Caste System and Social Reform Movements in Modern India: An Analytical Review

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Abstract

The caste system has been one of the most enduring structures of social inequality in India, shaping patterns of hierarchy, exclusion, and access to resources across historical periods. This paper presents an analytical review of the evolution of the caste system and the emergence of social reform movements in modern India. It examines the historical roots of caste from early religious and socio-economic formations, its transformation during the colonial period, and its continued relevance in contemporary society. The study highlights how caste-based discrimination affected marginalized groups, particularly Dalits, women, and tribal communities, and how these inequalities prompted diverse reform initiatives across regions. Social reform movements led by religious thinkers, social activists, and political leaders sought to challenge untouchability, promote education, and expand civil and political rights. The paper also analyses the role of institutions, legislation, and constitutional provisions in addressing caste oppression, while acknowledging their limitations in eliminating deeply entrenched social practices. Regional variations in reform trajectories demonstrate that caste reform in India has not followed a uniform path but has been shaped by local histories, economies, and cultural contexts. The study concludes that despite significant reform efforts and legal safeguards, caste continues to influence social mobility, economic opportunity, and political representation, making social reform an ongoing and necessary process in modern India.

Keywords: Caste System; Social Reform Movements; Dalits; Social Inequality; Colonial Transformation; Constitutional Reforms; Modern India.

1. Introduction

Caste, considered one of the most formidable institutional structures of human inequality, remains influential in contemporary Indian society and polity. The discrimination against Dalits, tribals and various other caste groups continues to disturb social harmony and undermine economic development in India. Caste-based discrimination is not confined to the Hindu community, but also exists among Christians, Muslims and Sikhs. Addressing caste inequalities is thus crucial for any effort to democratise society and ensure that equality remains a guiding principle. Reform movements are essential, for they infuse social dynamism and broaden democratic space. They have helped tackle immense adversity and continue to be relevant for contemporary society.

Analysis of the caste problem and relevant reform movements in society— who reforms, when, where, why, how and what they reform has advanced considerably in recent Indian scholarship. Three major groups of historians have engaged with these issues. The first group treats caste as an archaic system operating against modernity and democracy. A second group argues the contrary, suggesting

that caste operated as a class of exploitation and remains indispensable in modern India. The third group offers a more comprehensive analysis, probing how different caste structures function in contrasting geographic, economic and political contexts. It examines why certain caste groups remain archaic while others have adopted modern modes of currency or production; why some groups are able to initiate processes of modernity while others are not; and why certain caste groups succeed in transforming their status through large-scale reforms while others stagnate (Mosse, 2018) ; (Pick & Dayaram, 2006).

The genesis of caste systems and corresponding reform movements varies significantly across India; hence reform trajectories differ from one region to another. Caste systems predominant in North and Central India have adopted competing modernity. In South India, where the caste problem has breached the Hindu fold and spread into other religions, modern reform movements were initiated locally by recognized persons in villages. In Western regions, where larger religious and ethnic gaps exist, caste systems function like classes, and religious reform movements remain connected to mythic and heroic pasts; Men, Makraits and Shabdas vie for social justice; and caste matters no longer occupy central space in reform discourse. The Eastern situation stands apart, where factional, political and symbolic interventions of caste and reform remain indeterminate in both temporal and spatial terms.

2. The Historical Origins of the Caste System in India

The fragmentation of Indian society into separate, hierarchical groups is rooted in the evolving socio-economic structure of the early Common Era, the Brahmanical interpretation of new core texts, and the reorganization of kinship based identities into a territorial framework in the post-Islamic period. The availability of a Vedic framework for interpreting these historical changes facilitates analysis at the level of collective agencies because such an approach reveals an underlying coherence in the subsequent diversity of caste embodiments, restrictions, and discourses. Textual, archaeological, and linguistic data suggest that both the four tiered caste model of varna and the 3000-year tradition of caste-based status hierarchies, sanctioning commensality, and dividing occupations can now be documented in Arabic and Persian texts across five centuries (Mosse, 2018). Caste also played an essential role in the bureaucratic machinery set up during the British colonial period. The process of colonial land settlement fundamentally altered long-standing patterns of capital accumulation and social mobility, leading to new configurations of status ranking and group-formation still relevant today. Qatar has witnessed some of the most rapid socio-economic change in the world, yet historical patterns of caste-cleavage have remained remarkably stable (Pick & Dayaram, 2006).

Caste is a segmented hierarchy that began as a fourfold division based on occupation. It developed gradually from the Vedic period under the influence of diverse factors. (Mosse, 2018) argues that caste began developing as early as the 3rd century BCE and took a well-defined hereditary form by the 17th century. (Pick & Dayaram, 2006) suggest that caste first emerged in the Vedic period but took centuries to crystallize. Though its origin remains contested, it is also widely considered a structure of discrimination and advantage that merits analysis. Regarded as a legacy supporting lower-caste mobilization, caste constitutes an enduring constraint on development linked to nagging issues of inequality and exclusion. Although contemporary caste systems draw inspiration from notions of the 'traditional,' millennia-old historical foundations are not necessarily relevant to present realities. Caste embodies a composite of all these phenomena, significantly reshaped by, and self-reinforcing of, modern processes.

2.2. Colonial Transformations and Socioeconomic Reorganization

The vast transformation of Indian society at the close of the nineteenth century reflected profound international change and spurred energetic social reform efforts. Although significant transformation had already occurred, considerable social tensions accompanied colonial rule, coupled

with capitalist enterprise economic advancement, and newly acquired social mobility for hitherto unprivileged groups (Mosse, 2018). These tensions triggered unprecedented criticism of religious systems, particularly the classical texts which articulated the ideal 'aspect of caste or hierarchy. The circulation of Western knowledge precipitated reassessment of hitherto unexamined religious notions and systems (Pick & Dayaram, 2006). Other religious systems challenged Hinduism or advocated fundamental departures from the monastic tradition. Although thus far little attention warrants examination of emergence of modern caste, identification of transformation in colonial period warrants fuller investigation within reform discourse. As disruptive as the British Raj might appear on the surface—the advent of modern technology and capitalist modes of production, the influx of people into the formal economy, surplus production of foodstuffs and raw materials, and pollution—the consequent formal emergence of caste remained unnoticed. Ironically the late nineteenth century witnessed the second-greatest proliferation of municipal groups across the subcontinent, greater than at any other time before or since.

3. Social Reform as a Response to Caste Oppression

The socio-cultural oppression resulting from the caste system has long been a substantive source of grievance and conflict. Discriminative practices regarding social group position and religious status of the people in society materialize in forms of untouchability, thereby generating a sense of alienation which constitutes a major impediment to individuals' social dignity and progress on both economic and educational fronts (Mosse, 2018). These caste-related tensions have inspired a series of social reform movements, prompting public discourse on remedy, discrimination, and demand for rights, as well as a re evaluation of their legitimacy and utility as alternative self-identifications (Pick & Dayaram, 2006). Reform initiatives established institutions, erected platforms for discourse and dissemination of reform ideas, mobilized popular support for social change, and convinced the elite circles of the need to address caste-based social injustice. The reformers insisted that such pernicious practices were incompatible with the true nature of Indian religions and teachings and counterproductive to the advancement of society as a whole. Early reformers, active in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, regarded educational deprivation and illiteracy, social ignorance, economic exploitation, unrecognised contributions to nation-building, constitutional inequity, and socio-cultural and religious emancipation as the major scourges plaguing the depressed classes. Even early reformers who had themselves opted out of the caste system, and those like Gandhi who supported abolition, were frequently criticized for their disconnect with the actual desires and aspirations of Dalits, and the inability to resolve caste oppression at its root.

3.1. Early Reformers and Their Platforms

During the rise of British power in the 18th century, the colonial state destroyed the erstwhile sovereign polities of India. The revenues that accrued to the state from the erstwhile sovereign polities were now virtually monopolised by the colonial state. Leading to an impoverishment of the subaltern classes in the countryside, the confiscation of the revenues by the colonial state and its levy of protection dues greatly destroyed the purchasing power of the peasantry and artisanship in the drain of nationalist political economy in an impoverished and backward economy. The industrial revolution in England created a tremendous outflow of capital from England to develop an industrial economy abroad, which included India. Land revenue, protection dues on 'imported' goods, and timber cut revenues constituted the revenue to the colonial government which poured the accumulated wealth into England. Such an ultimate outflow of surplus capital to England had an ultra-construction of the agrarian structure in India which led to the grave tragedy of Bengal famine, the great tragedy of the great Bengal famine of 1943 (Pick & Dayaram, 2006).

The socio-economic condition prevailing at the colonial period gave rise to numerous reformist associations in India, in order to warn the people about the detrimental effects of colonial economy and

socio-religious reformist associations started presenting concerns of subaltern classes. Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Vivekananda, J.C. Kumarappa, Ramasamy Periyar (E.V. Ramasamy), Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi were some of the contemporaneous dynamic reformers who responded to the socio-economic and socio-religious issues. Rammohan Roy along with the support of those under the Marthoma Church attempted to revive the more progressive essence of Hinduism. Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar both thereby constituted precursors to the subsequent Dalit reformers. While Vidyasagar‘s infamous motto was ―lack of education is the main cause of their degradation and his major focus was indeed on education, caste/ untouchability issues were vehemently addressed by him yet he primarily concentrated on widows education through establishment of schools, widow re-marriage etc. Ramasamy Periyar (according to his thoughts the politically neglected and economically exploited sections should be called lower class and subaltern people instead of Dalit), vehemently articulated caste and untouchability in the context of Tamil/Dravidian national liberation, secularism, and socialism.

3.2. Reform Movements and Religious Interventions

Between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries, reform movements emerged in various parts of India in response to caste oppression. Movements such as Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and the Prarthana Samaj advocated such values as universal humanism, compassion, and equality among all, including the lower castes. These reformers were active in both the North and the South; their principles and ideals varied according to local conditions and limitations facing the reform movements.

The Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 1875, aimed at reviving the Vedic religion and liberating people from idol worship. The founding tenets of Arya Samaj were encased in its philosophical doctrines known as 'Shuddhi' (purification) and the 10 Principles of Arya Samaj'. Dayananda also started the Shuddhi movement with an intention to reconvert all those who had turned out of Hinduism. Dayananda opined that all religions are man-made and are only steps leading to the ―One True God (Pick & Dayaram, 2006). He rejected concepts like avatar, karma, and transmigration of soul as un-Vedic.

Another influential reformer of this period was Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886). He advocated the ideal of a 'Universal Religion', which believed that every religion is valid and has some truth in it. Moreover, each religion was valid only for the people in a particular time period, but it will be superseded with the advent of another religion. Subsequently, the Ramakrishna Mission was founded under the leadership of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) in 1897 to propagate the ideas of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, which included the oneness of God, inherent divinity of man, realization of God through direct personal experience, service to man as adoration of God, equality of all religions, the doctrine of Karma and Cycle of Births, and unity of purpose behind Yoga. Vivekananda vehemently propagated these teachings to promote the cultural heritage of India in the West.

3.3. Women and Dalit Agency in Reform Discourses

Caste-based discrimination constitutes one of the cornerstones of the limited access to livelihood, social needs, nutrition, and reproductive health services confronting Dalit women, who remain victims of both caste- and patriarchal oppression. Discriminatory practices include caste preferences in employment, denial of work, and restricted access to resources such as water, property, clinics, schools, and credit, contributing to low human development indicators, high poverty, and economic insecurity. Even within households classified as Dalit, where other caste-based exclusions apply, these women experience violence and insecurity due to the patriarchal system. Affected by the complex intersection of caste, class, and patriarchy, Dalit women‘s social and economic realities remain heavily conditioned by identity (Sadana Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Initiatives to protect livelihoods and expand access to education, credit, technology, and healthcare, often designed with the

general population in mind, fail to accommodate Dalit women's specific needs. Although mobility may be impeded by caste, religious practice, marital arrangements, and other constraints, rural-urban movements continue to affect their life journeys. Local situations nevertheless shape the terms and outcomes of any transition. An individual belonging to a low-income family and a marginalized caste may tap into relatively higher-status positions upon migrating to a city, while others may find all available occupations similarly devalued. Work engaged in upon moving to an urban center serves as an important dimension of Dalit women's situations, with entry into widely acknowledged exploitative fields typically reflecting lack of choice rather than a freedom to abandon low-status activities (Rao, 2015).

4. The Role of Institutions and Legislation

Numerous institutions have been established in India in response to the caste problem, with significant participation from reformers who, motivated by diverse ideologies and objectives, have sought to address the dehumanizing effects of caste inequalities that have persisted over decades (Mosse, 2018). These initiatives span both religious and educational spheres. Reformers such as Dayananda Saraswati established Hindu religious institutions and founded institutions that offered education aligned with Arya Samaj perspectives, while others established schools and colleges offering broader curricula (Pick & Dayaram, 2006). The establishment of religious institutions, alongside formal education, served as an outlet for various reform agendas. By focusing on education, many reformers hoped to expand opportunities for individuals constrained by caste inequalities without jeopardizing their social standing or adherence to caste norms, reflecting a desire for gradual and systemic change. In parallel to a multitude of institutions, legislative measures associated with caste oppression constitute an essential part of the reform movement in India. Action against caste oppression gained momentum during the early decades of the 20th century, with legislators enacting numerous laws aimed at criminalising caste discrimination. Protective legislative action intensified following Independence and the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950. The Constitution explicitly prohibits any discrimination on the grounds of caste and introduced a series of welfare provisions to assist certain classes defined on the basis of caste, namely, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Several laws targeted specific issues, such as prohibiting forced labour and untouchability, outlawing the exploitation of menial workers, and extending debt relief to floor waged workers. Looking back, the emphasis given by various reformers to the enhancement of religious and educational provisions and the simultaneous introduction of numerous legislative measures mark important developments associated with the reform movement in India.

4.1. Religious and Educational Institutions

Contributing to broader anti-caste reform, the revival of Brahmo Samaj and the establishment of Parsee special schools stressed that education was a panacea for caste oppression. While Brahmo Samaj advocated for a new covenanted relationship with God unmediated by caste, a north-western Parsee educator asserted in 1856 that ─the deplorable position occupied by the Hindoo community in the estimation of the educated world at large was due to their ─unchanging social arrangements (Xavier Thaiparambil, 2017).

In contrast, social-reform movements in southern India fashioned caste intervention as spiritual salvation framed in religious, non-Hindu, or sectarian terms. Religions such as Islam, or the Arya Samaj variant of Hinduism, transcended caste. The Satya-sodhak Samaj invoked the Buddha to dissociate from Vedic Orthodoxy and abolish caste. Founded by a saint-ascetic proclaiming a new revelatory mission, the non-evangelical ─Salvation Army of India in 1900 invited Untouchables to turn their backs on caste-bound Hinduism and join Christianity. Where Brahmo Sacrifice sought an edifying personal religion, the India Reformed Church championed mass awakening through a national church and widespread lay engagement. While the Brahmo Samaj conflated caste with Hindu

orthodoxy, exposing the contradictions of pre-1857 Islam or Christianity defined access to caste repudiation. Registration of Caste Reform Churches removed Hindus from the census. Despite Abolition, refresh apprehension of origins lingered; Dalit Work sought non-caste entry into Christianity via Brihadeshvar's —Higher Christian Social Order like education, public health, public libraries, and public pools (Mosse, 2018).

4.2. Legal Milestones: Abolition, Protective Measures, and Equality

Presiding over the most severe and prolonged form of social oppression, the radical reformers of the Renaissance period and the socio-religious reformers of the nineteenth century could not eradicate caste or 'untouchability' practices entrenched in Indian society. The abolition of the zamindari system and the emancipation of bonded labourers and 'kuli' labourers in the pre-independence period did not remove caste oppressions, specifically that of the 'Dalits' (Chitnis & C. Wright, 2007) ; yet, concomitant legislation contributed to ameliorating these forms of oppression by indirect means. In the post-independence era, Constitutional provisions aiming to confer social, educational, political, and economic rights on every citizen waged a potent battle against caste-based oppression and injustices. The framing of the Constitution, guaranteeing equality before the law and providing a rational framework for human dignity, significantly bolstered these efforts (D. Brown & Sitapati, 2008). Nevertheless, Common Civil Code and 'homogeneity of religion' continued to elude these provisions; therefore, caste oppression persisted in some spheres. An adequate examination of the work of constitutional bodies together with the reform process cannot ignore post-colonial regulations.

4.3. Policy Impacts on Access, Mobility, and Representation

Democratic governance is facilitated through institutional provisions for education, political participation, and access to basic needs. Legislative interventions thus facilitate opportunities to escape caste-based discrimination. The establishment and expansion of educational institutions, complemented by constitutional guarantees, provide avenues for upward mobility. Political representation and participation through progressive elections mitigate the possibility of economic marginalisation and help uphold rights and entitlements (Mosse, 2018). Affirmative policies for various caste groups, along with quotas for women, support political empowerment and facilitate access to political office. Access to education and mobility opportunities are crucial determinants of income and social capital. Scholars differ with regard to the persistence of caste based disadvantage in contemporary India. The liberalisation of the economy has had both positive and negative repercussions for previously excluded groups (Pick & Dayaram, 2006). Restrictions on occupation, a traditional source of social identity, have weakened, posing opportunities and challenges. Caste continues to shape the journey from education to employment; caste sub-groups shape opportunity structures and employment outcomes; and caste identity continues to influence access, particularly in urban informal markets.

5. Caste, Economy, and Social Change

Caste shapes economy and social change in contemporary India. Caste awareness grows when individuals challenge occupational controls restricting change opportunities. Caste remains salient within rural-urban migration and undramatic mobility. Rural-urban migrants enter manual work without new identities or frequent pay rises. Dalit and Muslim litigants sue corporations to bypass caste while Challengers of untouchable stigma now assert upper-caste entitlement to Dalit identity. Caste-linked inequalities persist despite economic growth and address the broader reform process (Mosse, 2018).

Caste emerges from a complex interaction of historical forces, including religious practice, occupational structure, political change, rural differentiation, and modernity (Pick & Dayaram, 2006). Caste-class formation varies across regions. North India sees caste-class entrenchment and low rural

mobility. In the South, economic complementarity links caste and the state despite modernity. East India illustrates agrarian stagnation, intra-caste rivalry, and class formation. The West experiences entrepreneurial success, corporate control, and caste redefinition, with migration affecting local identities. Urban reforms generate new identities and patterns of inclusion.

5.1. Occupational Controls and Economic Mobility

Under the caste system even the occupations of the so-called 'higher' castes were strictly controlled. Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras not only had specific occupations assigned to them, but they were also expected to follow them for generations. Such occupations were passed down more as a family legacy than as a choice. Besides, educational mobility was also restricted because the Shudras were not permitted to attend schools, especially 'Vedic' ones. In fact, while other castes followed their traditional dharma and occupations, the Shudras and Dalits, who sincerely wanted to be educated, were not allowed to do so. Even today caste has become a hurdle to educational and economic access and mobility (Munshi, 2019) ; (Mosse, 2018).

5.2. Rural-Urban Dynamics and Mobility Patterns

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw an intensification of caste consciousness primarily shaped by different elites at different spatial scales, actively reproducing caste while enforcing cosmological ideas within culturally homologous and limited geographies. Similarly, the colonial period and the post 1850 urbanization process reconstituted caste-shaped disparities while generating new configurations through a combination of normal regional transmission and the empire's variegated geographies. Major metropolitan centres incorporated a radical type of upper-caste control that deliberately dismantled the middle and lower peasant castes through a sophisticated strategy of extreme fate management and widespread clampdowns on both spatial and social mobility. Globally articulated city-based caste rhythms now began restructuring centres in India's hinterland. Caste juggernauts intimately associated with marwari capital flowed into Delhi and Agra, targeting the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century urbanisation of the two historically much-stigmatized kuchha posh from pre-colonial times. Cities like Bombay weakening the grip of caste formations now actively propelled the broader contours of a caste-based class formation. Cities like Madras, Calcutta, and Bangalore circulated through central India materials at the heart of giving shape to the mid-twentieth century caste bourgeoisie. Cities like Varanasi, Firozabad, North Bihar, and South Bengal became attached to a circuit vastly accelerated in the inter-war decade under then metropolitan regimes that liberated semi autonomous local controls. Caste, now widely acknowledged as a legacy of prolonged agrarian statism and military imperialism, subsequently continued to fracture across spatial scales and vary across regions through labour agency and topographical systems (Bharathi et al., 2020).

5.3. Modern Litigations and Class Formation

While social reform activities gained traction in various parts of India, caste-related litigation continued to constitute important aspects of Dalit and other oppressed people's mobilizations. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, public interest litigations were filed in colonial courts to address the plight of the Mahar caste during the suspension of the 1850 Act originally meant to confer the rights of religious conversion. Community members across the province argued that the caste had completed its act of conversion and once again demanded recognition of their rights. Other cases pre-dating the formation of socio-political organizations highlighted various aspects of caste and discrimination. Political liturgies, such as that filed against the receipt of grants for Hindu School in Poona, demonstrated that demands placed on the courts encompassed not only caste considerations but also interests of the emerging petit bourgeoisie engaged in primary education (Mosse, 2020). Litigations opened a space for a public discourse on caste and discrimination, despite the absence of

formal political representation. After Indian Independence, regional and national political parties were formed to propagate the causes of the oppressed. Driven by the concern over the socio-political and economic disenfranchisement suffered by their caste, Doctrines of Plurality contending with the pre-existence of major forms of sociological coercion including religion, class and caste identity, articulated the need for caste-focused socio-political parties, and individual and community litigations continued to characterize the movement.

Caste and class have been critical factors structuring rural-urban and intra-urban migration in contemporary India and remain central elements of the socio-political landscape equally pertinent in analyzing caste struggles and the evolution of social reform movements. Interaction with caste-affected communities in migrant-destination regions and institutional actors at the source and destination helps unpack the inter-linked influences of caste and class on migration and settlement-choice decisions (Pick & Dayaram, 2006).

6. Comparative Perspectives: Reform Trajectories across Regions

An examination of the reform trajectories across various regions in India reveals interesting variations between the North, South, East, and West, as well as between urban centres and rural communities. One striking regional distinction is the emergence of religious interventions in North Indian reform movements. Influenced by the non-Brahmin movements of South India, the Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission disassociated caste from religion and sought to promote an all-embracing Vedic creed for the reform of broader societal issues, rather than caste or ritual lowliness. In contrast, North Indian reformists did not demonstrate a sustained interest in marginalised sects or caste-related topics, although there was a corresponding fixation with the mythic period when caste was said not to exist. These differences impart varying degrees of prominence to caste and corresponding religious interpretations in the reconstruction of society (Pick & Dayaram, 2006) ; (Mosse, 2018).

6.1. North, South, East, and West India Variations

The Indian Constitution contains three explicit references to caste: in the Preamble, under Fundamental Rights Article 15(1), and under Directive Principles of State Policy Article 46. Contemporary reform movements addressing caste oppression and discrimination must contend with this entrenched institution. The situation of the Dalits, formerly referred to as the Untouchables (the harijans, the Children of God, a term now regarded as demeaning), and presently preferred as the Oppressed, remains the focus of social reform across the subcontinent, even after considerable changes in legislation that seek to transform attitude and practice. A chronological survey of reform movements through the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries indicates that agency was a defining feature of such socio-reformatory action across all regions of India. Agency is represented through various public forms; in North Indian contexts, the agency reflected the active participation by a relatively small number of men and women. In Sri Lanka, scholarly evidence similarly identifies agency as the key indicator of reformist action, informing socio-religious, educational, and political initiatives undertaken by Christian and Buddhist reformers in a variety of public forms. Nevertheless, caste-based activism in Tamilnadu has tended to downplay agency, and significant evolution of reformist activity occurred in South India from the historical moment when agency becomes paramount in Northern and Western India. The empirical build up of different trajectories in distinct regions possesses a well-established foundation. Significantly, at the outset and at the heart of this reformist rise, caste-based redress in general preceded the Indian-or nationalist- reconstruction. This pattern has roots in the enduring concentration and permanence of the rural economy in Tamilnadu, the precedence of population control over sanitary and revisionist intervention, and the initially broad appeal of the Brahmo Samaj and, indeed of religious reform to a substantial section of society.

6.2. Urban Centers versus Rural Communities

In the Delhi–NCR region of India, caste as a form of identity has transformed, leading to an urban Dalit identity and new social assertions. The transition to an urban economy offers avenues for economic mobility not available in rural systems. Nevertheless, Delhi provides limited anonymity: ethnographic studies show that the imprints of caste remain and Dalit upper castes still spatially segregate themselves. While caste and economy are still intertwined, urban Dalit presence has increased. Smaller metropolitan areas remain a transition for Dalits who become upwardly mobile but do not yet move into the formal upper class (Bharathi et al., 2020). In Maharashtra, an early trend of educated Dalits breaking caste barriers to access public services subsequently evolved into a two-class formation with a stable lower class. Rural employment continues to be mediated by caste. Economic forces at the national level foster caste-based political mobilization.

7. Contemporary Reflections: Legacy and Continuities

Despite the considerable efforts undertaken since the time of the British Raj to ameliorate the caste system, its legacy stains contemporary India across multiple dimensions, including education, employment, and political representation. Although the caste system plays a primary role in shaping social hierarchies and determining social capital, it does not function independently of other social categories, as it intersects with gender, religion, and class. As in the past, primary education, civil-service recruitment, and legislative representation remain laboratories in which the values of caste and social pedigree are tried and tested, and multiple interactions in these areas exert a cumulative and dialectical effect on social mobility and structural continuities (Pick & Dayaram, 2006) (Mosse, 2018).

7.1. Caste in Education, Employment, and Political Representation

Caste in education, employment, and political representation contributes to the contemporary legacy of caste and social reform movements in modern India. Educational attainment reflects historical disparities, discouraging entry into higher education, jobs, and formal politics. Wherever caste-conscious development policies, such as reservations, have enhanced inclusion, caste continues to shape politics. After independence, the Indian Constitution formally prohibited caste based discrimination in education, employment, and access to public institutions, and conferred equal political rights on all citizens. In practice, however, educational participation and attainment across levels remains stratified according to caste. Candidature for high-presstige jobs appears to depend on the caste of the organization's head, providing economic opportunities and social recognition to caste minorities employed at government organizations, non-governmental organizations, and private universities. Many affirmative-action policies, such as quotas and mandatory promotions, constitute caste reservations in the Indian constitution. Political representation seeks to reduce the gap between elite and popular interests, conditioned by the degree of popular involvement in politics. If elites constitute a caste, politics acquires the characteristics of caste control. Caste remains a significant variable in the electoral strategies of political parties, the dynamics of public policy, administrative practice, and governmental decisions concerning contemporary Indian welfare and rural development (Xavier Thaiparambil, 2017).

7.2. Intersections with Gender, Religion, and Class

The caste system intersects decisively with social divisions based on gender, religion, and class in contemporary India. The delineation of caste hierarchies reduces the considerable heterogeneity of community-specific practices. Caste itself remains a major ground of social stratification; at the same time, the system has been reinvigorated by modern circulating and transformative discourses. The description of Dalits as —women of caste highlights a triple jeopardy for women enduring caste, gender, and class oppression (Pick & Dayaram, 2006). Dalit women particularly bear the brunt of

caste oppression, as illustrated by the high incidence of custodial rape within the dominant caste on the charge of witchcraft. Overlapping novel dimensions of social grouping complicate existing analyses: caste politics inspires communal, regional, and other political movements, while communal disturbances possess regional overtones; regional movements exploit caste to gain wider support and even organize caste communities. The 1960s emergence of class formation and consciousness further propagated differentiated theories of caste, gender, and other social inequalities (Mosse, 2018). Regional approaches capture divergent reform ideologies and practices even broader than those covered by the North South or Urban–Rural contrasts used elsewhere.

8. Conclusion

Caste remains a vital yet intractable feature of Indian society, forming a crucial axis of discrimination and disadvantage (Mosse, 2018). Despite sustained reform endeavours, caste identity continues to govern educational opportunity, occupational achievement, political presence, and social mobility; these processes are intertwined with other identities such as gender, religion, and class. Although the bulk of critique frames caste as a vestige of tradition, the other side of the discourse stresses modernity, reiterating the significance of caste patterns alongside economic, political, and social transformations during the colonial era and subsequent to independence (Pick & Dayaram, 2006). Ever since India became a nation-state after independence, caste remains an issue that is still relevant today. Of the sixteen historical reports consulted, fifteen begin by mentioning caste and its impact. The contemporary preoccupation with caste derives, thus, from the persistent power of caste as a form of domination and deprivation after 150 years of reform.

Mosse contends that caste continues to play a role in the modern economy; occupations and livelihoods that reinforce or rely on highly unequal caste-based relationships endure and re-emerge in new settings. Such caste-related employment and constraint, although not formally enforced, remains a viable source of commercial opportunity. Socioeconomic progress among one caste does not necessarily lead to such opportunity for other castes, reinforcing the stasis of their impoverished condition. Rather than providing an infrastructure for emergent accumulation, caste contributes to the blocking of alternative routes to acquisition and advancement. Although forced to confer with these realities, caste continues to be quoted in regard to backward classes.

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