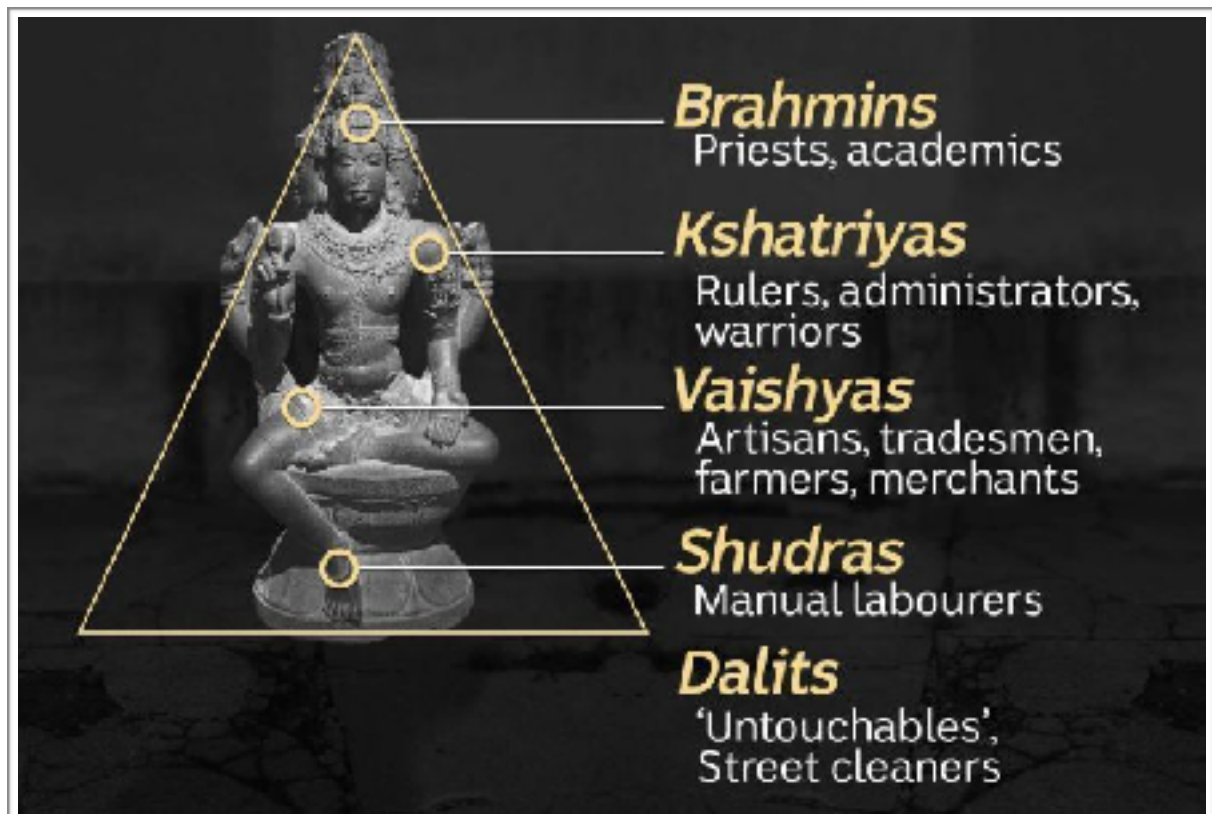


The Role of Caste in Modern Indian Society



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“Caste is a state of mind. It is a disease of mind. The taste of anything can be changed. But poison cannot be changed into nectar.”

- B.R. Ambedkar

Much like Geology, where stratification refers to the distinct vertical layers found in rocks, society's layers are made up of people and resources are unevenly distributed throughout these layers. The caste system is one such form of stratification that has been prevalent in India since time immemorial.

India used to have a very firm caste system that was based on the concept of purity and pollution. Caste was an ascribed status, where people would be born into their social standing, and had to remain in it their whole lives. There was no movement possible between the different castes; one couldn't simply move up the social ladder. People had to accept their social position, regardless of their talents and interests.

After independence in 1947, the constitution of India declared any form of discrimination based on caste to be illegal. Democracy brought along liberty and equality, where everyone had fundamental rights. Even those who were historically disadvantaged due to various social practices were all allowed to vote on equal terms. However, Surinder S Jodhka says that caste has not just survived but thrived in India since independence. This does not mean that democracy has failed; the survival of caste is not an evidence of its failure. But the caste factor has continued to remain highly relevant in the political and economical spheres of modern India.

S.N. Baviskar analyses the relationship between caste and cooperatives. Modern cooperatives have been organised on the basis of certain democratic principles, where there is equality among all the members. Baviskar looks at a cooperative sugar factory in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, where most of the economic and political life revolves around the cultivation of sugarcane and manufacture of sugar. The Marathas are the dominant caste in this region and others such as the ex-untouchable Mahars are the minority caste groups. Baviskar looks at three aspects, namely establishment, leadership and industrial relations and studies the role of caste in relation to these.

Baviskar notes that the initiative to establish 'Kisan', the factory being studied, came from the dominant Marathas, and never from the other minority castes. The latter were highly reluctant to join such a cooperation, not because of economic and financial issues, but due to the worry that they'd be dominated and controlled by the Marathas. They feared that it would make the upper caste even more powerful. However, they ultimately joined it because they couldn't prevent its emergence.

The leadership and control of Kisan was never completely under the hands of the dominant caste. The authority was the board of directors, elected by the shareholders. All shareholders had equal number of votes, irrespective of their caste. There soon emerged two rival factions to claim their seats to the board and these factions were NOT based on caste! There was a proportional representation for all the caste groups. Malis and Karekars, for instance, have atleast two directors on the board. These factions, and not the castes, have formed the basis of competition and rivalry. There is a slight caste factor however, because the factions are led by the dominant Maratha caste. But the rivalry has mostly independent of caste.

Many ex-untouchables from outside the region were attracted to working in Kisan. All the outside workers became loyal members to the TSU because they could not count on their caste or any village ties. They exclusively depended on union strength. The local workers resented the presence of outside workers and established INTUC. Soon, many loyal supporters of TSU were removed from the factory. This instance shows the role of locality and caste and how these two factors were the major source of friction between the two unions.

Fast forward almost forty years, Jodhka talks about how participation in democratic politics has a direct bearing on the working of caste relations. One's caste plays a significant role in determining his/her participation in politics. Jodhka studies the Dalits of rural Punjab and the caste related conflicts in the area. There is a high proportion of Dalits in Punjab, even more than the dominant caste of the Jats. But their visibility in elections has been poor and their position remains marginal in local politics.

Local Dalits have begun to assert for equal rights and a share of the resources that have always been under the control of the dominant Jats. Their assertions however are being actively resisted by the latter which has inevitably resulted in conflict. Jodhka studies three examples of conflicts in rural Punjab.

In Jethumajra, the Jats were offended because they didn't want the Dalits to release the drainage water from their houses into the Jats' ponds. Jat families themselves had been discharging effluents into the pond, but argued that if it came from the Ad Dharmis, it would defile the holy place. This led to open physical violence and is a clear example of how the Jats looked down upon the Ad Dharmis in the area, discriminating them on the basis of caste.

In Talhan, the Ad Dharmis were not represented on the committee to look after the shrine. They demanded representation because they wanted a share in everything that belonged to the village, and this led to friction between the two castes. This situation escalated so much that the village had to be sealed off for two days! Similarly in Hassanpur, the Dalits objected to the construction of drainage and they were socially boycotted by the others. In all these examples, we see how the Jats discriminated against the Dalits based on complete prejudice and due to their 'superiority' in the caste hierarchy.

A very significant commonality that is evident in both of these readings is that both readers have analysed the role of caste at a micro/rural level. Jodhka argues that the discussion of caste in the area of politics is usually based on a macro-level analysis that talks about it in very general terms. However, as he points out, the experience of caste varies significantly among the different caste groups. The experience of being a Jat is very different from that of being an Ad Dharmi. Both readings are based on studies in a micro/local context because 'the question of caste and democracy must also be seen at what is happening to the caste system on ground'.

Another commonality in both the readings, apart from this, is the discussion of the dominant caste. According to Srinivas, a dominant caste is called so because they are above a certain level of pollution, earn a decent amount of money and have a demographic majority. In the sugar cooperative factory, the Marathas were the dominant caste, simply because they were the cultivators and more in

number. The other castes were sceptical at first because they felt that the establishment of such a cooperation would put more power in the hands of the dominant caste. In rural Punjab, the dominant caste were the Jats, the landowners, and they were highly prejudiced against the Dalits.

Both authors also discuss about power relations. The workers in the sugar factory and the Ad-Dharmis are all worried about their representation in the decision making bodies. The fiasco in Talhan happened all because of the fact that the Ad Dharmis did not have any representation on the committee of the shrine. Jodhka points out that Srinivas talked about the 'dominant caste' in purely descriptive terms; he didn't talk about it in terms of the relational other, that is, the subordinate castes.

Even though both the papers have been written about events that have occurred post independence, Baviskar writes about cooperatives in 1960's and Jodhka writes about rural Punjab in early 2000's. One major difference we see in both is the reason for conflicts that happen. In the sugar factory, the main rivalry was between the **factions** that comprised of members belonging to all castes, because they wanted a seat on the board. The board directors did not all belong to one dominant caste. The factions fought with each other due to other problems, and **NOT because of caste**. Even the fight between INTUC and TSU was mostly based on the locality factor as there were many outside workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Caste did play a role, but it was not the dominant factor.

However, in case of the three examples put forth by Jodhka, the conflicts are all **completely caste driven**. The Jats didn't allow the Ad-Dharmis to construct the drain simply because they would 'pollute' something that was 'pure'. There is a clear discrimination on the basis of caste in all three instances. There is no rational argument put forth by the Jats, it is absolutely based on differences in caste.

Although there has been a certain distancing from caste related careers, evident from the fact that the Dalits of Jethumajra are employed in brick kiln factories and are not being forced to work on farms, and the fact that there is more political representation for the ex untouchables, the upper castes have not yet shed their prejudices against them. The caste system is so deeply engraved in

out tradition and culture that it has thrived in modern India. Even though discrimination is illegal, upper castes continue to look down upon them, simply because the social structure indicates so. Only time and education can make these meaningless prejudices go away.