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Modern Views of Caste: The Pervasiveness of Western Democratic and Christian Thought

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Within anthropology the study of India and her caste system has been vast. Caste in India is a complex hierarchical system that is foundationally grounded in Hinduism. Social mobility, marriage, daily habits and every aspect of life is affected by caste. India over the last two centuries has been occupied and built up by western invaders. This influence has combined to effect Indian cultural norms and daily life. When the Indian constitution was established in 1950, provisions protecting against discrimination based upon caste, gender, age, etc. were put into effect. In the last half of the 20th century India has experienced democratized, westernized, and Christianized movements dictating “correct” social intercourse and restricting their previous cultural norms. These movements, specifically in their effect on the modern perception of caste, have only begun to be studied. This research is intended to delve into matters of modern-day India and her people. The goal is to discover what is really happening and how people are now reacting and implementing the caste system into their new “modern” lives.

The original purpose of this research was to understand if prosocial or altruistic actions, between members of different castes, facilitate caste members to forget their caste restrictions and the reasons why or why not. As my research continued, however, I found that the validity of my responses were questionable. Due to my position as a westerner the likelihood that my subjects were responding about caste the same way they would respond to a Hindu is very slim. India, over the years, has been indoctrinated with western democratized and Christianized doctrines purporting “correct” views of how society ought to function (beginning with British colonization and then the establishment of the parliamentary democracy). This influence results with a predisposition to report commonly held westernized norms rather than the sought after Hindu reality. Because of this skew in the results, I find it more pertinent to identify the

responses that reveal a democratized or Christianized influence in an effort to answer the underlying questions of the current status of caste.

Method

Data Collection. Data was obtained by administering a vignette, or short story, to the participant and then interviewing the participant about their reaction to the vignette. The vignette was specifically formulated to describe altruistic acts in everyday settings and other actions with cultural and caste implications. The vignettes were first written in English and then revised and written in Telugu. Consultation from caste members and translators were sought, prior to research, to ensure the validity and efficacy of the vignettes used.

The interview that followed the reading of the vignette was structured around pre-formulated questions that were specifically intended to probe the participant regarding their moralistic perception and reasoning of the interaction. The interview was intentionally formatted to facilitate free response regarding individuals' personal opinions. Based upon the participants responses I questioned further, asked for clarification, and asked additional questions regarding caste, daily habits, and the story presented in the vignette.

Data Analysis. All of the data was gathered in Telugu and then translated into English to facilitate proper comprehension of both administrator and participant. Recordings of the interviews were also reviewed with a translator to ensure appropriate transcription. Transcribed data was then analyzed with the assistance of NVivo 9 software which allows the researcher to mark, or code, data in specific points. This facilitated efficient analysis and speedy organization of the data.

Data analysis will consist of finding commonalities in the responses given from the surveys. These attitudes will be described by analyzing the significance of repetitive words and repetitive codes present in the data. Therefore the description of the data will be an essence or a feel of the view points of the participants.

The first mode of data analysis was to identify western influence in the data. Based upon prior research about social interaction and structure in India, as well as, my knowledge of commonly held western values, I was able to identify comments are descriptions that went against social norms. For examples, a social norm in India is arranged marriage. If a participant were to say that they allow love marriage (non-arranged marriage), or have participated in a love marriage, this was marked as western influence.

The second mode of data analysis was to identify the democratic influence present in the responses. Due to the establishment of an independent democratic political system in the describe the current social attitude toward the caste system in 1950 India has begun to operate in a parliamentary democracy. Democratic thought and action has come out into public eye and is influencing people who are politically informed. The data was coded for democratic influence at any mention of politics or dogmatic thought presented by democracy.

The third mode of data analysis will be to find Christianized concepts in participants' responses. Any statements regarding faith, love, charity, service, and equality in God's eyes are all reviewed and evaluated by context. Then, if they qualify as Christianized, they are marked and used for analysis. Examples of this would be if a participant said that God created us all equal. Regardless of the specific "God" (monotheistic or polytheistic) it stands that this is clearly

a Christianized concept because the Hindu God Brahma specifically created all individuals unequally (Manu, 1991).

Population. The population recruited for research was approached using a convenience sample. In order to gain an unbiased sample, a wide range of people with different circumstances, castes, ages and backgrounds were questioned. The majority of study subjects were from South India in the state of Andhra Pradesh in the city Visakhapatnam. Visakhapatnam is a growing port city on the south east coast of India. The subjects live in a city with larger population density. Larger population density can be assumed to affect their outlook on interactions between people due to necessity of interaction.

The participant population can be divided into many different groups , regardless of caste. Two such groups are the older and the younger generations. The older generations are identified by their adherence to conservative and traditional values and practices. The younger generation is typified by the increased influences of westernization. These groups can be seen as demarcations of persons' willingness to accept or resist social change through the caste system.

Two other dividing groups are seen in low and high economic prosperity. Those of lower economic prosperity over all, due to their financial and living situations, are more prone to adapt to the needed social influences. Those who are in higher economic conditions are less likely to experience a forced social adaptation because of their location, influence, and social and economic control over others. Thus, these factors influence the acceptance to social change or the resistance to it.

Overview of Caste

The caste system in India is a complex hierarchy that structures Hindu culture. Caste is based in religious theology that, unlike Christian sects, creates people unequal. Caste divides people into social groups which anciently prescribed different occupations. There are four principal caste divisions: Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras. The caste divisions are very broad and encompass countless different sub-sets of caste groupings. Behavioral norms exist for each group and apply to all aspects of life (purpose in life, marriage, friendship, eating, clothing, organization at dinner table, etc.) (Comm 1963). Traditionally, due to the rigid nature of caste, social mobility was deemed far from possible. Individuals belong to a certain caste group, interact within that group, marry within that group, and hold most valuable social connections within that same group. Movement outside of the caste group, anciently, was seen as defiling or polluting of the higher castes and out stepping boundaries for the lower castes. According to Professor Sateya Pal of Andhra University, “Humanity is only between caste men... They feel it is their duty to love their caste men and despise other castes” (Smith, 2011).

Origins of caste

Some scholars attribute the origin of caste to the influence of Aryan invaders early in India's history (circa 1500 BC). Aryans, meaning non-Indians, were a semi nomadic group believed to have come down into the Indus Valley from Iran. The Aryan settlement in the Indus valley proved to produce a new established society. The interactions between the Aryans and the indigenous people (Dravidians) produced a social stratification. The people were divided into Varnas (colors) the Aryans being the higher, white, dominant Varna and the indigenous people the lower, darker, dominated Varna. Varna is the early beginnings of caste (Kulke and Rothermund, 1986).

From this early interaction of the two societies a new hybrid society was created. “There is an organic relationship between the ancient culture of the Indus valley and the Hinduism of today” (Majumdar, Raychaudhuri, and Datta 1950). From this new society comes the classic works of Hindu doctrine: the Vedas. The foundation of Aryan influence in the creation of Varnas is also demonstrated in the creation of the Vedas, which are fundamental to Hindu theology. The concept of Varna served as the precursor to the conceptualization of caste, the creation of which is represented in the Rigveda.

The ancient Rigveda states that the different castes represent different body parts of Brahma (the god of creation). Traditionally, Brahmins come from the mouth of Brahma and are to officiate as priests, teach and receive clean gifts, study, and teach. The Kshatriyas come from the arms of Brahma and are to study, make gifts and bear arms to defend his subjects. The Vaisyas come from the thighs of Brahma and are to be tradesmen, study, make gifts, and keep cattle and agriculture. The Sudras come from the feet of Brahma and are to serve the higher castes. The higher three groups consisted of the Aryan race while the subjugated Dravidian race, or the indigenous people, consisted of the lower serving group. This is an example of the nature of the caste system. It was intended to subjugate the Dravidians (indigenous people or Sudras) by making them polluted and unsacred (Tyler 1973).

Caste finds its origins in many different parts of Hindu culture and religion. All of the works and traditional models for which Hindus have based their belief and actions, regarding caste are, in part, products of the influence of Aryan invasion, domination and social dictation of the indigenous people.

Pre-colonization: Intercaste Behaviors

For one to explain why caste people keep themselves separate there must be an explanation of purity versus pollution. It's a common statement throughout caste literature that answers the questions of why certain people, according to caste system functioning, are less than human, human, and next to the god.

According to Hutton, "the degree of pollution varies with the caste". Due to daily habits, or ancient occupation (which may still apply in modern times), a person's activities pollute or make them unclean. Common polluting activities include cutting hair, working with the deceased or human excrement, working with leather, or consuming beef. Pollution and purity isn't necessarily defined by the cleanliness of the labor, but what affect such labor has on one's being. Being pure or polluted doesn't mean clean or dirty, rather it implies something much deeper.

The Brahmin caste, because of their religious ritual involvement, must maintain purity and avoid all those things that might pollute themselves. This caste upholds traditions of washing multiple times a day to maintain purity. The Brahmins are those who officiate as priests and facilitate religious worship for others in the community. This makes them next to the god. Most castes below Brahmin do not hold themselves to as strict rituals because their caste is less easily defiled; however, most castes above Sudras (the fourth lowest varna) do maintain custom of purity to some extent (Hutton 1946). Those who are of very low caste or even outcaste are considered to be so polluted they are less than human and in some accounts can make another caste man so defiled they leave their families for fear of polluting them. Therefore, people of different caste keep themselves separate from one another, as much as possible, and unified within their own caste.

Post-colonization

The British occupation of India was a long period of change for India and her people. The British created an infrastructure and system that had starkly contrasted the innate India lifestyle. In a Passage to India by E.M. Forster, this meeting of worlds is beautifully described when comparing the Indian and British dwellings of the same town.

“...the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges...the general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life. Inland the prospect alters... It is sensibly planned... bungalows that are disposed along roads that intersect at right angles... it shares nothing with the city except the overarching sky.”

This new system, however unlike traditional India, was adapted to through social movements such as democratic government reforms and Christianized reform.

Results

The results from the data speak to each individual participants' experience, life, age, and background. Due to this factor, the results will first be displayed by topic and then by demographic commonalities.

Throughout the data there examples of participants responding to questions with answers influenced by common western thought. This is noteworthy considering the opposing nature of innate “Indian” thinking (Ramanujan, 1989). There are identified themes that occur in the data, it is interesting to note that the themes can be stratified by age group. Westernized themes include: inherent equality, labor/education-centric focus and individualistic focus.

Equality. The theme of equality stands out as significant because of the Hindu doctrine of creation and the caste system as a whole. One of the main proponents of democracy is that all men are created equal and to each is given certain unalienable rights (Jefferson, 1776). Two of

the interviews conducted with people of opposite castes correlated on the topic of equality as well as which caste is most likely to support it.

“P: Yes of course he would offer the water because the low class people, nowadays, will not have any caste feeling because they are already degraded people. No degraded but economically very low. They are humble for the other persons. They have respect for the other persons. They treat equally to all people. They offer everything to the other persons, but the higher class people tell them to be low” (Smith, 2011).

This participant (P) is of an upper middle caste. She notes that people in the lower or schedule castes are degraded and therefore see and treat all people equally. The next response is from two Jalari men. The Jalaris are fishermen and live in the slums of Visakhapatnam. There are seen as some of the lowest in the caste system.

“L: Indira Gandhi came and told us there are 66 regions in our country and we must treat it all equally. We are all one. That’s what she said at that time. The Vaishya people used to close their nose if the Jalari comes passing by. They used to say tea costs one paise. The Jalari will drink the tea, the Vaishya used to wash the glass. This happens nowadays.

P: Nowadays all are equal. Every human is having blood red in color. There are some rich and some poor. If there are no poor how the rich live?” (Smith, 2011)

These two interviews represent the pervasiveness of the ideals of equality. It also demonstrates how democratic standards are being taught to the Indian public and how those standards influence the agenda of political leaders like Indira Gandhi.

Out of the participants, 40% stated that every person is the same and should be treated on an equal opportunity basis.

Labor/ Education. In one conversation with a man (RK), working in city, we spoke about education and the creation of a new social structure. This man is of the Setti Baliya or scheduled tribes caste. His position in the caste system is very low, but he is now working in an office in

the city. “RK: Nowadays they say high caste is those who are rich and low caste the ones who are poor. The educated are in huts and the uneducated are in buildings.” This participant’s position on education is very strong. He believes that people must be educated in order to eradicate the caste system. “J: You say the caste system does not exist, why? RK: Because it is wrong. All must be treated equally... J: Economic status and education will give you status now, not caste? RK: Yes. If he studies well he will get a good job he will be in good financial position... This problem [caste] arises because of the amount of uneducated people in India. This problem will be solved if everyone is educated. Everyone will be in good position. Then this problem will not arise” (Smith, 2011).

Out of the participants 17% focused on education being necessary for employment and higher employment is necessary for high economic status. The demand for higher education is not only a theme in the data, but throughout India. In Andhra Pradesh alone there are over 50 universities (India Study Center, 2010). Also among the participants 21% referenced the demand of employment and the need to be employed based upon skills alone.

Individualism. This is a democratic theme that is more radical than others because of Eastern emphasis on collectivism. In most parts of the western world a common belief is to put the needs of the individual before the needs of one’s family. In the majority of the eastern world this is not the case. Individuals are expected to maintain the good name, honor and dignity of their family’s name before looking to their own needs (Heesterman, 1985). Conversations with participants, predominately 25-35 years of age, about intercaste marriage has revealed some interesting points concerning individualistic thinking. Some quotations are as follows:

“VRMR: They should not involve their parents pressure or outside pressure in their lives. They continue independent.”

“JY: If there are in love they should not bother about the society.”

“BT: It is good because their parents disobey, they elope.”

“SKS: Intercaste marriage leads people to be outcasted from society. Slowly the younger generation is changing this through independence.”

“Slim Shady: Among the two one will have to cut their relations with their family... Individuals are important not families. I never care for the family. Individuals are more important, why bother about the families?”

From these responses it is evident that independence from families is necessary if societal norms, such as same caste marriage, are broken. People may even become out caste from society. The main point that must be seen from these results is that independence from families is opposing traditional collectivistic norms of Indian society and the idea of being independent from one's family is present with the results.

Christianization is the second adaptation that is being studied. Due to western influences, of predominantly Christian societies, it is assumed that participants' responses contain common themes of Christian doctrine. Christianized themes include: charity, service and humanity. These particular themes are of importance because they, when applied to intercaste situations, oppose or raise debate about traditional Hindu reactions.

Questions about the data: an ending note

I offer no conclusion to this data. My intent is to identify concepts found in the data and leave the reader to their own thought and reasoning.

I must first deal with the limitations of this study. The study results were gathered via translation. Due to the nature of translation, specific meanings can be reinterpreted in multiple ways. Connotations of certain words may be different and subtle inflections in tone and purpose for statements can be lost. The other main limitation in the findings is the superficial responses to

sensitive questions. The participants had a tendency to give standard westernized or Christianized answers to questions intended to reveal the motivations and literal feelings behind caste. A lack of trust is understandable in situation such as these where a westerner comes in asking questions about a system and tradition which they don't understand and in many cases inherently reject. Due the assumed lack of validity in the participants' responses, it is my goal to identify the westernized and Christianized themes alone.

Let us now delve into more substantial matters. Hinduism traditionally rejects the Judeo-Christian notion of universal moral judgments like "do unto others as you would have done unto you". Instead the concept is do not do unto others as you would have them do because their taste or caste may be different from yours (Ramanujan, 1989).

Where the western world has a defined system of moral reasoning, applying to all situations across the board, the Hindu's do not have such a system universally. Instead moral reasoning comes from particularization: judging situations based upon the context. There are generalizations for each caste (jati) but not for the people at large. While westerners say, "Bravery is a virtue," the Hindoos say, on the contrary, "Bravery is a virtue of the Cshatriyas[Kshatriyas]" (Ramanujan, 1989).

According to Ramanujan, there is a balance between context-free and context-specific moralist reasoning. Pervading western thought is that reasoning should be done context-free (universal) applying to all people. Traditional Hindu thought, as put forth by Manu, is context-specific. For every caste and division there is a specific way of doing things (dharma) and reasoning must therefore be based upon context (i.e. a Brahmin and a Sudra will reason differently given the same situation because of caste restrictions/ rules) (Ramanujan, 1989).

With the increased western influence in India, western thoughts and reasoning are being transmitted to the upcoming generation. In the data westernized themes are reflected in demands for education, higher employment, individualistic pursuits and equal opportunity. It is also assumed that because of increased westernization and missionary activity that Christian doctrines and ideals are, as well, being taught to many Indian people. It is evident from the data that the themes of both democracy and Christianity are understood by India and her people.

It is my thought that the data I have gathered and presented is a product of conflict: conflict of reasoning. When first collecting interviews I found a strange perceived hypocrisy in all of my findings. In the beginning I attributed it to my lack of understanding in combination with the ethereal that is India. I concluded that this was a way of life under attack. Upon further inquiry I found that this perceived hypocrisy, and all of my data for that matter, is nothing more than a way of life under, not that of attack, but of influence.

India has been invaded by this influence for the last two centuries and it has been taking its toll ever since. This research and all that it represents is just another account of what conflicting ways of reasoning can produce over time. It's by no means a conclusion. It is just an account that shows tradition versus change. The older generation of my participants expressed a need to "maintain the tidy," which I have lovingly come to call, sticking to things that work. The younger generation of my participants expressed a wide-eyed fantasy of western ideas and thought – calling for social change and independence. Across the board there are also those who were content with seeing how things turn out.

I now restate that this is a way of life under influence – with no conclusion at the present. I present ideas that were given to me, that may or may not be the way life actually works. The

fact that these ideas have pervaded thought enough to be expressed is noteworthy enough. The only question that remains is: how long, if ever, will these expressions become reality?

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