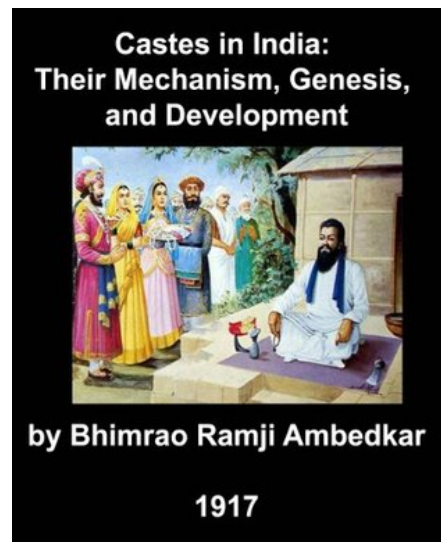




Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development

B.R. Ambedkar

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Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development was a paper read by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar at an anthropological seminar of Dr. Alexander Goldenweiser in New York on 9 May 1916. It was later published in volume XLI of Indian Antiquary in May 1917. In the same year, Ambedkar was awarded a Ph.D. degree by Columbia University on this topic.[1] In 1979, the Education Department of the Government of Maharashtra (Bombay) published this article in the collection of Ambedkar's writings and speeches Volume 1; later, it was translated in many languages.

In the paper, Ambedkar made a presentation a social phenomenon that emerged from the strategy of the Brahmins who adopted a strictly endogamous matrimonial regime, leading the other groups to do the same in order to emulate this self-proclaimed elite. He said that "the superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste".

Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development Details

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From Reader Review Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development for online ebook

Shishir Chaudhary says

Wow! Never before have I read anything as structured, scientific and logically communicated analysis of the practice of casteism in India as this remarkable paper by Ambedkar.

The reasons behind its genesis and the manner in which this system has evolved range from Endogamy, Exclusivity, the psychological act of imitation to the mechanized consequence of excommunication, to name a few.

While many researchers talk about 'standing on the shoulders of giants' to be an inevitable act of moving forward, Ambedkar stands on the very shoulders of eminent scholars and crushes them for their lack of reasoning and other shortcomings. You need to read to know the confidence and ambition Ambedkar possessed, for in his language lie the wealth of accumulated knowledge and expositions of original ideas.

I am still to fathom why his writings are not included in Indian school curricula to an extent of those by Gandhi or Nehru.

A. Sulthan says

It's a well structured thesis that explains the Castes's bits and bolts. Enlightened with a way of how to present a subject matter.

I said Castes's because Ambedkar argues there is no such thing as caste but only castes.

Mukesh Kumar says

This seminal paper was published 100 years ago by BR Ambedkar! What an absolute lucid piece of writing! Some really intriguing excerpts:

1. "...the means by which endogamous caste is preserved: i) burning of the widow with her husband/ Compulsory widowhood (a milder form of burning), ii) Imposing celibacy on the widower/ wedding him to a girl child not marriageable. With burning / celibacy options being less useful than latter.
2. "Caste is an enclosed class, with the customs most strictly followed by Brahmins/ The prevalence of caste preserving tactics in non-brahmin castes being derivative, their observance is neither strict nor complete."
3. "...no doubt that the whole process of caste-formation in India is a process of imitation of the higher by the lower...the Brahmin class first raised the structure of caste by the help of [above mentioned] customs..
4. "...the role of imitation in the spread of these customs among the non-Brahmin castes, as means or as ideals, though the imitators have not been aware of it, they exist among them as derivatives; and, if they are derived, there must have been prevalent one original caste that was high enough to have served as a pattern for the rest. But in a theocratic society, who could be the pattern but the servant of God?...a demi god/semi god"

And the whole paper is available for free online:

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mea/ac/pr...>

Pranav Aurora says

A summary of Ambedkar's thesis as I understood it:

Caste is an enclosed group of people. Importantly, caste cannot exist singularly, only as a system of castes. A singular caste is maintained through endogamy. A system of castes is maintained through excommunication. The genesis of the caste system begins with the Brahmins forming their own caste, and in turn a non-Brahmin caste. The caste system then spreads and evolves into its modern form through what Ambedkar calls the "infection of imitation." Essentially, it's better to have a seat at the table than not be at the table at all.

In addition, Ambedkar's analysis of endogamy is particularly important for its intersectional critique. Not only does the caste system legitimize economic exploitation, it also legitimizes the control of women's bodies. Widowed women have two options: (1) "sati" or burning alive with her deceased husband; or (2) compulsory widowhood, what Ambedkar describes as "a milder form of burning." But men are different. Ambedkar writes, "He is a dominant figure in every group and of the two sexes has greater prestige. With this traditional superiority of man over woman his wishes have always been consulted. Woman, on the other hand, has been an easy prey to all kinds of iniquitous injunctions, religious, social or economic." Widowed men also have two options: (1) imposing celibacy on the widower; or (2) wedding him to a girl not yet marriageable. While one is also forced celibacy, the other is girl marriage. The result: a violent system of economic exploitation fundamentally maintained through the dehumanizing control of women.

Vishal says

For any person who has ever read Dr Ambedkar, it is well understood that I need not eulogize him for his erudite thesis, spectacular insight and cogent arguments. Every time I read him, I always learn something new and find a different perspective of looking at things.

In this astute and remarkably concise paper on Caste-system, he explains the origin of Caste-system, and how it was perpetuated with the help of misogynistic practices; he includes in this paper rational arguments backed up with scientifically determined theories. Earlier, when people used to tell me that caste-system is at the root of most social problems in India, it was hard for me to digest. But I was mistaken, as I intend to point out in the quick summary of this paper. I have taken the liberty of adding some of my insights to this issue, I hope I'll be forgiven if I go on explaining at length about the topics that many people are already familiar with.

It is a commonly held belief that castes are created and perpetuated by Shashtras, which leads to the religious sanctity of the caste-system. While it can be said that the Shashtras stratified caste, the Caste might have been originated much earlier and from altogether different circumstances.

Ambedkar defines Caste as an enclosed class created and perpetuated by endogamy. Its origin is convoluted into Varna system which degenerated itself into Caste system when the priestly class isolated itself from others in order to preserve the privileges it had obtained by the means of its high position in the social hierarchy.

Ambedkar had argued with the new-age proponents of Varna-system in his book Annihilation of Caste, that

there is no way you can prevent the degeneration of Varna into Caste; because priestly class, once it obtains the privileges and high position, will be unwilling to let go of it for their descendants. Which is precisely what happened, the priestly class didn't want its descendants to be deprived of the privileges it enjoyed, so it isolated itself by the means of endogamy and closing contacts with others. It divided society into two sects: Brahmin and Non-Brahmin.

The other occupational communities followed suit, because they idolized Brahmins as their superiors and a class closer to God than they were. Any social customs practiced by Brahmins were imitated by non-brahmins except those which were strictly prohibited for them. Therefore, each occupational community formed its own caste supported by endogamy, following the example for priestly class which also had a common occupation for their caste.

Now, to support endogamy it was required that gender ratio of males to females is maintained. But in a close-knit group such as a caste, death of a husband or wife disrupted the balance and caused threat to the sexual moral fabric. A widow is susceptible to sexual corruption or a marriage outside the caste, so the practice of widow-burning was devised by Hindus. In case it appeared too inhumane, an alternative was employed which is to enforce lifelong widowhood and distort her beauty so as she is no longer a subject of sexual allurements. In case of a widower, such practices couldn't be employed since a man was an asset to materialistic prospects of a close-knit group, so it was decided that he should marry a younger girl who would be below marriageable age. This would maintain the ratio of men to women of appropriate age.

Later, confounded philosophies were contrived by Hindus to justify these practices in the name of obscure mysticism such as unity of soul and body of the couple in the case of widow-burning. However, they did not explain why the widower is not burnt if the soul and body of the couple is supposed to be united. In case of child-marriage, it was said that a girl should be married before she learns to love because she should love only her husband and no one else, if she grows young without marriage then she might love someone else other than her future husband and that would be a sin. It shows that Misogyny has served as the sole foundation on which the caste-system resides, because endogamy is another manifestation of misogyny where women of a community are treated as properties which should not be given to others. It is still evident in the current instances of Love-Jihad conflicts.

This, however, more or less summarizes the paper by Dr Ambedkar. I'll strongly recommend it to everyone who is concerned with social evils of India. Every communist, socialist, feminist and caste-proponent must read it.

A very contrasting point in this paper is the utter confidence and eloquence of Ambedkar as he stands on the shoulders of eminent ethnologists and crushes their arguments to crumbled rust. He points out flaws in their thesis of Caste-system while demolishing the apparent assumption of his arrogance by the reader, by proposing that his theory is not final and is a contribution to the discussion of issue; and he would be willing to abandon it if he is proved wrong.

Aditya Mishra says

This seminal paper clearly tells us how unnatural the institution of caste is. The paper gives compelling reasons regarding the origin and spread of caste. If you want to understand the uniqueness of caste system in India do read it

L XAVIER says

Gives an in-depth understanding and view on the origin of caste and its functioning mechanism. Must read for every Indian.

Hari says

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Krishnanunni says

When I first picked up "The Annihilation of Caste", I had negative preconceptions about it. If you have observed the Indian political landscape long enough, you will understand that Ambedkar's name is popularly used by proponents of a certain brand of politics. Over the last three days, I've ploughed through 3 of his works. emerging humbler and more knowledgeable and most importantly, more Indian, than I was before. This essay should have been titled "The Unravelling of Caste". If annihilation of caste was a discourse on the question 'Why should caste be eliminated?' This book delves into the question, 'How did caste system come into being?'

I recommend scribbling and organising ideas along with the ones from the other two books. But one question remains: Where would these discourses find a place, in a Post-Reservation-India?

Karthick says

"A learned man would be honored without his being labelled a Brahmin. A soldier would be respected without his being designated as Kshatriya. If European society honors its soldiers and servants without giving them permanent label, why should Hindu society find it difficult to do so is a question. All reform consists in a change in the notion, sentiment and mental attitudes of the people towards men and things"

Castes in India: their mechanism, Genesis and development is a Paper read before the anthropology seminar at the Columbia University on 9th May 1916 by Dr. Ambedkar.

Content is such a heavy one and not to be missed. Every paragraph, every page is important to be accounted for. Such a clarity, lucidity, and erudition.

CASTE:

It mentions definition of Mr. Senart, Mr. Nesfield, Sir H. Risley and Dr. Ketkar. But Dr. Ketkar's definition is much more elucidate.

Dr. Ketkar defines Caste as “a social group having two characteristics.

- i. membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born;**
- ii. the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group.”**

It throws light upon the real meaning of caste system and here he speaks about ‘Prohibition of Intermarriage and Membership by Autogeny’ as the two characteristics of Caste.

If you prohibit intermarriage the result is that you limit membership to those born within the group. Thus, it's two sides of the coin.

ENDOGENY:

Primitive Indian Society savored the principle of Exogamy. In fact, marriage between Sagotras (of the same class) was regarded as desecration and had more rigorous penalties. Exogamy as the rule, there could be no caste. Exogamy means fusion between the communities/clan.

Endogamy was foreign to India. Castes artificially chopped off the population into fixed and definite units, each one preventing from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy. It is the only characteristics that is peculiar to Caste. We have different castes because of endogamy. Thus, the superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of the caste.

If a group need to subsist endogamy and Caste, they ought to maintain the equality between the sexes. Otherwise, it turns out to be a chaos and members will be driven out of the circle to take care of themselves in any way they can. So, surplus of men or woman is a nightmare to the caste. If that prevails, they very likely to marry outside and eradicate the caste system. So, they need to create a system of rules to preserve endogamy.

Surplus of women

1. Burn her with her deceased husband and get rid of her = Sati
2. Enforce widowhood on her for the rest of her life.

Surplus of Men

Since men is a dominant figure and has greater prestige in every group and with this traditional superiority, his wishes always consulted.

1. He can't be burned with his deceased wife, because he is a MAN. If done, a sturdy soul is lost to the caste. So, considering this, he can remain widower for rest of the life. (enjoy self-imposed Celibacy)
2. But imposing celibacy fails both theoretically and practically, as he is the one who raises a family (Grahastha). So, he can be provided with a girl not yet marriageable. By this he is kept within the caste and endogamy morals are preserved

Endogamy and Caste are one and the same thing. Wow! What a piece of shit!

CUSTOMS:

Hindu society in the later Vedic period (1000 B.C to 600 B.C) saw the changes in the status of women which was degraded. They lost their status both in religious and social fields. Baby girl was a curse.

1. Sati
2. Widowhood
3. Girl Marriage

In Medieval India (800 AD-1600 AD), women status was even worse. They were denied to study Vedas, marriageable ages were lowered, destroyed opportunities for higher education etc. According to Manusmirti, “girls were to be given away by their parents between the ages of six and eight”.

All these customs were obligatory and were honored because they were practiced. Strict endogamy could not be preserved without these customs, while caste without endogamy is a fake. Society is always composed of classes. A caste is an Enclosed Class.

CUSTOMS >>> ENDOGAMY >>> CASTE

BRAHMINS:

These customs in all their strictness are obtainable only in one caste namely the Brahmins, who occupy the highest place in the social hierarchy of the Hindu society. Strict observance of these customs and the social superiority by the priestly class are sufficient to prove they were the originators of this unnatural evil structure. I think the big culprit is “Manusmriti”.

But Ambedkar impresses that ‘Manu did not give the law of caste and it existed long before Manu. Manu was an upholder and philosophized about it. His work ended with codification of existing caste rules and the preaching of Caste Dharma’.

Hindu society was constructed into the framework of caste system which was created by shasthras. They believed and justified the texts, because it cannot be wrong. How Pathetic!.

GENESIS OF CASTES

At some time in the history of the Hindus, the priestly class socially detached itself from others through a closed-door policy became a caste by itself.

Sub-division is natural but unnatural is they become self-enclosed units.

The question is: Were they compelled to close their doors and become endogamous? Or did they close them of their own accord?

- 1. Some closed their doors. (psychological interpretation)**
- 2. Others found it closed against them (Mechanistic process: If group A wants to be endogamous, Group B must be so by circumstances; means, ‘they are directly closed out, but indirectly closed in’)**

Endogamy/Closed-door system was a fashion in the Hindu society and it had originated from the Brahmin Caste and imitated by other Non-Brahmin sub-divisions and became endogamous castes.

LAW OF IMITATION:

It is the “Infection of the Imitation” that caught all these subdivisions on their onward march of differentiation and has turned them into castes. Imitation is a virus deep-seated in the human mind. Given the opportunity, a nobility will always and everywhere imitate its leaders, kings, sovereign, etc. It leaves no doubt that caste formation process in India is the process of imitation of the higher by the lower (Tarde’s laws of limitation: Intensity of Imitation varies inversely in proportion to the distance)

Caste have no mercy for one who violated the code. The penalty was excommunication and the result is a

new caste.

How can we eradicate the caste system??...
“Answer lies within you”..

Shayantani Das says

Such lucidity of ideas. Dr Ambedkar's writing is always richly rewarding.

Alexandria Marcus says

A statement or yet a theory by Ambedkar on casteism or 'Caste System' in India - its origin, growth and development in Hinduism. Ambedkar holds an altogether different perspective to view caste and presents his arguments in such coherent ways that it is difficult to disagree with him. Whether it is his origin in this system or the various studies he has done regarding it, in any ways, Ambedkar was a man who knew Caste in depth and with all his efforts wanted to uproot it.

Tony Sheldon says

A good book to know the theory presented forth by B R Ambedkar about the definition, origin and workings of the caste system in India and how some of the practices followed in the caste system came into being.

Aamil Syed says

In 20 pages, Babasaheb Ambedkar will literally unravel castes for you and leave you enlightened and enraged at the same time.

Absolutely a must for anyone who wants to understand castes in India and the best introduction to anyone who has never read Ambedkar.

Dimple says

"The superposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste"

Interesting insight.

My inferior level of concentration has hampered my level of understanding.(also this is a thesis :p)
And so, I read some additional reviews on this material.

This is the first time I have a read something by Mr. Ambedkar and I must say that the experience was fascinating.

He is aware of the complexity of the issue and deals with it in a systematic manner. Limiting the paper to mechanism, genesis and development of caste.

"A Caste is an enclosed Class"

Well, according to him, caste is a social phenomenon which resulted from Brahmins choosing to adopt a strict endogamous matrimonial regime.

Since they were almost considered as demi-gods, other people started emulating this.

Those in the military parcelled themselves into Kshatriyas.

There is the concept of surplus woman and surplus man.

The customs of Sati, enforced widowhood and Girl Marriage were all devices to maintain endogamy.

(I did not understand why a surplus man couldn't marry a woman from same caste. Why does it have to be a small girl.)

Anyways, I am glad I was able to take something away from his work.

Thus begins my journey into the annals of Indian History.
