-caste marriages in Assam. The keen observation on marriage and personal interview with some persons makes it clear that endogamy is the ultimate rule of marriage particularly for Brahmins, Kayasthas and other higher castes. The lower caste boys and girls face rejection and sever humiliation and ill-treatment in cases of inter-caste love affairs. But sudra castes or depressed castes like Kaibarta (Fishermen), Napit (Barber), Hira (Potterer), Patni, Muchi, Sudradhar etc. are very backward economically as well as educationally, which makes them disable in holding similar positions with other castes in occupation and wealth. They are looked down by all the other castes because of their caste status and poor educational and economic condition. For them, social mobility is very difficult task to achieve. We can say that caste stratification has underlined the social relationship among people in Assam. Caste determines the most primary aspects of individual's life in the society of even Assam, even if culture and ethnicity binds them in one fold.

5.1 Case study on muchi caste

A case study has taken on Muchi caste group residing in the village Rajnagar of Cachar district, Assam. There are around twenty families residing in the village. They live in the bank of the river Barak, which flows across the village. *Muchi* is an outcaste and included in scheduled caste category. They use the surname- *Rabidas*. They are popularly known as *chamar*. They still associated with traditional occupations like pulling skin of dead animals, selling of animal skin and making and repairing of shoes though some of them works as labourer in construction site and in agricultural field. Highest education

among Muchis in Rajnagar village is tenth class, though some members have attained higher education, wealth and even political position in Cachar district. A section of elite Muchi emerged from the ground of vote-bank sets by political parties in Cachar district. But economic condition of Muchis in this village is very poor due to their occupation and lack of proper consciousness regarding upliftment of social status.

The social segregation is clearly visible as Muchis usually perform rituals in their own place of worship. They have own priest to perform rituals in various occasions. Muchis may visit the program of Durga Puja *mandap* (place where idol places for worship) since Durga puja is also set for exhibiting various social issues through lighting and decorations but they are totally excluded from the organising committee of Puja. Unlike other Hindus Muchis do bury the dead body instead of cremation. Though literal untouchability is absent Muchis faces social stereotypes and isolation, which further pushed them into degradation. Their social status is still lowest in society. Promotion of an egalitarian social order is just an oral slogan of political elites. It has been argued by an elder member of Muchi caste that members of higher castes still don't consider Muchis on par with them and the name itself indicates the constructed inferior identity of this section of people. Social, economic and educational upliftment can make difference but social stigma attached with them is difficult to vanish.

6. Casteism is hindrance to modernity

Caste is a long enduring, deep rooted and age old socio-religious institution makes a large section of Indian subjugated; and sign of servitude established by caste system lively still in contemporary era, which instigated the sociologist like Dipankar Gupta assess the very claim of India as modern. He put forwarded certain characteristics of modern society such as: dignity of the individual; adherence to universalistic norms; elevation of individual achievement over privileges or dis-privileges of birth; accountability in public life. Any society can be called as modern if it cultivates these characteristics. According to Dipankar Gupta modernity has been misrecognized because of the tendency of considering technological growth and contemporary artefacts as modernity (Gupta, 2000, pp-12-13). Modernity is wrongly associated with merely developed technology, application of foreign architecture, and availability of imported food items etc. Peoples have belief that society is progressing towards modernity as because large numbers of industries, shopping malls, multiplexes, brand stores are available in Indian cities. In corporate offices, peoples are working together for common interest, which somehow gives impression that occupational mobility is no more closed. The reservation facility has seen as the means of equity in India. But in actual social intercourse, peoples are still divided in caste line firmly. Caste segregation developed the distinct community feeling among different castes. For instance *Hira* (potterer) of Brahmaputra Valley, Kumar (potterer), *Kaibartha* (fishermen) and *Napit* (barber) of Barak Valley, etc. are some lower castes lives in social isolation and they are usually regarded as *kom jat* or *choto-jat* (low caste) in Barak valley. Social distance is fully observed by higher castes in marriage function, community feasts and *Sraaddha* (death ritual) and other day-to-day events.

Dipankar Gupta rightly described modernity as relations between people. Modernity actually characterised by the attitude of equality among all and respect for all. Though we can't say that in modern society all are actually equal, modernity demands for a baseline similarity so that people can live with dignity and avail the opportunities to improve their conditions. He argued that modernity can only come into being when "intersubjectivity" is a central concern. Intersubjectivity refers ability to participate in one another's lives and share in one another's fate. It arouses the quality of empathy and empathy encourages vicarious participation in the lives of other people (Gupta, 2000, pp-15-16). Unfortunately, it has to accept that the social relation is still restricted in India, as birth determines ones respect and honour not education or occupation. Higher caste people always remain antagonistic towards lower castes but become liberal at the time of gaining self-interest like exchanges in business, professional and political benefits^[5]. Sometimes political forces can unite the castes in the name of religion but it is just pretended visualisation of oneness. This unity is not among caste groups rather a union of them under common ideological interest. External conflict or tension can bring internal unity and integration among castes but it is not able to bridge the social gap among castes. Ethnocentrism strongly maintains by higher castes, which deteriorates the status of lower castes to marginal level. One of the respondents reported that during community feasts in Brahmins house, separate day allots for offering feasts to Brahmins and other day for non-Brahmins. Kaibarta provides service of fishing and sells fish even in the doors of people face disrespect and degradation. They don't get equal respect and honour in the house of higher castes and even no hospitality offers to them.

The value of mutual respect among citizens and dignity of life of people always comes under severe attack in India. We can't imagine a modern society with traditional stereotypical values, which are so firm that even modernism has to adjust in uncertain social process in twenty first century. Indian rural society and even small towns and cities are full of ghettoised localities. Dalits are the most ghettoised communities and the reasons are deliberate exclusion and fear of ill-treatment and exploitation. Dalit castes of Assam are no exception in residential pattern. *Muchis* and *Namasudra* are two prominent dalit castes live in absolute isolation, detached from greater Hindu society in social relationship. Material needs sometime makes the higher castes bound to allow dalits in their doorsteps either to get certain ritually unclean works performed or showing public liberalism, in case of similar class position. But caste-based ethnocentrism is an inherent fact in the social environment of Assam too. Higher caste individual's feeling of superiority and degrading attitude towards lower castes is difficult to quantify. It has to be understood with the help of interactionism.

7. Conclusion

The phenomena of caste-class nexus has become crucial misfortune for depressed castes. The class position of

depressed castes is not very satisfactory. In the village, where case study conducted, it has been reported that members of Napit, Kamar, Kumar and Sutradhar castes are still associated with their traditional occupation, which indicates their low class position. Caste distinction is not violent in nature but consciousness regarding social distinction and differentiation appears in various occasions of everyday life. This mental consciousness is very firm and rigid, puts the limitation in interaction and makes the sharp differences in social intercourse. The changes may occur if people do deviation of caste rules internalized by them or tendency of alteration of caste status can be seen as mobility. Untouchability is not visible in peculiar form but its latent significance prevails everywhere in Assamese and Bengali society of Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley. So caste distinction has been survived because peoples reproduce it in their repeated actions. They consciously internalize it through socialization process. Therefore modernity has not been able to over-throw caste stratification. The values of modernity completely contradict the caste distinction. Modernity in India can be seen as superficial flow of rapid change caused by industrialization and urbanization. Democratic politics further strengthened the elite power and practically the elites dictate the public policy. India's modernity is just limited in the equipment in industry, extravaganza and others.

8. Reference

1. Allen BC, Assam District Gazetteers Cachar. Baptist Mission Press. Calcutta, 1905, 1.
2. Allen BC. Assam District Gazetteers Sylhet. Government of Assam, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam Narayant Handiqui Historical Institute. Guwahati, 1905, 2.
3. Das Bhakta. A Glimpse of the Scheduled Caste and their Socio-Economic Development in Assam. Omsons Publication, New Delhi, India, 1986.
4. Dev Bimal J, Lahiri Dilip K. Cosmogony of Caste and Social Mobility in Assam. Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1984
5. Gupta Dipankar. Mistaken Modernity India between Worlds. Harper Collins Publishers. UP, India, 2000
6. John Robert. Ethnocentrism, Ethnopreference, Xenophobia Peacein Race Relations_ A New Understanding. The Occidental Quarterly. 2007; 7(2):1-25.
7. Scuto Giuseppe. Caste Violence in Contemporary India. Munich, 2008. accessed from [http://www.indianet.nl/pdf/Caste Violence in Contemporary India.pdf](http://www.indianet.nl/pdf/Caste%20Violence%20in%20Contemporary%20India.pdf).(01/10/2018, 7.54)

⁵ Members of higher castes are not isolated rather they need the services of low castes like Kaibarta, Napit, Muchi and others. They receive the services but don't consider them equal.