**Caste and Politics**

After India’s decolonization a lot many changes have occurred in Indian society which has led to a de-ritualization of caste. A large part of the support system of caste has collapsed due to the erosion of rituality. However, caste still survives as a kinship-based cultural community which operates in a different newly emergent system of social stratification. Members of different castes are, now, forming themselves into larger horizontal social groups. Such groups in the new scenario, now, increasingly compete for entry into the middle class. Consequently, the old pre-independence character and composition of the middle class has undergone a sea-change. The new and vastly enlarged middle class is becoming politically and culturally more unified but highly diversified in terms of the social origins of its members.

Keeping in view the B.A. (H) Political Science Syllabus the present attempt would be to confine the analysis to the contemporary Indian situation. However, without discussing much on the history of the caste system in India an account of the colonial discourse on the subject would be in the fitness of things. The first among Europeans to provide detailed accounts of its functioning were the Portuguese. A very detailed and empirical account of caste was given by Duarte Barbosa, a 16th century Portuguese. After the British rule was established in India the second important account of caste by Europeans came to the fore. There were now Western Orientalist scholars, the Christian Missionaries and the British administrators who began to make sense of this complex phenomenon. This resulted in the birth of a new, colonial discourse on caste. Studies of caste in post-independence India continued to be guided by the terms set by the colonial discourse for many years.

**Distinctive features of the Colonial Discourse:**

First, the colonial discourse centred on whether caste was a system beneficial to Indians or it worked against them. Caste was viewed by the Orientalist scholars as serving some positive functions. On the contrary, the missionaries saw it as an unmitigated evil. Second, caste was seen by both the groups in highly schematized and unidimensional terms as an inflexible hierarchy of vertically ranked ritual statuses. Barbosa, the Portuguese scholar, had seen the idea of pollution in the context of untouchability but, the colonial discourse generalized it for the whole system. So the idea of ritual purity and impurity of statuses was considered the central principle governing the caste system. Depiction of caste in the religious scriptures guided largely the reconstruction of caste reality. Thus Barbosa’s empirical view of caste was now superimposed by the scriptural (ideological) varna view of caste. Three, due to the Orientalist studies focusing on Hindu scriptures, caste became a prism through which the colonial rulers began to see Indians and the whole Indian society. Caste was seen as representing a worldview of Indians and a totality of India’s social and cultural life. Certain non-ritual, even non-religious elements in the caste system which informed quite a few aspects of inter-caste relations were theoretically ruled out of the system. Four, the colonial regime launched a number of land and village surveys in different regions of India in the process of setting up its revenue administration. Consequently, the revenue administrators focused their attention on the Indian village which was also a revenue unit. This led to the development of a view of village as a microcosm of the Indian society. Further, caste became a constituting factor of India’s social, economic and political organization legitimated by its religious ideology. Such a view contributed to the image of the village as a stable, unchanging social system. In the later studies of caste undertaken by Indian sociologists caste continued to be seen as a vertical hierarchy of ritual statuses embedded in the religious and cultural context of the village. This happened notwithstanding the fact that they discarded the varna theory. Fifth, the British officers countered both the Orientalist and the Missionary views of caste. It was due to their utilitarian concern about finding administrative and political ways to tame and change this formidable system functioning from ancient times, to suit the needs of the colonial policy and economy. This concern prompted an ideological debate on caste with a degree of political sophistication which introduced a new, theoretical-comparative dimension for viewing caste. Thus caste now began to be seen in comparison with the normative (values of equality, individualism, etc) and social (estate, race, class, etc) categories of the western societies. Caste became a bone of contention between conservatives and progressives, traditionalists and reformers when the English educated nationalist Indians joined the debate on the terms set by the colonial regime. Sixth, unlike the method of the Orientalists the British administrators adopted an empirical method in reporting about caste. The caste system was not seen by the British only in terms of the varna categories; they also saw castes as separate communities often divided by descent, political organization and customs. This led to their theorizing caste in terms of its racial and tribal origins and character. Seventh, the relationship between caste and the state was a crucial feature of the colonial discourse. The colonial state began caste-wise enumeration of the entire Indian population from 1901 Census. The population figures for enumerated castes were not only updated every ten years but the castes were given specific names/labels and ranks.

It is important to note here that in this process the colonial state acquired an agency, even a legitimate authority, to arbitrate and fix the status claims made or contested by various castes about their locations in the ritual hierarchy. Because of this many castes brought demands for special recognition by the state for receiving educational and occupational benefits as well as for political representation. A situation had arisen giving the colonial state an opportunity to assume a dual role. It performed the role of a super Brahmin who located and relocated disputed statuses of castes in the traditional hierarchy and also the role of a just and modern ruler who wished to recognize rights and aspirations of its weak and poor subjects. Performing such roles also helped the state to protect its colonial political economy from incursions of the emerging nationalist movement. The colonial regime got a boost now as it also induced people to organize and represent their interests in politics in terms of caste identities and participate in the economy on the terms and through mechanisms set by the colonial regime.

The colonial regime, thus, not only introduced new terms of discourse on caste, but it also brought about some changes in the caste system itself. However this is not deny that a large part of these changes were unintended consequences of the colonial policies. They were related to the larger historical forces of modernization, secularization and urbanization which had begun to make some impact on the Indian society by the end of 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. But it would be appropriate to consider some specific policies of the colonial regime which were aimed at delegitimizing the power of the traditional social elites and creating support for its own rule. Such policies, alongside the larger historical forces, had produced some profound and far-reaching changes in the caste system.

**Consequences of Colonial Policies on Caste system:**

First, there was the formation of a new trans-local identity among ‘lower castes’, collectively as a people with consciousness of being ‘oppressed’ by the traditional system of hierarchy. The discourse of rights made its first appearance in the context of the caste system. Until then such a discourse was quite alien to the concepts governing ritual hierarchy. New ideological categories like ‘social justice’ began to interrogate the idea of ritual purity and impurity. It led to a beginning of confronting the established categories of ritual hierarchy with new categories like ‘depressed castes’ and ‘oppressed classes’.

Second, it was a very important development that several castes occupying more or less similar locations in different local hierarchies began to organize themselves horizontally into regional and national level associations and federations. Because they felt it was becoming increasingly necessary for them to negotiate with the state and project their larger social identity and numerical strength.

Third, movements of the lower castes for upward social mobility acquired a qualitatively new dimension as they began to attack the very ideological foundations of the ritual hierarchy of castes in the modern ideological terms of justice and equality. Movements were not new in the history of the caste system. But earlier, the movements such as the Buddhist and Bhakti movements attacked the ideological foundations of the ritual hierarchy of castes in terms which were internal to the system.

Changes in the caste system during the colonial period have greatly intensified in post-independent India. With the establishment of a liberal democratic state and the growth of institutions of competitive, representational democracy the changes acquired newer dimensions and a greater transformative edge. Together this has produced some fundamental structural and systemic changes in the traditional stratificatory system.

It is important to emphasize here that despite such qualitative changes they continued to be interpreted, in the old, colonial ideological –evaluative frame. The sociologists studying caste as well as social reformers and political thinkers described these changes by using the terms and categories which were derived from the colonial discourse. It resulted in two opposite views of change in the caste system which represented mirror-images of each other. One view, a dominant one in post-independent India, emphasizes certain structural and cultural continuities the Indian society has manifested in the course of modernization. According to this view, changes in caste are seen in terms of functional adjustment made by the system for its own survival and maintenance. The other view sees modernization as a linear, universal force of history, transforming the caste system into a polarized structure of economic classes. This view dominated the political-ideological discourse on caste until recently. The discourse on caste in post-independent India, overall, remained bogged down in the dichotomous debate on ‘tradition’ verses ‘modernity’ and ‘caste’ verses, ‘class’.