

Caste as Identity in Traditional Indian Society

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Abstract

The Indian caste system has a very strong historical background that has been ingrained from ancient times. People are often segregated based on religion, gender, language, class and tribe. In the Indian caste system, a person is identified based on the caste in which they were born. This social stratification is burdensome for people who are bound by the caste system. It regulates their behaviour in society. The practice of 'Untouchability' came about as a result of caste-based social stratification.

This article highlights the deplorable situations people find themselves in due to the prevailing caste system. For a better understanding of the concept of how identities of typical Indians are shaped by caste, references from 'Untouchable' by Mulk Raj Anand and 'Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man' by U.R Ananthamurthy are included in the article.

It aims to provide an in-depth understanding of their lives and experiences and highlight the ethical, political and social issues faced by victims of the caste system. It is also intended to provide an understanding of the current scenarios of caste-based Indian society.

Keywords: *untouchable, casteism, discrimination, identity, society, human rights, constitution.*

India is a country rich in culture and practices. Many customs have been persistent in the country for centuries and we countrymen have continued them hitherto. Amidst all the prevailing ones, one substandard custom is the '**Casteism**' that has made its home in our country. Besides, where did such observances come from, who made them, it is difficult to ascertain because many interpretations can be necessitated.

It is believed that the advent of casteism in India was due to the arrival of Aryans, who had the impulse to hold the natives and their identities in their grasp. There are different speculations about the origin of caste system. One of the theories regarding the origin of the caste system in India is '**Distribution of Power**'. In the case of any society, there are four major sources of power. These are – land, knowledge, army and money. The Hindu caste system sought to avoid the concentration of all these four on one hand. Hence, it divided these sources among people resulting in four main castes. **Knowledge** went to the **Brahmins**, **land** to the **Shudras**, **money** to the **Vaishyas** and **army**, or the military power to the **Kshatriyas**.

Yet another theory, based on the '**Sense of Responsibility**' holds the view that the one who takes the most responsibility for society gets the highest position. For example, the Brahmins with their access to wisdom

and knowledge take charge of not just themselves, but also of the redemption of the society as a whole. So they deserved the highest position in the social strata. Then came the Kshatriyas, whose duty was to protect the country in the face of external dangers, and therefore they deserved the second-highest place. The Vaishyas do not take much responsibility for the well-being of society. While running businesses, they maintained prosperity and economic channels, but mostly for themselves. So, they were placed after the Kshatriyas. And finally, the Shudras, by raising crops, selling and consuming them, took care of only themselves. Hence, they were given the lowest rank.

But, this logic does not make sense because Shudras feed everyone. They too contribute to the welfare of the society by providing one of the most essential commodities for survival i.e., food. Outside this social stratification lies the **Untouchables** or the outcasts, who are considered beneath all other races.

This stratum has categorized men in various ways. Compared to the people from the lower castes, the members of the upper castes enjoy more privileges. There is not a person to bridle them. They can choose any vocation they want and treat the low-borns the way they like as if it is their birthright. But, when we examine the lives of the underprivileged, they are at all times marginalized and their emotions and feelings are

consistently subdued or disregarded. They are not even regarded as humans and their dignity is not taken care of at all. No matter how capable or worthy these people are, they are still not given the respect they deserve, solely because they were born into a certain caste. Society has chained them and their subsistence.

Identity is a defining feature in each of our lives. Our individuality is essential in making our existence recognized in society. The novel, '**Samskara: A Rite for a Dead Man**' by U.R Ananthamurthy, throws light on the loss of identity of certain characters. The character of Chandri, who is introduced as a woman belonging to the lower caste, is much discussed in this specific narrative. Since she belonged to the impoverished category, she is perceived differently by the Brahmins of the Agrahara. She is not just considered unapproachable but is also treated as if she is unobtrusive. In the back of their minds, almost all the Brahmins of the Agrahara wanted to have a sexual affinity with Chandri since they felt attracted by her grace and charm. But they also felt that their status will be blemished if they do so. This thought held them back. This novel brings forward the grabby nature of the people of the ostensible upper-class community. This was deposed at the beginning of the novel, when nobody was ready to do the dissolution of Naranappa, a Brahmin by birth but a non-brahmin by all his actions. But when Chandri, his handpicked concubine, offers her gold to anyone willing to perform the rites, confoundingly, everybody agrees in order to get hold of the gold proffered.

Even, the proponent of this novel, Praneshacharya is also the perfect embodiment of loss of identity. We can affirm that he is baffled as to who he actually is, what his role in the community is and why is he masking up his innermost self. It is Chandri a woman from the lower caste, who plays a vital role in the metamorphosis of Praneshacharya. In the arid sexless life of the Acharya, Chandri comes to his rescue and sows the seeds of joy into him. It is through the character of Chandri that Praneshacharya starts rationalizing his own self, and his desires, and questions what his true identity is if he sets aside the label of the head of the Agrahara.

People should be identified based on their excellence, toil, commitment, and enthusiasm, not merely because of

their caste. Nevertheless, the cold truth is that humans are pinpointed by their genealogy and their family roots, rather than by their attributes. The footprints of the **caste system** on civilizations and the lives of people are just appalling. Caste becomes a part of one's identity. In the novel, '**Untouchables**' by Mulk Raj Anand, we come across the character of Bakha, who is mercilessly maltreated only because he belonged to the **Dalit community**. The hardships of these folks have been rendered through Bakha's character. He is allocated the job of a general janitor and it was believed that this is what is meant for his kind. They don't have the liberty to choose any other piece of work for themselves. Thus, because of his social class, he is allocated a distinctive identity in the society that he cannot escape.

In addition, it is not verifiable that people belonging to upper castes have all the entitlement. Despite being from the upper caste community, they might have to face stumbling blocks. The same is evident in the character of Naranappa, from the novel, '**Samskara**'. Even though he belonged to the Brahmin community, which had been given the catbird seat in the existing caste system, he still had to undergo the downside. He was a Brahmin by birth, but in due course, he embraced non-brahminical conventions, which made him a black sheep in the eyes of the Brahmins of the Agrahara. Since he infringed the rules of his community, he had to face the hatred of other Brahmins. Hence, this caste system in itself is atrocious for everybody in the society, because the upshot is faced by all and sundry.

'**Casteism**' can be considered as racism in the Indian garb. Its toxic branches penetrate every nook and corner of the country and bear execrable fruits like **Human Rights violations, untouchability, and caste-based discrimination**. In pre-independent India, untouchables were denied basic human rights such as touching a high caste, drinking water from community wells and visiting temples.

The novel '**Untouchable**' throws light on the demeaning way in which the Dalit community was treated by the upper caste men. Mulk Raj Anand, through his novel, portrays the oppression faced by the untouchables. The protagonist of the novel, Bakha and his family live in a

one-roomed house made of mud. They are assigned the job of cleaning latrines as they belong to the community of sweepers. Bakha and his family are victims of the hegemonic caste system and are looked down on by the members of the upper caste. Bakha is abused by an upper-caste man who accidentally bumps into him on his way to the temple. The upper-caste Hindu accuses Bakha of polluting him, and returns home to purify himself of Bakha's 'polluting touch'. Another instance of caste-based oppression can be seen when Sohini and the other untouchables stand near the well with their pitchers, waiting for the mercy of an upper-caste passer-by to fill their containers. The **Vedic scriptures** justify such instances of caste-based oppression citing the religious doctrine of 'Karma', according to which, one's birth is determined by one's conduct in previous lifetimes. A person's caste determines his /her social position, and thus, becomes a tool that governs one's life.

As mentioned earlier, it is not only the lower castes and the untouchables who are the victims of the caste system. Even the upper caste community is fastened to the chains of caste system. The Brahmin society in U.R. Ananthamurthy's '**Samskara**' lead a monotonous dull life ordered by rituals and festivals. As one progresses up the social ladder, the concept of purity and pollution becomes more deeply ingrained. The lives of the untouchables are remarkably simple when compared to the complicated lives of Brahmins in the Agrahara who are bound by complex religious norms. The Brahmin norm forbids them from eating anything while the uncremated body of a fellow Brahmin lies there in the Agrahara. Though all of them despised Naranappa for his non-brahminical deeds, they were bound by the Brahminical code of conduct and were forced to sacrifice their meals until his body was properly cremated. While the whole Agrahara is fasting, Chandri, Naranappa's concubine eats naturally, as she is aware that no rules apply to her. She is a woman conscious of her identity and unlike the Brahmin women in the Agrahara, she is not tied down to any duty. In this respect, she leads a more unrestricted life than the Brahmin wives who look down on her.

The laws of untouchability practiced by the Brahmins are made flexible to serve their own interests. **Subaltern**

women like Chandri and Belli in '**Samskara**' are viewed as objects to satisfy the sexual needs of the Brahmin men. These women, though they belong to the untouchable community, are not 'untouchable' when a Brahmin requires sexual pleasures. This behaviour can also be noticed in Anand's '**Untouchable**', where the temple priest tries to molest Bakha's sister, Sohini.

A person's caste also played a major role in their options regarding education and jobs. In pre-independent India, untouchables were denied the **Right to Education**. This aspect is well portrayed in '**Untouchable**', where Bakha has a strong desire to learn but is denied any formal education because of his backward caste. Initially, Bakha failed to understand his father's reasoning that education was not meant for their kind, but later he realizes that being a sweeper's son, he would not be admitted to any of the schools, lest the masters and students be polluted by his touch. The lack of education among the lower castes hugely contributed to their lack of awareness about their own rights and thus, prevented them from getting good jobs and hindered any progress in their lives.

Seventy five years have passed since India gained Independence. **The Constitution of India**, which was adopted as the country's fundamental governing document, contains various articles aimed at promoting equality among the citizens of the nation. **Articles 14 and 15** promote equality and forbid discrimination based on caste, religion, race, or gender. **Article 17** classifies the practice of untouchability as a punishable offence.. **Articles 45 and 46** guarantee the promotion of educational and economic welfare of the unprivileged. The Constitution contains various other articles to protect the rights of the **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes**, to make sure that they no longer remain suppressed. These measures have been implemented to ensure equality for all the people of our country.

Despite all the Constitutional measures, caste discrimination is still prevalent in many parts of modern Indian society. Instances of caste-based violence and discrimination have certainly reduced over the years, but India still has a long way to go before achieving the goal of equality. It can be observed that inter-caste marriages are still disapproved in many Indian societies, and have

resulted in atrocities like honour killings in various parts of the country. Yet another indicator is the fact that the majority of the people engaged in jobs like sweeping, tanning, and scavenging belong to the backward communities of society. The current state of affairs seems to indicate that caste still plays a major role in shaping the identity of an individual in a traditional Indian society. The present situation can thus, hardly be deemed satisfactory. The Indian society will be truly free only when we see an end to such meaningless and harmful traditions.

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