

The Caste System in India

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Abstract

The main objective of this research paper is to acquire an efficient understanding of the caste system in India. The caste system comprises of castes, which are known as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. These are grouped on the basis of the occupations that they carry out. The concept of untouchability is practiced in all communities throughout the country. The untouchables are engaged in different occupations, such as, removing the carcasses of dead animals and birds, cleaning the sewers, and so forth. These are considered to be impure occupations, which enable the upper castes to remain at a distance from untouchables. The upper castes form the viewpoint that their status would get polluted, hence, they maintained social distancing. The concepts of purity and pollution are practiced on the basis of the occupations in which they are engaged in. The individuals, belonging to all castes have one of the primary goals of promoting enrichment of their overall standards of living. Hence, they are wholeheartedly committed towards putting into operation their job duties in a well-organized manner and generating desired outcomes. Individuals put emphasis on inculcating the traits of morality, ethics, diligence and conscientiousness. Therefore, it is well-understood, all castes are focused on promoting community well-being. The main concepts that are taken into account in this research paper are, understanding the caste system in India, characteristics of caste system, and advantages and disadvantages of the caste system.

Keywords: Caste System, Communities, Efficient, Indian Society, Job Duties, Social Institution, Social Structure

Introduction

The social structure of the Indian society is characterised by a unique social institution called caste. The Indian caste system is the system of social stratification and social restriction within the country. Within the caste system, the communities are defined by thousands of endogamous hereditary groups, which are known as the jatis. The jatis are grouped under well-known categories, which are known as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Certain individuals, such as, foreigners, nomads, forest tribes and chandalas

were excluded together and were treated as untouchables. The caste system, which emerged out of the Varna system as a form of social stratification was peculiar to the country. Furthermore, it is regarded as an inseparable aspect of the Indian society. There is not any institution in any other parts of the world for the caste system. Besides India, evidences in the castes are found in other parts of the world, but the most perfect evidence exists in India. (Summary, n.d.).

The word caste is derived from the Latin word, *castus*, which means pure. It was loosely used by Portuguese to denote the Indian social stratification. The individuals formed the viewpoint that the system was used to preserve the purity of blood. The term was applied to the Indian caste system by Garcia De Orta in 1563. The Sanskrit word for caste is *Varna*, which means colour. There are complexities involved in the caste system, due to which the individuals have not been able to acquire an efficient understanding of the exact definition of it. The spread and the growth of caste system is too gigantic. It is referred to the task, which is to be achieved by the power or authority of individuals or of a class. The caste system is primarily referred to the groupings of the individuals. It is created by the *Shastras*. The norms and values are considered important. The individuals are required to be well-informed in terms of norms and values. These are regarded as the key in living an efficacious and an organized life (Caste System, n.d.).

The Indian caste system is regarded as the system of social stratification and social restriction within the country. The communities are defined by thousands of endogamous hereditary groups, which are known as the *jatis*. The *jatis* are grouped under well-known categories, which are known as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. When conducting research on the caste system, it is necessary to acquire an efficient understanding of the origin. The Indian caste system has been defined as the segmental division of the society, hierarchy, restrictions on food habits, occupational restrictions, religious disabilities, endogamy, maintenance of social distancing, untouchability and settlement pattern and the concept of purity. These characteristics give the caste system a distinctive individuality. However, all castes have positive and negative aspects giving rise to advantages and disadvantages. The changes that have taken place within the caste system have to be brought about in accordance to the changing world. Therefore, it can be stated, the concept of caste system is important and needs to be understood in an efficacious and well-ordered manner.

Understanding the Caste System in India

The Indian caste system is the system of social stratification and social restriction within the country. Within the caste system, the communities are defined by thousands of endogamous hereditary groups. The castes are grouped under well-known categories, which are known as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras (Castes in India, n.d.). These are stated as follows:

Brahmins

Brahmins are the top-most caste in the hierarchy of the caste system. They are in the occupations of teachers and priests. They were treated with respect and courtesy. When there were organizations of any types of functions and events, the Brahmins were invited to perform the rituals. The main functions of the Brahmins were to study the Vedic scriptures and various branches of knowledge such as, science and philosophy. They were to offer spiritual guidance and provide assistance to all the other classes and in the performance of religious ceremonies and rituals. The individuals, belonging to all castes perform religious ceremonies and rituals. The individuals, belonging to all classes were dependent on them. The Brahmin's threefold function of teaching, studying and renunciation inspired the masses of mankind. To kill a Brahmin was regarded as an unpardonable sin, which would not be expiated even by penance through an unlimited number of successive births. The main objective of the Brahmins was to impart information among others in terms of morals and ethics. The individuals acquire an efficient understanding of these in order to live efficacious lives.

Kshatriyas

The Kshatriyas are the individuals in the second position in the hierarchical structure of the caste system. Kshatriyas are engaged in the job duties, related to management and administration. These are regarded as warriors. They are brave and chivalrous. The enjoyment of the senses and pleasures, subject of laws and rules and inculcate the traits of diligence, resourcefulness and conscientiousness. The management and administration are regarded as important functions in all communities. The individuals, belonging to Kshatriya caste are putting into practice their tasks and activities in a well-ordered and satisfactory manner. Therefore, it can be stated, the individuals, belonging to Kshatriya caste are well-prepared in terms of different types of methods and approaches, which are necessary in promoting well-being of individuals, belonging to deprived, marginalized and economically weaker sections of the society. The individuals, belonging to disadvantaged sections of the

society are augmenting their information in terms of methods and approaches, which would be facilitating in promoting enhancement of their living conditions. The Kshatriyas are contributing efficiently in promoting their well-being and goodwill.

Vaishyas

Vaishyas are the merchants, traders, artisans, craftsmen, ironsmiths, goldsmiths, weavers and so forth. Furthermore, the individuals, belonging to Vaishya caste are required to be well-informed in terms of different types of methodologies and procedures, which would be facilitating in enhancing productivity. These individuals have one of the primary goals of making profit. Within the course of putting into operation their job duties, they are committed towards leading to an increase in productivity and profitability. In their businesses, they experience losses and profits. But they are wholeheartedly committed towards putting into operation the methods and approaches, which are facilitating in minimising losses and maximising profits. These individuals managed the entire commercial and industrial affairs. This class was sub-divided into various sub-groups in accordance to their professions. The main objective was to lead to an increase in knowledge, which would be facilitating in promoting community well-being. Therefore, Vaishya castes are essential in managing the businesses. This is also considered as an important factor in leading to progression of individuals, communities and nation as a whole.

Shudras

Shudras are the cleaners and sweepers. They performed these job duties within the households of the entire community. According to Manu, the highest merit of this class was to serve the other three classes. Since the individuals, belonging to this caste was the lowest, hence, the individuals, belonging to upper three castes maintained distance from them. They were not allowed to approach the individuals, belonging to higher castes. The research studies have indicated that there are certain individuals, who are not able to live up to the caste dharma. In other words, they are unable to abide by the norms, values, principles and standards. Such individuals as well as their children are considered as outcastes from the Indian society. The main reason being, when they are not able to abide by the norms and principles, they are not given recognition. In other words, they are not given any regards by the individuals, belonging to other castes. As a consequence, they are discriminated against and are not being provided with equal rights and opportunities. Therefore, the individuals,

belonging to Shudra caste are considered impure and individuals, belonging to other three castes do not approach them.

Characteristics of Caste System

The individuals, belonging to all communities, categories and socio-economic backgrounds, belong to different castes. The castes of the individuals have an important influence on their overall personality traits and standards of living. The individuals, belonging to all castes have one of the important goals of sustaining their living conditions in an efficient manner. In other words, they aim to lead to up-gradation of overall standards of living in an efficient manner (Chapter – III. The Caste System in India, n.d.). Hence, when individuals are wholeheartedly committed towards achievement of their goals and objectives, they need to put into operation their tasks and activities in an appropriate manner. The individuals are required to be well-informed in terms of morals, ethics, standards and principles. These are regarded as the key in achieving desired goals and bringing about improvements in their overall quality of lives. Furthermore, when individuals are generating information in terms of caste system, they are required to be well-equipped in terms of characteristics of caste system. These are stated as follows:

Caste is Innate

The first distinguishing feature of the caste system is it is innate. It is characterised by absolute rigidity and immobility. The caste determines the status of the individuals within the society. The individuals, throughout their lives learn to adjust within the castes in which they are born. The individuals remain in the same caste throughout their lives. The individuals, belonging to all castes have one of the primary goals of sustaining their living conditions in an efficient manner. In order to achieve this goal, they are required to get engaged in occupations and professions, which would be suitable to them. In other words, the occupations and livelihoods opportunities of the individuals are based on their castes.

The Brahmins are the teachers and priests. Kshatriyas are engaged in the job duties, related to management and administration. Vaishyas are the merchants, traders, artisans, craftsmen and so forth. Shudras are the cleaners and sweepers. The individuals, belonging to all castes possess this viewpoint that they are required to implement their job duties in a well-ordered manner in order to promote enhancement of their living conditions. Therefore, it is

well-understood that caste is innate and individuals are required to get engaged in tasks and activities that would be suitable to them.

Restrictions on Food Habits

Diet and nutrition are considered as vital aspects in the lives of the individuals. The norms, values, principles and standards of individuals are centred on the food items, which they consume. Through consumption of adequate diet and nutrition, the individuals acquire the necessary energy, which is facilitating in carrying out different tasks and activities in a well-ordered manner. The individuals, belonging to all castes differ in their dietary habits. The Brahmins are not permitted to consume non-vegetarian food. The Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were permitted to consume vegetarian food. These castes were forbidden to consume food, such as, beef. The Shudras were provided with the freedom to consume any type of food.

The mind-sets of the individuals get influenced by the type of food, which they consume. Furthermore, the diet and nutrition renders an important contribution in bringing about transformations in the overall personality traits and living conditions of individuals. One of the important aspects that needs to be taken into account is, diet and nutrition is facilitating in promoting good health, physically and psychologically of individuals. Therefore, restrictions on food habits are an important characteristic of the caste system, which is regarded to render an important contribution in influencing overall standards of living of individuals.

Caste is Endogamous

Endogamy is the most important element of the caste system. The scholars and researchers have conducted research on the caste system. Through their research, they have generated information that each one is supposed to marry within one's own caste and within the sub-group, if there is any in the caste. Due to the rigidity of the caste system, inter-caste marriages are difficult. In other words, marriage has to take place within one's own caste. The individuals need to ensure, they find a life partner within one's own caste. The individuals, belonging to different castes are different from each other in terms of number of factors, i.e. norms, values, cultures, habits and so forth. Due to these differences, it will be difficult for them to adjust with the individuals, belonging to other castes, hence, they need to find a match within their own caste (The Caste System, n.d.).

Marriage ceremonies are implemented in accordance to the norms and values. Hence, it is necessary for the individuals to marry within their caste, as there will not be any kinds of differences in the norms and customs. Furthermore, individuals will learn to understand and adjust with each other. As a consequence, marriage will be successful. Therefore, caste is endogamous is a vital characteristic of the caste system, which enables the individuals and families to adjust with each other in an appropriate manner.

Hierarchical Social Structure

The caste structure of the society is the hierarchy or the system of subordination. It is held together by the system of inferiority and superiority. The Brahmins are at the top of the hierarchy, second position is of Kshatriyas, Vaishyas have the third position whereas, Shudras are at the bottom of the hierarchy. The relative position that the person occupies in the caste hierarchy is in most cases determined by its relations to the Brahmins. The highest castes are considered to be the castes from which the Brahmins will accept food. On the other hand, lowest castes are the ones, from whom the highest castes will not accept any food and drink. The Shudras carry out the job duties of cleaning and sweeping within the homes of higher castes, hence, they are made to sit on the floor.

The Brahmins are granted social rights and privileges, as they are highest in the hierarchical structure. The individuals, belonging to all castes are required to ensure, they are well-informed in terms of morals and ethics. In other words, they are required to live their lives in a moral and ethical manner. Therefore, hierarchical social structure is a crucial characteristic of the caste system, which enables the individuals to acquire an understanding of norms of the castes, which they belong to.

Occupation is Stable

Occupation is considered stable in all castes. In other words, individuals, belonging to all castes generate information in terms of their own respective occupations and get engaged in these in order to sustain their living conditions in an effective manner. Every caste considers the occupation as hereditary. The individuals exercise the occupations of castes, which they belong to, in other words, they do not exercise the occupations of other castes. The identity of the individuals is established through the occupations in which they are engaged. Throughout their lives, they augment their information in terms of the ways, which are facilitating in carrying out their tasks and activities in a well-ordered and disciplined manner.

The Brahmins are the teachers and priests. Kshatriyas are engaged in the job duties, related to management and administration. Vaishyas are the merchants, traders, artisans, craftsmen and so forth. Shudras are the cleaners and sweepers. The individuals, belonging to all castes possess this viewpoint that they are required to implement their job duties in a well-ordered manner in order to promote enhancement of their living conditions. Therefore, occupation is stable is a characteristic of the caste system, which enables the individuals to acquire recognition within the community in which they are living.

Segmental Division of the Society

The individuals belong to different castes and these differences have enabled them to recognize the segmental division of the society. The individuals live their lives in accordance to the ways that are compatible to their own castes. The norms, values, standards and principles are required to be flexible. In other words, when individuals are carrying out their job duties within personal and professional lives, they are required to abide by their own norms, values, standards and principles. Hence, it is well-understood, segmental division of society is recognized on a comprehensive basis.

Segmental division of the society means that Indian social stratification is based on caste to a major extent. There are various castes that have a well-developed lifestyle of their own. It is apparently understood that norms, values, standards and principles influence the lives of the individuals. The tasks and activities that individuals put into practice are in accordance to the rules, norms and principles. The membership of the caste is determined by birth, hence, it is regarded as hereditary in nature. Therefore, segmental division of the society is a characteristic of the caste system, which enables the individuals to be well-informed in terms of their job duties and functions.

Purity and Pollution

The concepts of purity and pollution are regarded as vital in all castes. The Brahmins are considered highest in the hierarchical structure, whereas, Shudras are the lowest in the caste hierarchy. The highest castes are considered to be the castes from which the Brahmins will accept food. On the other hand, lowest castes are the ones, from whom the highest castes will not accept any food and drink. The concepts of purity and pollution are practiced within the caste system. These are judged in terms of factors, such as, deeds, occupations, food habits, language and dress patterns. Impurity is characterised by consumption of liquor, non-vegetarian food, left-overs of higher castes, participation in occupations, such as, leather

craft, lifting dead animals, sweeping and carrying of garbage. These are supposed to be impure.

The individuals, belonging to low caste get engaged in these occupations. It is apparently understood that individuals, belonging to all castes find difficult to get engaged in employment opportunities, hence, individuals, belonging to higher castes get engaged in jobs, which are considered as minority jobs, i.e. cleaning, driving, cooking and so forth. The Shudras carry out the job duties of cleaning and sweeping within the homes of higher castes, hence, they are made to sit on the floor. They are kept at a distance from individuals, belonging to higher castes. The food and drink is given to them in separate utensils. Hence, it is well-understood, concepts of purity and pollution are practiced. Therefore, purity and pollution is a prominent characteristic of the caste system.

Social and Religious Disabilities and Privileges of Few Sections

The individuals, belonging to lower castes are prohibited from getting engaged in certain types of tasks and activities. These include, making an entry into the temple, not making use of literally language, and not being able to make use of any gold ornaments, particular type of attire or umbrella. This is normally considered negative. The reason being, all individuals are vested with the rights to make their lives pleasurable and contented. Hence, they need to obtain the rights and opportunities, which would be facilitating in promoting enhancement of overall standards of living.

In the present existence, with advancements taking place and with the advent of modernization and globalization, there are transformations taking place in the viewpoints and perspectives of the individuals. Individuals, belonging to all castes are making an entry into the religious place. Furthermore, they are wearing gold ornaments and attire of their choice. In addition, they get engaged in different types of social and religious activities as well. As a consequence, the individuals are rendering an important contribution in incurring the feeling of satisfaction. Furthermore, they are able to bring about improvements in their overall standards of living. Therefore, social and religious disabilities and privileges of few sections is a characteristic of the caste system, which has deprived individuals of certain types of rights and opportunities.

Differences in terms of Custom, Dress and Speech

It is understood on a comprehensive basis that customs have an important influence on the lives of the individuals. The tasks and activities that individuals put into practice are in accordance to the customs. Furthermore, dress determines the overall personal appearance of the individuals. Speech is regarded as the way through which effective communication processes takes place among individuals. The individuals, belonging to all castes are different from each other in terms of custom, dress and speech. They make use of different languages within the course of interacting with others.

This is apparently understood that there are differences in the personality traits of the individuals. All individuals, even belonging to the same castes are different from each other in terms of their natures and overall personality traits. Furthermore, there are differences in custom, dress and speech. It is apparently understood that norms, values, standards and principles influence the lives of the individuals. The tasks and activities that individuals put into practice are in accordance to the rules, norms and principles. The membership of the caste is determined by birth, hence, it is regarded as hereditary in nature. Therefore, differences in terms of custom, dress and speech is a characteristic of the caste system, which is important among individuals, belonging to all castes.

Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Among individuals, belonging to all castes, there are occurrences of conflicting situations and disagreements. These may be in a major or minor form. Hence, individuals, belonging to all castes are required to be well-informed in terms of peaceful conflict resolution methods. In all castes, individuals have their methods and procedures, which would be facilitating in resolving conflicts. Throughout the lives of the individuals, they are required to understand that they need to form positive viewpoints in terms of various factors. Furthermore, they need to form cordial and amiable terms and relationships with others within as well as outside the homes. In addition, feelings of antagonism and antipathy are required to get eliminated.

Conflicts are barriers within the course of progression of individuals, communities and nation as a whole. Hence, individuals are required to be well-informed in terms of different types of mechanisms, which would be facilitating in resolving conflicts. The conflict resolution mechanism such as caste panchayats, there are individuals in leadership positions, who are vested with the authority and responsibility of putting into operation peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms. These are facilitating in promoting well-being and goodwill

of individuals, communities and nation as a whole. Therefore, conflict resolution mechanisms are a characteristic of the caste system, which is facilitating in development of mutual understanding among family as well as community members.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Caste System

The individuals are required to augment their information in terms of advantages and disadvantages of caste system, when conducting research. There are difficulties involved in the caste system, due to which the individuals have not been able to acquire an efficient understanding of what it means. The spread and the growth of caste system are too massive. These are referred to the tasks, which are to be achieved by the power or authority of individuals or of a class. The caste system is primarily referred to the groupings of individuals. The caste system has different types of advantages and disadvantages. These are stated as follows:

The Advantages of the Caste System

Unity in Diversity

It is apparently understood that individuals, belonging to all communities, categories and socio-economic backgrounds are different from each other in terms of number of factors, i.e. caste, creed, race, ethnicity, religion, cultures, traditions, norms, values, educational qualifications, occupations, communities, and socio-economic backgrounds. In order to achieve desired goals and objectives, it is of utmost significance to maintain unity in diversity. Therefore, unity in diversity is regarded as one of the indispensable advantages of caste system. This is facilitating in reinforcing the feeling of brotherhood among individuals.

Co-operation

When individuals are wholeheartedly committed towards achievement of their goals and objectives and promote enhancement of their overall living conditions, it is understood on a comprehensive basis that they need to put into operation their tasks and activities in an appropriate manner. The individuals are required to reinforce co-operation. The individuals, belonging to all castes co-operate with each other in promoting enhancement of their overall standards of living. It is apparently understood that all castes make provision of support and assistance to each other in promoting well-being and goodwill. Co-operation is regarded as the key in achieving desired goals and forming cordial terms and relationships with each other. Therefore, co-operation is one of the significant advantages of caste system.

Economic Security

Getting engaged in employment opportunities is regarded as one of the vital goals of individuals, belonging to all castes. The main reason being, individuals are required to generate income in order to sustain their living conditions in an effective manner. The individuals, belonging to all castes possess this viewpoint that they are required to implement their job duties in a well-ordered manner in order to promote enhancement of their living conditions. Hence, throughout their lives, they are required to be well-informed in terms of job duties and methodologies, which are needed to do well in one's job duties and generate desired outcomes. Therefore, economic security is a meaningful advantage of caste system.

Integration of the Country

The development of class consciousness takes place due to caste system without breeding caste struggle. It has created a Hindu society in an efficient manner without giving any chance to class frictions and factions. When the individuals, belonging to different castes are working in collaboration and integration with each other, they are not only promoting mutual understanding with each other, but will render an important contribution in leading to up-gradation of communities and nation as a whole. It is understood on a comprehensive basis that India will progress when Indians will promote unity in diversity. Therefore, integration of the country is a noteworthy advantage of caste system.

The Disadvantages of the Caste System

Mobility of Labour

By putting restrictions on the change of occupation, the caste system has denied mobility of labour. This continuously leads to stagnation. Occupation is considered stable in all castes. In other words, individuals, belonging to all castes generate information in terms of their own respective occupations and get engaged in these in order to sustain their living conditions in an effective manner. Every caste considers the occupation as hereditary. The individuals exercise the occupations of castes, which they belong to, in other words, they do not exercise the occupations of other castes. The individuals, belonging to lowest castes get engaged in impure occupations and are not allowed to get engaged in pure and decent occupations. Therefore, mobility of labour is regarded as one of the critical disadvantages of the caste system.

Inappropriate Occupation

Shudras are the cleaners and sweepers. They performed these job duties within the households of the entire community. They served the other three castes. Since the individuals, belonging to this caste was the lowest, hence, the individuals, belonging to upper three castes maintained distance from them. They were not allowed to approach the individuals, belonging to higher castes. Furthermore, they got engaged in the occupations of leather craft, lifting dead animals, sweeping and carrying of garbage. These are supposed to be impure. This enabled them to remain at a distance from other castes. Therefore, inappropriate occupation is a severe disadvantage of the caste system.

Untouchability

The untouchability is regarded as one of the negative effects of caste system. The untouchables are shunned, despised and prevented from social intercourse within higher caste groups. They are considered as impure due to the impure occupations in which they are engaged in. Furthermore, they were not allowed to approach the individuals, belonging to higher castes. Furthermore, they got engaged in the occupations of cleaning, leather craft, lifting dead animals, sweeping and carrying of garbage. These are supposed to be impure. This enabled them to remain at a distance from other castes. The untouchables were discriminated against in terms of various factors. Furthermore, they are deprived from various types of opportunities as compared to the individuals, belonging to higher castes. Therefore, untouchability is an unfavourable disadvantage of the caste system.

Promote Casteism

The individuals, belonging to different castes carry caste feelings and manifest blind and over-riding loyalty to their castes. This makes them to disregard the healthy social standards of justice, fair-play, impartiality and brotherhood. Under the influence of casteism, the members of one caste do not hesitate in imposing any kinds of disadvantageous effects on the members of other castes. Hence, it is well-understood that casteism spells the need of the autocracy, instead of the system, based on fraternity. Therefore, promote casteism is an adverse disadvantage of the caste system.

Conclusion

The Indian caste system is the system of social stratification and social restriction within the country. The castes are classified into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Characteristics of caste system are, caste is innate, restrictions on food habits, caste

is endogamous, hierarchical social structure, occupation is stable, segmental division of the society, purity and pollution, social and religious disabilities and privileges of few sections, differences in terms of custom, dress and speech and conflict resolution mechanisms. The advantages of the caste system are, unity in diversity, co-operation, economic security and integration of the country. The disadvantages of the caste system are, mobility of labour, inappropriate occupation, untouchability and promote casteism. Finally, it can be stated, caste system is prevalent throughout the country in all communities.

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