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## Indian Caste Hierarchy System and Education

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### **Abstract**

In Indian social system there exists segmental division of society based on caste groups. Ancient scriptures, literatures show that these groups have been placed in order of hierarchy since early times. The assignment of basic rights among various castes is unequal where, those at the top enjoys most rights coupled with least duties and those at the bottom performing most duties coupled with no rights at times. The system is maintained through the rigid enforcement of social ostracism (a system of social and economic penalties) in case of any deviations. In such a situation education plays a vital role in making our society a class based society from its caste-based structure. Through this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the role and importance of education as a tool to empower individual as well as society in removing caste based hierarchy.

**Keywords:** Caste Hierarchy, Education, Social Mobility.

### **1. Introduction**

Caste systems are a form of social and economic governance that is based on principles and customary rules such as, it involve the division of people into social groups (castes) where assignments of rights are determined by birth, are fixed and hereditary. The doctrine of inequality is at the core of the caste system.

The Indian caste system refers to the social stratification of people into ranked groups defined by descent and occupation, based on the underlying notion of purity. Usually the caste system is described as a more than 2,000-year-old Hindu tradition geographically originating from early civilizations on the Indian subcontinent. The Indian constitution refers to Dalits as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and ethnic minorities as Scheduled Tribes (STs), and together they comprise more than 24 % of India's population as per Census data, 2001. Discrimination based on caste can be seen in terms of the relative underdevelopment of low-caste groups, e.g. the literacy rate for Dalits is significantly lower than for the rest of the population, infant mortality and under-five mortality among Dalits are much higher than the average.

The exclusion of 'caste-affected communities' by other groups in society and the inherent structural inequality in these social relationships lead to high levels of poverty among affected population groups and exclusion from, or reduced benefits from development processes, and generally precludes their involvement in decision making and meaningful participation in public and civil life. Here comes the need of education as Education is seen as a major vector in society. It brings about a change in the pattern of social relationships as well as in the outlook and attitude. Moreover, Modern education is based on such democratic values like equality, liberty and fraternity. It is also grounded on such scientific values like reason and observation. Hence it is quite natural that with the spread of modern education, the people's belief in the divine origin of caste, Karma and Karmaphala has received a severe setback. As modern education is usually imparted in co-educational institutions, it encourages inter-caste marriage and inter-caste mixing. Moreover, it acts as a powerful force towards the removal of untouchability and any form of discrimination.

### **2. Education and Caste Hierarchy**

Caste discrimination is not something that has emerged post-colonially. It is a cultural and social phenomenon that has been a part of the traditions of Hinduism for thousands of years, dividing people into castes in a hierarchical order based on their descent. The efforts made by various governments to bring to an end to it, such as legislation changes, has been proved drastically insufficient and caste based discrimination has moved from being a religious tradition to becoming a human rights issue with international proportions. Education can be used to change social attitudes towards the traditional caste stratification. It plays a vital role through influencing impact of caste discrimination through research, reports, organizing exchanges or visits to caste-affected

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areas of students and teachers to study their conditions, through educational curricula, youth programmes, celebrating the positive cultural contributions of caste-affected communities.

### 3. Social Mobility by Means of Education

Education can be used as a tool to empower the individual. Through child centered learning, students are able to see their own role in transformation. Societal change comes from the collective transformation of the individuals within that society. Education has become secular today. It is a process which brings about changes in the behavior of society and enables every individual to effectively participate in the activities of society and to make positive contribution to the progress of society to act as a factor of social mobility. Though education does not guarantee high status and higher positions to all people, yet without education, an individual is unlikely to achieve social mobility. That a society has differentiation in skills and specialization is not what is bad. The bad thing is lack of mobility. When, anyone from any background with any level of resources at his/her hand in a society has the ability to reach the top, the scourge like that of the Caste System cannot happen. If, one profession or Skill becomes a hereditary gift, then it shuts the society down. Just because a society has Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, doesn't make it a retrograde Caste society. A Retrograde Caste society is one where a person from any caste does not have the opportunity to do what s/he likes and is capable of despite the abilities. Education is the only mean to develop capabilities to the maximum which in turn leads to social mobility.

### 4. Influence of Caste System on the Mode of Life

Caste-based discrimination can influence all spheres of life and violate a cross-section of basic human rights including civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. It is also a major obstacle to achieving development goals, since affected populations are often excluded from development processes. The exclusion of 'caste-affected communities' by other groups in society and the inherent structural inequality in these social relationships lead to,

- ➔ High levels of poverty among affected population groups,
- ➔ Exclusion from, or reduced benefits from development processes,
- ➔ Precludes their involvement in decision making and meaningful participation in public and civil life,
- ➔ Lack of education and awareness leads to denial of human rights.

### 5. Education in Creating "Open System Model" of Society

In a static society, the main function of the educational system is to transmit the cultural heritage to the new generations. But in a changing society, these keep on changing from generation to generation and the educational system in such a society must not only transmit the cultural heritage, but also aid in preparing the young for adjustment to any changes in them that may have occurred or are likely to occur in future. The relationship between educational system and society is mutual; sometimes the society influences changes in educational system and at other times the educational system influences changes in the society. Education is directly related to the development of an individual and the community. It is the most important single factor for economic development as well as social emancipation and by bringing mobility and changes in society it can turn a close or conservative society based on caste hierarchy into a liberal or open model society.

### 6. Education and Constraints to Eliminate Caste Hierarchy

Education helps to remove certain constraints present in the path of eliminating caste hierarchy by,

- ✓ Providing adequate information and awareness about social justice,
- ✓ Developing of political will, institutional commitment and Dalit leadership,
- ✓ Ensuring systematic inclusion to participate in the decision making that affect their lives,
- ✓ Broadening outlook to accept changes and challenges needed for eliminating caste hierarchy.

### 7. Universalization of Education, Westernization and Its Effect on Caste System

Goal of universalization of education is yet to achieve in India though persistent efforts and steps have been made from a long period. Discrimination against Dalits in the educational system is a widespread problem in caste-affected countries. Alienation, social exclusion, and physical abuse transcend all levels of education, from primary education to university. Illiteracy and drop-out rates among Dalits are very high due to a number of social and physical factors. Legislation on the area is limited, and measures that have been taken are often inadequately implemented. Universalization of primary education in this situation among dalit children is essential by removing known barriers to the enrolment and retention in school of young and teenage girls/boys belonging to all ethnic groups, castes and communities that are discriminated against.

Modern liberal education introduced into the country by the British has played a crucial role in undermining the importance of caste in Indian social life. The term 'Westernization' was coined by Srinivas to signify the changes in the Indian society during the British rule. By promoting education, egalitarianism, rationalism, humanism and above all a critical outlook towards various social issues and problems, westernization has gone a long way in undermining the influence of the caste system. It has given severe blow to practices like child marriage, purity and pollution, commensality, untouchability etc. The effects of westernization are prominently visible in the form of inter-caste marriages, intercommunity marriages, inter-religious marriages, occupational changes etc.

### 8. Education as a Liberating and Democratizing Force

Democracy is based on the principle of equality. Education plays significant role in equalizing opportunities in three ways.

- ☆ By making it possible for all those who have the desire to be educated and the ability to benefit by that facility,
- ☆ By developing a content of education which will promote the development of a scientific and objective outlook,
- ☆ By creating a social environment of mutual tolerance based on religion, language, caste, class etc. for providing equal opportunities of social mobility to all individuals in society. For providing equal opportunity to secure good education is crucial.

### 9. Role of Education in Social Change with Special Emphasis on Eliminating Caste Hierarchy

Education is considered as an instrument of social change. In describing education as an instrument of social change, three things are important: the agents of change, the content of change, and the social background of those who are sought to be changed.

Educational institutions under the control of different cultural groups reflect the values of those groups which support and

control education. In this situation, teachers impart specific values, aspirations and to the children. Educated Social reformers emphasized on values like removal of caste restrictions, equality of women, doing away with social evil social customs and practices, voice in the governance of the country, establishing democratic institutions and so on. They, thus, wanted to teach liberal philosophy through education for changing society by advocating removal of caste hierarchy.

### 10. Rights, Accountability and Education

Illiteracy and lack of awareness of the weaker section of the society have been used for their harassment, humiliation and economic exploitation. Education not only enlightens individuals by providing knowledge and skills but also makes people aware of their rights as well as responsibilities in other words it makes people accountable. Only responsible and socially aware people develops interest in social issues and tries to bring changes analyzing positive and negative aspects of the issue. To eliminate caste hierarchy such responsible attitude is essential.

### 11. Human Rights Education to Get Rid of Caste Discrimination

“The plight of hundreds of millions cannot be justified as age-old traditions, nor can it be regarded merely as a ‘family business’. The time has come to eradicate the shameful concept of caste.”- UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay.

The hierarchical division of a society placing inherent privileges and restrictions by birth run contrary to the belief that “all human beings are free and equal in dignity and rights” as stated in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Caste is the very negation of the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination. Caste-based discrimination is a violation of international human rights law affecting more than 260 million people worldwide. Being based in deeply engrained social structures, caste based discrimination is part of day to day life. Discrimination is often based on housing, work and access to public spaces. The Indian constitution (1947) protects the fundamental rights of every Indian citizen, including equality, freedom of speech, expression, belief, assembly, association, movement, education, equality of opportunity in matters of public employment without discrimination on grounds of race, religion, caste or gender. It also formally abolishes “untouchability” and prohibits its practice (Article-17). Caste discrimination involves massive violations human rights. Caste-affected communities are denied a life in dignity and equality. Human rights education helps in community mobilisation, developing awareness regarding human rights and leadership training, building and strengthening the local/district presence of national movements, campaigning against specific untouchability practices and to take the necessary steps to ensure equal access to the justice system for all members of descent-based communities.

### 12. Suggestions

Some recommendations can be put forward for utilizing education to eliminate caste hierarchy-

- Emphasize to inculcate values like removal of caste restrictions, equality of people, doing away with social evil social customs and practices and plan curriculum, co-curricular activities accordingly.

- Holding formal consultations, seminars, discussions with representatives from caste-affected areas and educationists to develop programs and calls for proposals.
- Adopting equal opportunity policies coupled with affirmative action for Dalit girls/boys.
- Improve access to vocational training and employment opportunities for caste-affected communities.
- Educational levels particularly higher education sector should give formal and informal leadership building as an essential priority. It should aim at developing skills to take up leadership positions in community and society.
- To remove financial exclusion of weaker section from development process of the country financial education or literacy should be taught which in turn will help in inclusive growth.
- Human rights education should be included in all levels of education.
- Along with organizing student-teacher exchange programs among different communities education system should play supportive role in the efforts to develop coherent and consistent local, national and international messages and strategies for eliminating caste hierarchy.
- Undertaking research to develop appropriate frameworks addressing caste discrimination may be very helpful in this regard.

### 13. Conclusion

According to the sociological perspective, education does not arise in response of the individual needs of the individual, but it arises out of the needs of the society of which the individual is a member. The educational system of any society is related to its total social system. It is a sub system performing certain functions for the on-going social system. The goals and needs of the total social system get reflected in the functions it lays down for educational system and the form in which society structures it to fulfill those functions. What has been there for centuries cannot be undone in a day or two. Therefore there is a need of change all over the place by means of proper education in the thinking of people about caste, community, religious and philosophical values. Nothing is objectionable so long as there is no compulsion, hatred, animosity.

The world is created by God in a wonderful and mysterious way. Diversity is the Art of Nature; but Unity is the Heart of God. This is what the Rgveda (I.164.46) declared ages ago: ‘eka’ sad viprābāhūdāvadanti’ (What exists is One but wise men call it by different names). People should do what they think is right and good for them; but at the same time they should not battle in the name of religion, philosophy, race, caste, class, community or political affiliations. Discrimination among people in any ground is not permissible in a democratic country. Education has become one of the influential instruments of social change in this regard. It leads to the mobilization of people’s aspirations for development and change, equalization of opportunities, empowerment of weaker section and serves as the solution of most of the societal problems.

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