THEORIZING CASTE AS A PSYCHE: EMERGING CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

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ABSTRACT

The principal aim of the paper is to highlight an important gap in the psychological understanding of caste owing to a lack of Indian theorization and attempts to suggest ways to bridge the said gap. Hence, firstly, the paper explores the academic theorization across disciplines, on the issue of caste in the Hindu communities. It attempts to summarize both, the theoretical understanding and empirical data showing the impact of caste on various markers of human experiences in the nation, thereby providing a glimpse of the pervasiveness of the social system. Thereafter it seeks to understand insights from the discipline of social psychology which attempt to unpack the components and explanations of discriminatory behaviour. Herein it attempts to see if caste could be understood and explained through the lens of social psychology and enlists myriad stumbling blocks which could prevent a succinct explanation given the existing mainstream approach within psychology as a discipline. Finally, it attempts to nudge readers towards a possible solution emerging from the promise of Critical Qualitative research methods in psychology.

KEY WORDS: *Caste, Qualitative Psychology, Critical theory, Discrimination, Prejudice, Stereotypes*

INTRODUCTION

The following review begins with an understanding of the various theorisations of the Indian Hindu caste system and its various manifestations. Thereafter it turns to the way stereotypes; prejudice and discrimination are understood in predominantly Western psychological literature and the diverse perspectives therein, positioning the need for a psychological exploration of the caste phenomenon from a qualitative perspective.

The Phenomenon of Caste

Academicians have been theorizing the complex phenomenon of caste for a long time and have tried to understand the caste question from their vantage point, from their fields of study. This fundamental question has challenged and perplexed researchers time and time again as they attempt to explicate the role played by caste in the Indian social order.

Sharma (2004) defines caste as a "hereditary endogamous group which decides the individual's status in the social stratification and his profession etc". Hutton's (1977) understanding of caste is a "system whereby a society is divided into a number of units which are self-contained and completely segregated; the mutual relationships between whom are virtually determined in a graded scale". Martindale and Monachesi (1951) state that "caste is an aggregate of persons whose share of obligations and privileges are fixed by birth, sanctioned and supported by religion".

The caste system in India is entwined with the political processes of the nation-state and it owes this to the colonial rule in India. It was for the first time during British rule that the caste system became institutionalised. While the British government did not recognise caste as a unit empowered to administer justice, it did consider caste customs in matters of civil law and helped caste retain its cultural integrity (Karnad, 1978). Even the nationalist struggle against colonialism, which invoked the Vedic civilisation – challenging the colonial claims to supremacy as a justification of their superiority and entitlement to power- carries an unstated hierarchisation of the different social groups that got to make the nation (Pandian, 2016).

Those considered to be at the foot of the caste hierarchy have historically been denied the agency to identify themselves or cohere around common issues. Dispersed, divided and dominated by 'higher castes', they have been identified organised and acted on by others (Karnad, 1978). Even the socially revolutionary promises of the Indian constitution in 1950, have been unable to eradicate untouchability in practice. Hence, since the 1970s the Scheduled Caste groups have mobilised themselves to challenge caste discrimination directly. A significant aspect of this struggle has been the rejection of the imposed labels and the adoption of the self-inscribed identity category-'Dalit' (Gorringe, 2005).

Nature of Caste

Several important features need to be considered while examining the nature of the phenomenon of 'caste' in the Indian sub-context. Ghurye (1969) in his sociological classic 'Caste and Race in India,' points outsome features of the Indian caste system such as the Segmental Division of Society, Hierarchy, and Restrictions on Feeding and Social Intercourse. He also mentions the Civil and Religious Disabilities and Privileges experienced by the different sectionsand the Lack of Unrestricted Choice of Occupation. Dumont (1970), in his famous work 'Homo Hierarchicus', points out the inherently hierarchical nature of the caste system in India. For Dumont (1970), caste originated in the transcendental realities of religion, which could allow it to subsume the material realms of economy and political power. A person born at a particular level in the caste system remains within it unless they are expelled from it and moving from one caste to another becomes extremely difficult if not impossible as the caste identity that a person receives at birth cannot be altered by any means (Grinsell, 2010).

Moreover, each caste has a caste lower than itself in the hierarchy. Even the most downtrodden and marginalised sections are divided sharply amongst themselves and practise untouchability or hold notions of status and purity amongst themselves based on where they stand in the hierarchy. Subservience to one's caste and subjugation of another; keeps the caste agenda intact and maintains the status quo (Karamsi, 2010). In addition to establishing a firm social hierarchy, the caste system also involves a complicated distribution of political authority, among the various communities that comprise the Hindu social structure. Hence, it is important to understand that caste has been a social institution which has been instrumental in structuring and maintaining relations of power amongst different communities. Moreover, it seeks to legitimize these power relations through systematically dispensing mixes of economic and cultural assets as well as opportunities and deprivations to different communities (Saikia, 2014).At the centre of the concept of caste-based hierarchywas the juxtaposition of 'purity' with 'pollution'which forms the idea of status. It is the core of the hierarchical caste system and governs relationships between various castes, has been endorsed by various sociologists and social anthropologists like M. N. Srinivas, Hocart, Bougle, Dube and Pocock (Sharma, 1984).

Manifestations of Caste

Researchers have explored how caste impacts different spheres of people's lives and have attempted to document the prevalence of caste-based practices in India. The caste system in India manifests itself in the contexts of education, employment and marriage, among other aspects of people's lives. While Dalits account for 16.6% of India's population, their literacy rate is only 66% as compared to the all-India level of 73% (Raghavendra, 2020). Students who belong to the lower structure of caste experience discrimination based on caste in their academic life (Neelkandan & Patil, 2012). Singh (2013 as cited in Maurya 2018) identified four areas of discriminatory behaviour that Dalit students pursuing higher education have had to face: prejudice and discrimination experienced before entering higher education, attitudes, actions, exclusion and opposition from teachers, fellow students and administrative officials. In addition, Dalit students tend to not avail of affirmative action due to fear of shaming, exclusion and even threats from anti-reservationist groups. Another threat to the educational inclusion of Dalit students is the rise in the privatisation of education (Neelkandan & Patil, 2012).

Considering the Dalit population in the country, their control over the resources of the country is marginal i.e., less than 5%. As much as half of the Dalit population lives below the poverty line. Among Dalits, most of those engaged in agricultural work are landless or nearly landless labourers (Saikia, 2014). The upper caste groups have created a system that enables them a have a hold over land and deny ownership to Dalits. Therefore, Dalits become dependent on them as a means of their livelihood and it gets difficult for them to have a stable income, keeping them in extreme poverty (Rao, 2010; George, 2013). Caste-based inequality involves Inequality of Opportunity and Inequality of Outcome. There is an unequal distribution of land, education, business ownership and occupation leading to unequal access to resources. The highly capable members of lower castes also suffer social and economic discrimination that results in inequality of outcomes (Siddaramu, 2013).

Caste groups and sub-groups maintain membership by encouraging marriage within the same group. This principle of endogamy ensures that there is no contamination and acts as a tool for the perpetuation of caste subordination. Ideally, endogamy serves as a way of preserving the qualitative attributes of *Jati* and marking their differences from other *Jatis.* (Chakravarti, 2013). Since marriage within castes helps maintain the hierarchical structure of the caste system, love between partners as a basis of marriage threatens the existing structure and needs to be replaced by 'arranged' marriages (Chakravarti, 2013). Even though inter-caste marriages are slowly appearing to register themselves in society, they are neither welcome nor accepted by Indian society. Even when legislations like the Special Marriage Act 1954 have been in place for many years now, inter-caste married couples face several problems which other couples do not have to face (Kamath & Krishnaswamy, 1995).

Another element is residential segregation which is one of the primary manifestations of the caste system (Ghurye, 1969). While it can be assumed that urban areas provide anonymity which might result in decreased levels of caste-based segregation, what is observed in India is that cities tend to be segregated along caste lines (Bharathi et al., 2018). By using ward-level data from the 2001 census, Vithayathil and Singh (2022) explain how caste is a much stronger basis for residential segregation than socioeconomic status as observed in the seven largest metro cities in India. Shaban and Aboli (2021) state that in Mumbai, the Eastern Suburbs have a higher concentration of SC population as compared to Mumbai city and this has been observed in a review of the census data of the year 1991 as well as 2011. The progressive growth of the SC population in certain areas also correlates with the growth of slums in those areas owing to the scarcity of provisions and opportunities available to them (Shaban & Aboli, 2021).

Jodhka (2010) attempts to explain the shift in the understanding of the phenomenon of caste and its portrayal in research literature over the years. His study draws on three significant moments of Culture, Politics and Caste. The caste system is central to India's organization. It created a framework to arrange sub-groups according to their position in the hierarchy while maintaining social inequality. It provided a worldview around which a typical Hindu organized their life. The theorisations of academicians like Dumont, Ghurye, Moffatt etc constitute this moment of culture (Jodhka, 2010). The moment of politics involved the negotiations of caste with democratic politics while not confronting political questions of power, hierarchy, discrimination and exclusion (Jodhka, 2010). The moment of caste saw the emergence of Dalit politics. Caste reservations became an important element that coincided with a shift in state policy towards development. The presence of Dalit politics made way for the understanding of caste at an intellectual level (Jodhka, 2010).

Caste as a Gendered System

The Dalit tag has been credited as granting the 'Untouchables' a voice buthas also been criticised for concealing the intersections of gender, caste, class and region (Gorringe, 2005).Dalit women face all the atrocities discussed above in addition to the difficulties that arise due to being a woman. The feminist movements have recently started challenging these aspects and made conscious theoretical efforts towards understanding the gendered nature of the caste system.

Dalit women experience subjugation in terms of economic deprivation, patriarchy and caste. They are also subjected to sexual exploitation under the guise of social and religious practices such as *devadasi* - temple prostitution (Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015).One of the most significant arguments regarding the gendered nature of caste comes fromChakravarti (2013), who explains how patriarchy and its manifestations in the Indian sub-context are linked to the caste system. Brahmanical patriarchy has created caste to ensure the existence of a structure that maintains power in a way that upper-caste men benefit from it (Chakravarti, 2018).Women must be monitored, and their sexuality closely guarded because they protect the honour and respectability of theupper-caste men. This control of female sexuality which forms an important element of the caste system is achieved by invoking concepts like *'Streeswabhav and Pativratdharma'*(Chakravarti,2013).

Persistence of Caste

Despite various attempts at reform, the caste system continues to plague the Indian society. The advent of technology, increasing awareness and modernization has led to the emergence of subtle, less obvious forms of discrimination rather than its decline(Siddaramu, 2013). Many beliefs, structures and systems play an important role in maintaining the hierarchical caste system in India that enables the mistreatment of Dalits at the hands of their upper-caste counterparts and government or law enforcement officials. Ghurye (1969) and Siddaramu (2013) explain how local caste panchayats and other caste organizations ensure that the customs of caste are not defied, and caste identity remains intact.

Further, the concept of Sanskritization is based on the notion that the caste system causes those belonging to lower castes to subtly compare themselves with the upper castes and try to reduce or almost eliminate the apparent basis for the differencesin status (Gould, 2020; Srinivas, 1956). The idea of *izzat* or honourplays an important role in sustaining systems of caste. A family can gain or lose honour through proper or improper behaviour, most critically through the behaviour of its women. Women are conditioned or shamed into behaving appropriately. Humiliation, according to Parekh (2009) involves "violating an individual'sself-respect and demeaning/belittling him or her in one's own and/or others' eyes". He explains how societies based on slavery, racial segregation, hierarchical status untouchability and caste system build in forms of organised or institutionalised humiliation in order to systematically violate the self-respect of individuals and groups. Thus, humiliation is made an integral part of the system of domination.

Despite many attempts at theorization, caste has smartly persevered and prevailed. The persistence of the caste system to adapt to every form of effort meant to eradicate it and its manifestationin society in various ways - both overt and subtle - demands a thorough, intersectional investigation into the phenomenon. Hence, it becomes not just important but also necessary to borrow from the discipline of psychology that seeks to understand and dismantle the concepts of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination.

The Psychology of Discrimination

The history of the empirical study of discrimination as a concept is a young one, lesser than about 100years. In less than a century in the field, psychologists have gathered a significant understanding of the influence of stereotypes and prejudice on behaviour. This represents major conceptual advancement in only a brief period (Stangor, 2009). The understanding of this phenomenon rests onthe three pillars of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. Since caste is a uniquely human concept of differential treatment and oppression in social behaviour, one can turn to the field of social psychology to understand the Indian caste system in terms of the three pillars mentioned as social psychology explores norms, conflicts and behaviour in groups.

Stereotypes refer to certain attitudes, beliefs and expectations towards a social group (Baron & Branscombe, 2017). Stereotypes are representations of traits that are seen as typical of a particular group or people belonging to a group and these differentiate them from members of other groups (Stangor, 2009). Supposedly, stereotypes are often used like schemas that help an individual to categorize people and save mental effort. While stereotypes are the cognitive element of the triad, prejudice is the affective element. Prejudices are a reflection of the negative responses made to another individual entirely based on their membership to a particular group (Baron & Branscombe, 2017).Prejudices have the effect of not only leading to the failure to evaluate members of a group as individuals but also making preconceived judgments about them without having interacted with them or knowing them (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006). Discrimination is the behavioural element of the three and it may involve negative or harmful actions towards the object of prejudice. Members of a particular group are given differential treatment based on their membership in a particular group (Baron & Branscombe, 2017).

Social psychologists have put forth the following perspectives in order to understand and explain the nature and origin of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination:

Scientific Racism Theory

Scientific racism involves the analysis of research in a way that marginalized communities are seen in a negative light. The goal is to use scientific concepts, data and research to maintain and justify an existing hierarchy (Winston, 2020). Discrimination and prejudice are considered natural, non-problematic responses to people belonging tominority groups and are not viewed as social problems (Whitley & Kite, 2009).

Cognitive and Attributional Explanations

Since human beings need to simplify the complex world around them, their perceptions of the world are often supported by systematic cognitive biases. As mentioned above, individuals depend on pre-existing schemas and perceive others as belonging to particular categories than as distinct individuals based on these stored schemas.Such category-based processing tends to be more affective than cognitive, consisting of more emotional responses to the group than factual beliefs about it. (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006).Another way our cognitive processing perpetuates stereotypical thinking is

through the process of illusory correlation which refers to the tendency to see relationships or correlations between events that are actually unrelated. Illusory correlations are particularly stronger when the events or people are distinctive or conspicuous(Aronson,Akert& Wilson, 1997).

Aronson et al. (1997) explore some attributional processes that can be associated with stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. The nature of the triad can be understood through the concept of the Fundamental Attribution Error which is the human tendency to make dispositional attributions fora person's behaviour than considering that some aspect of the external situation may be influencing them. Stereotype Vulnerability refers to the apprehension experienced by the members of a minority group that they may behave in a manner that may confirm an existing cultural stereotype. Exceptions and Distortionsoccur when an individual from the prejudiced community displays non-stereotypical behaviour. On such occasions, the behaviour which is exceptional or different is attributed to the situation, keeping the stereotype intact.Blaming the Victimrefers to the tendency to blame individuals (make dispositional attributions) for their victimization, which is typically catalysed by the desire to see the world as afair place. If the dominant groupsact according to Self-Fulfilling Prophecies, they may justify for example, the denial of education/access to resources to a group by falling back upon their belief that the members of the group are irredeemably stupid, uneducable and fitonly for menial jobs(Aronson, Akert & Wilson, 1997).

Psychodynamic Theories

Psychodynamic theories describe an authoritarian personality, one that displays exaggerated obedience to authority, rigid adherence to traditional norms, self-righteous hostility and punitiveness towards those who choose to not conform and members of marginalized communities. This kind of personality has resurfaced in recent years as right-wing authoritarianism and has been associated with prejudice towards racially and ethnically marginalized groups (Taylor, Peplau & Sears, 2006). The psychodynamic perspective also suggests that prejudice is based on motivation, and it can contribute to strengthening one's personal identity and self-esteem (Whitley & Kite, 2009).

Evolutionary Explanations

Evolutionary explanations are offered with the help of the concept of 'Kin Favouritism'. Since people needed to be able to differentiate between those who would cooperate with them and those who would not, they developed a set of cues to guide them. The cues involved physical similarity as well as proximity and those who met the criteria were considered safe to cooperate with, 'similar to kin'. People that did not meet the criteria were perceived as potentially dangerous and this led to avoidance, dislike and competition with those from other groups (Whitley & Kite, 2009).

Realistic Conflict Theory and Social Identity Theory

Muzafer Sherif developed a well-known theory of intergroup conflict called the 'Realistic Conflict Theory' (Hogg, 2016). According to this theory, group members have goals and sometimes, their achievement of goals can clash with or make them compete with members of another group. When groups compete for limited resources, prejudice can arise. The word 'realistic' in the name of the theory conveys that the inter-group hostility that may result from this competition has at least some rational basis but an extreme case such as war, may threaten the existence of the other group (Brown, 2006).

Tajfel (1970 as cited in Hogg, 2016) further extended this theory to explain that just being categorised as a member of a particular group was enough for members to feel an increased attachment towards their own group and involve in intergroup conflicts.

Social identity theory was Tajfel and Turner's (1979 as cited in Hogg, 2016) explanation of group behaviour, categorization and social perception, and prejudice and discrimination in society. It explains that we derive our self-esteem from our social group memberships and wish to feel positively towards that group. Group members may tend to experience bias and a sense of prejudice against the outgroup, especially if the distinctiveness of their own group is threatened (Baron & Byrne, 2010).

The Pendulum Framework

This framework was put forth by Choma and Hodston (2008) to bring within a unified model, the various perspectives on understanding prejudice and discrimination. The framework is organised along two relatively independent dimensions that capture dominant themes in the prejudice literature: Abnormal versus Normal and Person/Individual differences versus Situation/Group. The first dimension; Abnormal versus Normal, represents the extent to which prejudice is conceptualised because of conditions that are characterised as pathological or as falling within the normal range of functioning. The second dimension; Person/Individual differences versus Situation/Group, represents the extent to which the theoretical roots of prejudice are person based or emphasize group, situational or contextual factors. (Choma & Hodston, 2009).

The framework is intended to serve three important functions: 1) provide a descriptive organization of prejudice research and theory 2) operate as a tool of how different areas of prejudice research and theory inform one another and the general understanding of prejudice and 3) orient prejudice researchers as a meta-cognitive tool by encouraging them to think about what prejudice researchers are thinking about in this domain (Choma & Hodston, 2009).

While the domain of psychology, particularly social psychology explores the concepts of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination adequately, it does so in the Western context, making these theorizations less generalizable to the Indian population. There arises then, the need to use the theories of social psychology and efficient ways of research to particularly understand the nuances of Indian experiences.

The Way Forward

The social psychological understanding of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination has been subjected to criticism. Social psychological approaches have been critiqued for empiricist and positivist agendas which have long been challenged for theirpreference towards the maintenance of status -quo (Prillentsky& Nelson, 2002; Nightingale& Cromby, 1999). The review notes that the available understanding of these concepts in social psychology appears to lack sensitivity to social issues, and instead proposes understandings which are at times too straightforward or too superficial. These explanations could inadvertently justify the phenomenon of active discrimination by viewing it as heuristical, natural or unintentional.

The caste that an individual belongs to is recognised as a part of their identity. The identity of an individual is very central to them as it defines the way they look at the world and the way the world sees them. However, what research scarcely mentions is that caste is more a structure that shapes an individual's identity and lived experiences, than a part of their identity itself. The hierarchical structure of caste ensures that individuals stick to their own groups and status-quo is maintained.

The perspectives in conventional social psychology do not engage enough with the lived experiences of individuals, which have intertwined themes of power, oppression and domination. Social Psychological 'objective exploration' therefore, enables the explanations to become a part of the framework that reinforcesand maintains systems of domination (Prillentsky & Nelson, 2002).This calls for a need to understand subjective narratives of caste, to conduct a

qualitative exploration of the Dalit experiences through the Dalit lens. Qualitative methods of research such as Grounded Theory, Phenomenological Approaches, Understanding Narratives or Discourse Analysis may lend themselves well to such kind of exploration.

To draw a parallel, over the years, research on gender which started with understanding women as a marginalized gender has moved forward to incorporate men and the understanding of masculinity, to fully understand gender and discrimination. Likewise, studies in sexuality which began with the understanding of queer bodies have shifted their gaze to theorize the heteronormativity which marginalizes these queer bodies. In a similar vein, understanding caste-based discrimination would need to shift its locus from understanding the oppressed to theorizing the psyche of the oppressor.

Besides, it is extremely important to understand Dalit experiences through the Dalit lens. Many academicians have attempted to put forth a bottom-up approach by conveying their own lived experiences as Dalit individuals rather than being seen through the Savarna expert academic gaze. Research on Dalit experiences generally stresses their narratives of the pain and suffering that they experience. Anupama Rao's 'The Caste Question' attempts to understand the caste-based violence that Dalit individuals face and the stigma and humiliation that gets perpetuated (Gupta, 2013). Suraj Yengde (2019) in his book 'Caste Matters', explores being a Dalit in modern Indian society through mundane, everyday discussions in Dalit households. Suryakant Waghmore in his book 'Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India' explores how Dalits craft their own histories and remake ideas of democratic life within conditions that are neither made by them nor conducive to them (Natrajan, 2015). Yashica Dutt in her autobiography 'Coming Out as a Dalit' explains the struggles of being Dalit in the presence of other identities and politics. She explores the Dalit identity through the various lenses of gender, class and a generalized 'other' (Tyagi, 2019). Researchers have also tried to understand the affective nature of caste. Caste has been described as a 'feeling inside the mind/heart' among other descriptions, as noted by researchers exploring psychological experiences of discrimination (Jadhav et al., 2016).

The categorisations of caste are not in the form of either/or categories but involve complexities of hierarchical segmentations. The caste phenomenon encompasses complex issues of status, economics, access, gender, sexuality and politics, which constantly interact with each other dynamically. Discrimination needs to be understood not only in its religious and historical background but also in the current, rapidly changing context which involves changes in manifestations and forms of discrimination as well.

Critical psychologists have time and again proposed the importance of a paradigm shift which could involve leaving behind the quantitative, experimental angles and adoptingperspectives of social constructivism, intersectionality, subjectivity and the significance of language (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999).Critical qualitative psychological research will make way for theformulation of theories that explore intricate connections between psychology, domination, oppression and power (Prillentsky & Nelson, 2002). The researcher suggests Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006) as a way forward that will allow foran understanding ofthe subjective narratives of all parties involved in the complex phenomenon of caste and to unpack the power dynamic between them.

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