

A Comparison of Hindu and Muslim Caste System in Sub-continent

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ABSTRACT

Caste system is an essential feature of both Hindu and Muslim societies in the sub-continent. This paper compares the dynamics of traditional caste system practiced across Hindus and Muslims of India and Pakistan respectively. Birth-ascribed statuses, definite occupations, hierarchical positioning of caste groups and endogamous form of marriage are found to be the common characteristics of caste system practiced across Indian Hindus and Pakistani Muslims. In the Hindu caste system, membership in a Jati determines the rules and regulations regarding food and touch ability for the members through socio-religious rituals of purity and impurity. In contrast the notions and rituals of pure and impure are virtually absent in Muslim Pakistan. Caste system in both India and Pakistan is decaying with time because of the increasingly urbanization. However, geographical isolation and long established social structures in rural India and Pakistan are the favorable conditions that uphold the caste practices.

Key Words Caste system, Hindus, Muslims, Sub-continent, verna and Jati system

Introduction

The word caste is derived from the Portuguese word ‘casta’ that means lineage, breed or race (Freitas, 2006). While it primarily represents a fundamental institution of Hindu India, the concept of caste has also been used to refer to class structures of exceptional rigidity in any society (Barth, 1960; Leach, 1969). This multiple usage of the concept has raised the argument, whether to understand caste as a cultural occurrence exclusively referring to the Hindu society or as a structural phenomenon denoting a highly generalized discussion about the nature of closed status groups, such as race, ethnicity, nobility etc., and different types of social inequalities and differentiations in any society (Weber, 2009; Leach, 1969). Conceptualizing caste by detaching it from its original geographical, cultural and historical Hindu Indian context is problematic and using it outside India has been questioned by academics (Lyon, 2004; Sharma, 1999).

In the Hindu context, caste is described as a specific and distinctive type of socio-religious stratification comprising of different hereditary groups placed in hierarchy according to their ritual statuses. These ritual statuses are determined according to the notions of pure and impure in terms of purity of blood and the nature of work (Dumont, 1980; Marriott, 1977). Some kinds of purity in the Hindu caste system are inherent, for example Brahmins are born with inherent purity and sweepers and Chamars, leatherworker, are inherently polluted. The touch of a sweeper’s body is polluting to the ones higher in caste hierarchy. Purity is

connected to the ritual cleanliness, which includes bathing in flowing water, eating the food appropriated for one's caste, abstaining from physical contact with the lower caste's people and keeping away from ritually impure substances like body wastes and excretions etc. (Dumont, 1980; Freitas, 2006). The notions of purity and pollution in Hindu India vary considerably across castes and regions (Chakravarty, 2003). There is considerable evidence that suggests that the caste system in India is going through a number of alterations. Sharma (2004) argues that the caste eventually may reduce to a word denoting a group of people in any society.

Hindus and Muslims in the sub-continent practice the caste system with significant variations (Sikand, 2004; Werbner, 1989). The caste system in Hindu communities has a religious basis (Liddle and Joshi, 1986), while the Muslim's holy texts and teachings insist on equality of all Muslims (Alavi, 1972; Lyon, 2004). For the non-Hindus, caste practices are the cultural residues of Hinduism (Eglar, 1960). Despite these differences, the caste system is an essential feature of both Hindu and Muslim societies in the sub-continent (Chakravarty, 2003; Sikand, 2004; Werbner, 1989).

Conceptualizing Caste in Subcontinent Context

Robert Risley is considered as one of the pioneer western writers on the practices of caste in the Indian region. His books 'The Tribes and Castes of Bengal' (1892) and 'The People of India' (1915) describe the caste system in Indian culture in detail. He understands caste as:

A collection of families, or groups of families, bearing a common name, which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional calling and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single and homogeneous community (cited in Sharma, 2004: 149).

Risley's argument that the people from a caste group claim common descent from a mythical ancestor is questioned by Hutton (1946). However, his definition rightly depicts the origin of caste system in the Indian region while arguing that the caste system primarily rests on ancestral occupations. According to Freitas (2006), Risley claims that the caste system exists to prevent racial mixing but does not explain the other features of caste system. However, Freitas (2006) did not discuss the features that Risley overlooked in his definition of caste. Risley proposed a broad definition addressing both Muslim and Hindu contexts of the caste in region. A more comprehensive definition was given by A W Green (1939) (cited in Sharma 2004).

Caste is a system of stratification in which mobility, movement up and down the status ladder, at least ideally may not occur. A person's ascribed status is his

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life time status. Birth determines occupation, place of residence, style of life, personal associates and the group from among whom one must find a mate. A caste system always includes the notion that physical or even some forms of social contacts with the lower caste people is degrading to higher caste persons. The caste system is also protected by law and sanctified by religion (Sharma, 2004: 149).

This covers a number of features of the caste system. The definition depicts caste as a highly rigid phenomenon and refers only to the Hindu caste system. It suggests that the options in a caste society are limited in terms of life style, relationship patterns, occupations and mate selection. On the other hand, academics stress that the people from lower castes in modern India are changing their occupations, places of residence, life styles and personal associates as a result of urbanization and migration trends towards cities (Freitas, 2006; Sharma, 2004). Sharma (2004) writes that the inter-caste marriages are towards increase in contemporary Indian society and thus the mate selection and relationship patterns are no more caste related phenomena. People have started to opt for occupations on the basis of monetary strengths. Occupations are no longer fixed in terms of caste; different professions are open to people of any caste group. Correspondingly, Brahmins are becoming deprived of their past respect and status. Increasing urbanization is the major factor to weaken the caste structures in Indian society. However, Sharma (2004) argues that the patterns of change in caste system cannot be generalized across the rural and the urban areas. It is stressed that the geographical isolation and long established social structures of rural India are the favourable conditions to maintain caste practices.

On the other side, Barth (1960) understood caste system in Pakhtun societies of North Pakistan as structural classification of social groups. He defined caste as:

A hierarchical system of stable social groups, differing greatly in wealth, privilege, power, and the respect accorded to them by others. In any such system the organization of one stratum may only meaningfully be described with reference to its relations to the other strata [1960: 131].

In literature, there are a number of other definitions to understand caste system in Pakistan. Contrary to the Hindu Indian context, these definitions explain caste in the form of indigenous hierarchical groupings like quom or zaat, based on birth-ascribed statuses (Lyon, 2004). From the discussion in literature, caste in Pakistani context can be defined as:

A hierarchical system of hereditary based and endogamous social groups, called zats or quoms, with definite occupational specializations, differing greatly in privilege, power, and the respect accorded to them by others. In any such system, the organization of one stratum may only meaningfully be described with reference to its relations to the other strata.

Caste in Pakistani context represents the hierarchical positioning of hereditary based occupational groups and can be regarded as the defining feature of caste system practiced in rural Pakistan (Barth, 1960; Eglar, 1960; Lyon, 2004). Above suggested definition incorporates the aspects of definite occupations, hereditary and endogamy, which were overlooked by Barth (1960) in his definition of caste. The word 'wealth' is excluded from the definition of caste given by Barth. He discussed the differences in wealth, privilege, power and respect, accorded to a group by others, as the characteristics of caste society in Swat. Although the service providing caste groups are reported as poorest in rural Pakistan (Planning Commission, 2003), arguably the caste groups, or individual members from different caste groups, may not always differ greatly in wealth. However, it is important to mention here that the mere fact of being wealthy or acquiring some land does not raise the social status of service caste groups, locally known as Kammis (Eglar, 1960). The villagers in rural Pakistan associate status with caste memberships and not the economic possessions. Contrary to the Hindu caste system, caste practices in Pakistan do not prohibit the physical contact between people from different caste groups, as described by A W Green (1939), nor is the place of residence or the style of life determined by one's caste, even within the long established rural structures (Eglar, 1960).

Characteristics of Caste System

This section compares the characteristics of caste system that the Hindus and Muslims of sub-continent practice. The main characteristics of traditional caste system include birth-ascribed statuses, definite occupations, hierarchical positioning of groups, endogamy and rules of commensality and touch ability.

Determination by Birth

Birth-ascribed status is the fundamental feature of caste system practiced in both Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. An individual is granted caste membership on the basis of his birth in one particular caste group. Caste identity of individuals does not change despite changes in their occupational, educational or financial status (Blunt, 1969; Freitas, 2006). Birth in a lower caste group attaches a lifelong stigma of subordinate identity to the members of that caste, even if they acquire higher education or join respectable professions later in their life. While the caste structures are decaying with time, the birth-ascribed identities persist as a factor that differentiates various caste groups in rural India and Pakistan (Hooper and Hamid, 2003; Sharma, 2004).

Definite occupations

Traditionally, caste is defined according to the occupational specializations associated with different groups. Hindu scripture mentions the occupations and

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occupational functions of all the varnas i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Lowest on the hierarchy are assigned the task to do menial work for other varnas (Dutta, 2014; Ghurye, 1961). Caste divisions in Pakistan exist between landowning and service providing groups. Villagers in rural Pakistan are increasingly leaving their parentage occupations by opting for other employment; therefore, caste occupations are no longer relevant. However, the members of different caste groups are still identified through their parentage occupational specializations, such as barbers or cobblers. This parentage identity plays a central role in defining their social relationships with others in the village setting (Ahmad, 1970; Lyon, 2004).

Hierarchical groups

Caste groups are ranked hierarchically on the basis of occupations associated with their caste. An individual's social position depends on his membership in a caste group (Klass, 1993). Hindu caste groups are ranked in order of Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra (Sharma, 2004). Freitas (2006) emphasized that the caste based hierarchies are mostly local and fluid depending on the changes observed over time and place. In the modern day India, an individual's social status is the combination of his achievements and caste. Sharma (2004) pointed out that the caste hierarchies are exaggerated in South India. As previously mentioned, the basic caste divisions exist between landowners and service providers in rural Pakistan, with former placed higher on caste hierarchy. Academics deny any internal ranking within the landowning and the service providing caste groups (Eglar, 1960; Lyon, 2004; Werbner, 1989).

Endogamy

Traditionally, the caste groups in India and Pakistan are endogamous (Kapadia, 1966; Eglar, 1960). Endogamy is used as a means to preserve caste purity. In rural India, marrying to a lower caste person is considered as polluting the upper caste lineage. While endogamous form of marriage is towards decline in Modern India, inter-caste marriages are not approved in traditional Hindu communities even at present (Sharma, 2004). Similarly, in Pakistan, different caste groups do not inter-marry or at least do not prefer to marry out of their caste group (Alavi, 1972; Eglar, 1960). Caste endogamy exists as an essential feature of the caste system practiced in rural Pakistan (Ahmad, 1970; Blood, 1994).

Rules of commensality

In Hindu caste system, restrictions are placed on eating or drinking with the members of lower caste groups. Moreover, caste system governs the rules of accepting or not accepting food from the members of other castes. While there may be no restrictions to accept fruits, milk, butter, dry fruits etc., bread and

certain other foods can only be accepted from the members of one's own or higher caste. The conduct of commensality originates from the rituals of purity or impurity in the Hindu caste system (Freitas, 2006; Sharma, 2004). Conversely, the practices of commensality do not exist in Muslim Pakistan. People from different caste groups eat and drink together and also share food (Ahmad, 1970; Eglar, 1960).

Touchability and status

Rules of touchability are an integral part of traditional Hindu caste organization. Touch or at times the shadow of lower caste individuals is considered as defiling the members of upper caste groups. Brahmins maintain their caste superiority by not touching lower caste people or by keeping them at a certain distance. While untouchability is practiced rather firmly in certain parts of India, such practices are in decline as a result of the increasing urbanization trends (Sharma, 2004). Conversely, untouchability is virtually absent in caste system practiced in Pakistan (Eglar, 1960; Sikand, 2004).

Jati versus quom

The Varna and Jati system in India have the similar characteristics to Zamindar-Kammi division and Quom system in rural Pakistan. The Varna system groups the society into four major types as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. On the other side, the main caste divisions in rural Pakistan exist between Zamindars and Kammis. Jatis in the Hindu caste system refer to endogamous social groups associated with specific hereditary based occupations and membership in a Jati is a birth-ascribed status. Different Jatis are included in a Varna e.g. different artisan, labourer and service providing Jatis comprise the category of Shudra Varna (Dumont, 1980; Lal and Van, 2005). Similarly, different Quoms jointly makeup the categories of Kammis and Zamindars in the caste system practiced in rural Pakistan. All the service providing, labourer and artisan Quoms are grouped together as Kammis e.g. barbers, carpenters, cobblers etc. Different landowning Quoms e.g. Rajputs, Jats and Gujjars are included in the category of Zamindars (Ahmad, 1970; Eglar, 1960). Like Jatis in the Hindu caste system, different Kammi and Zamindar Quoms are endogamous social groups and form Biradari system i.e. kinship groups.

Members show loyalty to their Jatis and Quoms, especially in the struggles for power and leadership e.g. in elections. While the dynamics of the caste system in India and Pakistan are changing, Jatis and Quoms are still an important factor in marriage practices and mate selection (Lal and Van, 2005; Lyon, 2004). Similarly, the occupational identities associated with the membership in different Jatis and Quoms cannot be changed, even if the members do not follow those occupations later in their life e.g. members of barber Quom/Jati are always recognized through their hereditary occupation (Lal and Van, 2005; Lyon, 2004). Jatis and Quoms are

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seen as the most significant principles of organization and categorization in the caste systems practiced in India and Pakistan.

The above section compares the classical Hindu caste system in India and caste system practiced in Muslim Pakistan. Besides Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in India also practice the caste system with some variations. Among Indian Muslims, the major caste divisions are between Ashrafs and Non Ashrafs, with former placed higher on caste hierarchy. Ashrafs claim a foreign decent and are divided into four caste group i.e. Sayyads, Shiekhs, Mughals and Pathans. Non Ashrafs converted from Hinduism and belonged to the local population. Among non Ashrafs, those who were the higher caste Hindus before conversion consider themselves superior on the caste hierarchy than the other non-Ashraf Muslims associated with service providing castes (Bhatty, 1996; Sharma, 2004). Similarly, while the Sikh faith prohibits caste hierarchies and Brahmanical ideology is rather weak in the Indian Punjab, a caste system exists among Sikhs as well. Social relations and the political economy of agriculture, especially in the rural Punjab, are structured around the caste system. Like the Pakistani caste system, the major caste divisions among Sikhs exist between landowning cultivators, mostly Jats, and service providing caste groups (Jodhka, 2004; Puri, 2003).

Conclusion

The main characteristics of traditional caste system i.e. determination by birth, definite occupations, hierarchical groups and endogamy are similar among Hindus of India and Muslims of Pakistan. The Varna and Jati system in India and Quom system in Pakistan are also similar. Jatis and Quoms are the most significant principles of caste organization in India and Pakistan. The rules of commensality and touchability are the major differences between caste system practiced across Hindus of India and Muslim of Pakistan. In the Hindu caste system, membership in a Jati determines the rules and regulations concerning food and touchability for the members through a socio-religious system of ritual statuses. Members of upper caste groups, such as Brahmins, maintain their caste superiority by not touching the members of lower caste groups. In contrast, there is no comprehensive system of ritual statuses and notions of pure and impure associated with the caste divisions of landowners and service providers or different Quoms in Pakistan. Caste system in both India and Pakistan is decaying with time because of the increasingly urbanization and modernization. However, geographical isolation and long established social structures in rural India and Pakistan are the favourable conditions to maintain caste practices.

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