Caste System and Caste related Violence in Indian Culture

Subbiah M¹, Malathi B²

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Performing Arts, Pondicherry University, Pondicherry, India
2. Research Scholar, Department of Folklore, St. Xaviers College, Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli, India

Corresponding Author: Assistant Professor, Department of Performing Arts, Pondicherry University, Pondicherry – 605014, e-mail: tamladavu@gmail.com, Mobile: 09487279439

Received 08 April; accepted 23 May; published online 01 June; printed 16 June 2013

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Caste System

The Indian caste system to be an immensely complex subject. There are differences between the theoretical construct and the practical reality. Doctrinally, caste was defined as a system of segregation of people, each with a traditional occupation that was hereditary, closed and exclusionary. In the Hindu system, people were categorized in one or other of the five major ideological schemes: Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaisyas, Shudras and Untouchables. This ideological scheme was theoretically composed of 3000 sub-castes, which in turn was claimed to be composed of 90,000 local sub-groups, with people marrying only within their sub-group. This theory of caste was applied to what was then British India in the early 20th century, when the population comprised about 200 million people, across five major religions, and over 500,000 agrarian villages, each with a population between 100 to 1000 people of various age groups, variously divided into numerous rigid castes (British India included modern India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar).

Caste in Indian society refers to a social group where membership is largely decided by birth. Members of such local group avoid entering into marital relationships with outsiders. Originally, these groups were associated with specific professions. The mutual relationship of one caste with the other is established on the principle of lineage and the resultant purity of blood, making the 32 relationship between one and another caste distant. Though caste has always been a part of Hindu society in India, it did not become institutionalized into government organizations until the arrival of British colonizers. The removal of the boundaries between "civil society" and "political society" meant that caste now played a huge role in the political arena and influenced other government-run institutions such as police and the judicial system. Though caste seemed to dictate one's access to such institutions, the location of that caste also played a pivotal role. If a lower caste were concentrated enough in one area, it could then translate that pocket of concentration of its caste members into political power and then challenge the locally dominant upper caste. Gender also plays a significant role in the power dynamic of caste in politics. Women's representation within the political system seems to also be tied to their caste. Lower, more conservative castes have less female participation in politics than upper, more socially liberal, castes. This has caused a disproportionately large number of upper-caste women to occupy political office when compared to their lower caste counterparts. The hierarchy of caste and its role in politics and access to power and resources has created a society of patron-client relationships along caste lines. This staunchly clientelistic structure was most prevalent during the Congress-dominating period. This eventually led to the practice of vote banking, where voters back only candidates that are in their cast, or officials from which they expect to receive some kind of benefits (Bayly Susan, 1999). The caste system has traditionally had significant influence over people's access to power. The privileged upper caste groups benefit more by gaining substantially more economic and political power, while the lower caste groups have limited access to those powers. The caste system distributes to different castes different economic strength. The upper caste groups can then manipulate the economic and political system to transfer economic strength into political power (Kothari Rajni, 2004).

1.2. According to Ambedkar: Caste System and Discrimination

Ambedkar, who was born in India, in a caste that was traditionally classified as untouchable, became a leader of human rights in India, a prolific writer, and a key person in drafting modern India's constitution in the 1940s. Ambedkar wrote extensively on discrimination, trauma and tragic effects of the caste system in India. Ambedkar described the Untouchables as belonging to the same religion and culture, yet shunned and ostracized by the community they lived in. The Untouchables, observed Ambedkar, recognized the sacred as well as the secular laws of India, but they derived no benefit from this. They lived on the outskirts of a village. Segregated from the rest, bound down to a code of behavior, they lived a life appropriate to a servile state. According to this code, an Untouchable could not do anything that raised him or her above his or her appointed station in life. The caste system stamped an individual as untouchable from birth; it was true, he wrote, that some Untouchables had risen in Indian society above their usually
low status, but the majority had limited mobility, or none, during Britain's colonial rule. According to Ambedkar, the caste system was irrational. Ambedkar listed these evils of the caste system: it isolated people, infused a sense of inferiority into lower-caste individuals, and divided humanity. The caste system was not merely a social problem; he argued: it traumatized India's people, its economy, and the discourse between its people, preventing India from developing and sharing knowledge, and wrecking its ability to create and enjoy the fruits of freedom. The philosopher supporting the social stratification system in India had encouraged critical thinking and cooperative effort, encouraging instead treatises that were full of absurd conceits, quaint fancies, and chaotic speculations. The lack of social mobility, notes Ambedkar, had prevented India from developing technology, which can aid man in his effort to make a bare living, and a life better than that of the brute. Ambedkar stated that the resultant absence of scientific and technical progress, combined with all the transcendentalism and submission to one's fate, perpetuated famines, desolated the land, and degraded the consciousness from respecting the civic rights of every fellow human being.

According to Ambedkar, castes divided people, only to disintegrate and cause myriad divisions that isolated people and caused confusion. Even the upper caste, the Brahmin, divided itself and disintegrated. The curse of caste; according to Ambedkar, split the Brahmin priest class into well over 1400 sub-castes. This is supported by census data collected by colonial ethnographers in British India (now South Asia). Gandhi, an admirer of Ambedkar, and who worked together to non-violently protest British colonial rule in India, disagreed with some of Ambedkar's observations, rational and interpretations about the caste system in India. Caste, claimed Gandhi, had nothing to do with religion. The discrimination and trauma of castes, argued Gandhi, was the result of custom, the origin of which is unknown. Gandhi said that the customs' origin was a moot point, because one could spiritually sense that these customs were wrong, and that any caste system is harmful to the spiritual well-being of man and economic well-being of a nation. The reality of colonial India was, Gandhi noted, that there was no significant disparity between the economic condition and earnings of members of different castes, whether it was a Brahmin, an artisan, or a farmer of low caste. India was poor, and Indians of all castes were poor. Thus, he argued that the cause of trauma was not in the caste system, but elsewhere. Judged by the standards being applied to India, Gandhi claimed, every human society would fail. He acknowledged that the caste system in India spiritually blinded some Indians, subsequently added that this did not mean that every Indian or even most Indians blindly followed the caste system, or everything from ancient Indian scriptures of doubtful authenticity and value. India, said Gandhi, is not like any other society, cannot be judged by a caricature of its worst specimens. Gandhi stated that one must consider the best it produced as well, along with the vast majority in impoverished Indian villages struggling to make ends meet, with woes of which there was little knowledge (Bayly Susan, 1999; Witsoe Jeffrey, 2011; Henri Tiphagne, 2011; IDCR, Loyola College, 2010).

2. CASTE-RELATED VIOLENCE

Caste-related violence and hate crimes in India have occurred despite the gradual reduction of casteism in the country. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, “Dalits and indigenous peoples continue to face discrimination, exclusion, and acts of communal violence. Laws and policies adopted by the Indian government provide a strong basis for protection, but are not being faithfully implemented by local authorities.” The post-independence era was marked by frequent instances of atrocities springing up across the country; for example, the assassination of the young, educated Dalit leader Emmanuel Sekaran in Tamil Nadu for defying the untouchability-based interdicts on SCs, which resulted in the Ramanathapuram riots of 1957; the Kilavenmani massacre of 42 Dalits in 1968 in Tamil Nadu; the gruesome killing of Dalit Kotesu in Kanchikapicherla in 1969 in Andhra Pradesh; the killings of 10 STs by police in connection with a land dispute in Indravalli in Andhra Pradesh in 1978. All such events shook the then national leadership. Hence, under pressure from Dalit MPs, the Government of India started monitoring atrocities against SCs from 1974 and in the case of STs from 1981 onwards, with special focus on murder, rape, arson and grievous hurt. Atrocities continued to rise with ferocity and frequency – for example, in Bihar the massacres of SCs at Belchi in 1979 and at Pipra in 1980; in Uttar Pradesh the massacre following a SC bridegroom riding on horseback at Kafalta in 1980; in Madhya Pradesh the killing of Bachchus in Mandsaur district in 1982; in Bihar the killing in police firing on 15 STs at Banjhi in Sahibganj district in 1985; in Bathani Tola, Bhopur in Bihar in 11 July 1996, 21 Dalits were slaughtered by the Ranvir Sena. Among the dead were 11 women, six children and three infants. In Laxmanpur Bathe On 1 December 1997, Ranvir Sena gunned down 58 Dalits. In the village of Melavalavu, in Tamil Nadu's Madurai district, following the election of a Dalit to the village council presidency, members of a higher-caste group murdered six Dalits in June 1997, including the elected council president, whom they beheaded. In January 1999 four members of the village panchayat of Bhungar Khera village in Abohar, Punjab, paraded a handicapped Dalit woman, Ramvati devi naked through the village. No action was taken by the police. In Uttar Pradesh at 2001, Phoolan Devi, a lower Caste leader was shot dead by the higher caste assailants. In the Indian province of Rajasthan, between the years 1999 and 2002, crimes against Dalits average at about 5024 a year, with 46 killings and 138 cases of rape. On 19th Feb 2003, the Adivasis/Tribals gathered under Adivasi Gotha Mahasbha (ADMS), at Muthangara faced 18 rounds of police firing in which 2 fatal casualties were confirmed officially. The Tribals gathered in protest to the Governments delay in allotting them land, which was signed on October 2001. Later, the casualty toll had reached 5 deaths among the Tribals. On September 29, 2006, four members of the Bhotmange family belonging to the Mahar Dalit underclass were slaughtered in Kherlanji, a small village in Bhandara district of Maharashtra. The women of the family, Surekha and Priyanka, were paraded naked before being murdered. On March 7, 1996, upon returning from a conference organized by Dr. Krishnaswamy, Thevar assaulted several Pallars in this village. Following the attack, 150 Pallar houses were set on fire; a Pallar resident of the village was thrown into the fire and burned alive.

In Rengappaanikanpatti, in Virudhunagar district in Tamil Nadu, On June 13, 1996, the Thevar Community people, upper caste people disconnected street lights and threw bombs into the Dalit People's settlement. When the incident was reported to the sub-inspector of the Rajukularasan police station, the complaint was reported.

On May 12, 1997, the Thevars of Rengappaanikanpatti, together with the Thavars from a nearby village, set fire to Pallar houses. The fire also destroyed farmlands, coconut groves, and motor pumps of Dalit Peoples.
2.1. Caste Violence against Dalits by the Police Administration

The police forces are also did so many caste violence against Dalits by numbering in the hundreds of raids conducted in Dalit villages. The pattern of the raids consisted of arbitrary arrests and assaults on Dalit men and women and often included looting and destruction of property. In some cases, police removed their badge numbers so villagers would not be able to identify and file cases against them. The theme of that attack was economy and to destroy their Fans, TV sets, and blenders. The Police destroyed all signs of wealth earned by the Dalit Peoples. They said they would break the economy and put those [Pallars] ten years back. The pattern of these police attacks was established with the raid on Kodyankulum village, Tuticorin District, Tamil Nadu in 1995.

Since 1980 the Dalits of Kodyankulum village, in Tuticorin district, have benefited from the flow of funds from family members employed in Dubai, Kuwait, and the United States. On August 31, 1995, a 600-member police force attacked the all-Dalit village in the presence of the superintendent of police and the district collector and destroyed property worth hundreds of thousands of rupees. In what appeared to be a premeditated attack, police destroyed consumer durables such as televisions, fans, tape-recorders, sewing machines, bicycles, agricultural implements, tractors and lorries, and also demolished food grain storages. They made a bonfire of clothes and burned the passports and testimonials of educated Dalit youth. The village post office was targeted, and police allegedly poisoned the only village well. A village elder claimed “all through the operation, the policemen were showing abuse on us and made derogatory references to our caste, which only showed their deep-rooted prejudice.” District collector Pandeerav, accused of leading the raid, was subsequently transferred to Madras. The stated purpose of the raid was to capture Dalits allegedly involved in the murder of three Thevars in a nearby village two days earlier. Many suspect that it was the relative affluence of the Dalits that attracted the attention of the uniformed men. The idea, it appears, was to destroy their economic base, because the police feel the Kodyankulum Dalits provide moral and support to the miareants in surrounding areas. Similar raids have taken place during the southern district class caste violence. Pandur is a sixty-five-year-old Pallar widow of Thavara- dominated Vanalamparam village, was stripped of all her valuables. At the time of the caste riots, “They entered the house and took all house things, dresses and everything. We kept quiet. We did not say anything. If we said something we would get beaten or they would set fire to the house.” Since the riots, Pandurtha and her two children have relocated to a Pallar-dominant village. Two other clash-related raids are described below.

On February 26, 1998, in the village of Gundupati, Dindigul district, some one hundred policemen and thirty policewomen, along with four truckloads of unidentified men thought to be affiliated with the party, attacked Dalits and bonded laborers residing in two villages in Koolak Panchayat, a remote area of the Kodaikanal hills. Attackers reportedly looted and destroyed property and assaulted residents, including women, children and elderly persons. Kerosene was poured into stored food grains and grocery items. The attackers, including police personnel, reportedly urinated in cooking vessels. According to a local human rights organization, women were kicked and beaten, their clothing was torn, and police forced sticks and iron pipes into their mouths. The police attack, whose victims were predominantly women, was apparently in retaliation for a decision made by residents of the Koolak Panchayat to boycott the national parliamentary elections. The police had a field day breaking open houses, pull out people, beating them up and even violating their modesty, using criminal force on women and girls, pulling out their mangla sutras [marriage necklaces], abusing them with filthy language. They allegedly dragged women and arrested sixteen of them along with nine men. One woman’s baby was thrown while they were starting with their truck. The whole village made many entreaties to the police and then alone the child was allowed to be taken by the mother. In this state of terror and panic, one of the young women who had a miscarriage on the road itself. The twenty-five men and women were then beaten in the police station and sent to jail after being taken before a magistrate. They remained in prison for nearly a month. The People’s Watch activist who initially brought this case to the attention of the National Commission for Women was later charged with dacoits. In the premiership of Enquiry Act 1998 the One Man Commission appointed by the government of Tamil Nadu submitted its report on police excess to the state’s chief minister. The report suggested compensation to the victims.

Desikapuram, The same pattern of destruction was apparent during a raid on Desikapuram village in Virudhunagar district in June 1997. The arrest of Dalit leader Dr. Krishnaswamy on May 2, 1997 led to a staged roadblock by the village population, composed entirely of Pallars. On May 22 some 1,000 police officers, many of whom then proceeded to enter the village and search the houses, confronted protestors. According to a People’s Watch report, “The police had entered the village in the name of ‘search’, dandreg the houses and the higher caste women would pick up.” The next morning, some officers entered the village and demanded a total of Rs. 15,000 (US$375) from residents. Many villagers, including nineteen women, were arrested during the raid: fifteen women were held for fifteen days and four for twenty-nine. Many of the men and women suffered fractured arms and legs because of the attack. The police’s behavior during the raids was not indicative of a systematic search for armed activists. Rather, the attacks and assaults were characterized by large-scale destruction of property. In all such cases, the Indian State at both the national and state levels avoided addressing basic contradictions, vulnerabilities and causative factors; the treatment was mainly symptomatic and palliative instead of the required radical solutions. The Indian government has failed to prevent widespread violence and discrimination against millions people at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. “Untouchability” was abolished under India’s constitution in 1950. Yet entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste, in which hostility, or Dalit deaths and the high caste villages, may not use the same wells, wear shoes in the presence of upper castes, visit the same temples, drink from the same cups in tea stalls, or lay claim to land that is legally theirs. Dalit children are frequently made to sit in the back of classrooms. Dalit villagers have been the victims of many brutal massacres in recent years. “Untouchability” is not an ancient cultural artifact, it is human rights abuse on a vast scale,” said Smita Narula, researcher for the Asia division of Human Rights Watch. In protest Dalits have been repeatedly attacked since the 1980s, violence against Dalit people is both “the root of Dalit rights movements. According to 1989 law banning atrocities against Dalits, it is illegal to force Dalits into bonded labor, deny them access to public places, foul their drinking water, force them to eat “obnoxious substances,” or “parade them naked or with painted face or body.” However, “The violence will only grow and the caste violence are severe in all the places”. Upper-caste employers frequently use caste as a cover for exploitative economic arrangements. With the exception of a minority who have benefited from India’s policies of reservations (affirmative action), Dalits are relegated to the most menial tasks. An estimated 200 million people in India, among them 75 million children, are bonded laborers, working in slave-like conditions in order to pay off debts. The majority of them are Dalits. At least one million Dalits work as manual scavengers, clearing feces from latrines and disposing of dead animals with their bare hands. Dalits also comprise the majority of agricultural laborers who work for a few kilograms of rice, or 15-35 rupees (less than US$1) a

day. In India's southern states, thousands of Dalit girls are forced to become prostitutes for upper-caste patrons and village priests before reaching the age of puberty. Landlords and the police use sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women to inflict political "lessons" and crush dissent within the community. Dalit women have been arrested and tortured in custody to punish their male relatives who are hiding from the authorities. Dalits throughout the country also suffer from de facto disenfranchisement. During elections, Dalits are routinely threatened and beaten by political party strongmen in order to compel them to vote for certain candidates. Dalits who run for political office in village councils and municipalities (through seats that have been constitutionally "reserved" for them) have been threatened with physical abuse and even death to get them to withdraw from the campaign. In the village of Melavalavu, Tamil Nadu, following the election of a Dalit to the village council presidency, members of a higher caste group murdered six Dalits in June 1997, including the elected council president, whom they beheaded. As of February 1999, the accused murderers -- who had been voted out of their once-secure elected positions -- had not been prosecuted. In all the above-investigated cases, with the exception of a few transfers and suspensions, no action has been taken against police officers involved in violent raids or summary executions, or against those accused of colluding with private actors to carry out attacks on Dalits. In many instances, Dalits have repeatedly called for police protection and been ignored. Even national government agencies concur that impunity is rampant. "Talking about the problem is not enough," said Narula. "The Indian government must act now to demonstrate its stated commitment to ensuring equal rights for Dalits (Henri Tiphagne, 2011; IDCR, Loyola College, 2010)."

3. STATISTICS OF CASTE VIOLENCE

Tamil Nadu along with the rest of the country has an unfortunate history of "Untouchability" which is still persisting and rampant in various forms including the notorious "two-glass" system, and infliction of atrocities on SCs when they seek their rights including the right to dignity. The Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act, 1955 and the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) (POA), Act, 1989 are being implemented in a casual and lackadaisical manner. Statistics provided by the Government of Tamil Nadu for the Annual Reports on the POA Act and the PCR Act, placed on the Table of the Parliament, presents a picture of absent-mindedness, casualness and gross negligence. For example, the Government of Tamil Nadu reported under the PCR Act, 2 cases in 2002 and 3 cases in 2003 which is patently and unrealistically low. During the same period, the Govt. of Andhra Pradesh reported 343 cases in 2002 and 495 cases in 2003. The "Untouchability" situation in Tamil Nadu is not better than Andhra Pradesh. Even in Tamil Nadu, the reported cases in 1999 was 33 which came down to the numbers mentioned for 2002 and 2003 while in the neighbouring Andhra Pradesh the number of cases went up from 279 in 1999 to 495 in 2003. There is no justification for so much variation between Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and for the fall of number of cases in Tamil Nadu. Another painful instance is that of zero conviction in Tamil Nadu in 2003. In that year, trial was completed in 2017 out of 2056 cases in the court. Everyone of the 2017 cases ended in acquittal! The zero conviction in 2003 should be compared with the number of convictions in Tamil Nadu itself in previous years — 137 in 2002, 247 in 2001 and 140 in 2000. The slump in convictions in 2003, the wide and apparently inexplicable internal variations in Tamil Nadu and inter-State comparison with neighboring States all show lack of seriousness about effective implementation. The figures of Tamil Nadu do not mesh with the ground reality of rampant "Untouchability" and frequent atrocities, and the number of cases registered, number of convictions and acquittals and variations are apparently the outcome of casualness (Henri Tiphagne, 2011; IDCR, Loyola College, 2010).

4. STRENGTHENING THE PCR MEASURES

The Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955: The PCR Act and its implementation should be strengthened through the following measures:

- A Special Mobile Court in each district exclusively for trying cases under the PCR Act on the spot;
- Organization of mass movements through mobilization of all positive social forces including SCs and STs, liberals and voluntary organizations in addition to the official machinery in order to totally eradicate every form of "Untouchability" and atrocities.
- It should be made the personal responsibility of every District Collector and SP to ensure that all measures necessary for ensuring that the rights arising from the abolition of "Untouchability" are made available to and are availed of by SCs in terms of Section 15A of the Act.
- In particular, they should be required to pro-actively ensure elimination of "Untouchability" in Anganwadis, Mid-day Meals, Class-room seating, equal access to drinking water in schools, provision of services by medical, health and gynaecological personnel, without any difference to SCs, in addition to ensuring equal access to temples, and to institute a system of grievances-hearing of SCs regarding "Untouchability" in any form anywhere and immediate redressal of grievances.
- SC women should be appointed as Mid Day Meal cooks, firmly resisting caste-biased opposition. Where cooks are not SC women, the meal servers should be SC women.
- SC and other caste children should be seated interpersed for Mid Day Meals. These will help SC children to get their Mid Day Meals with dignity and will help curb "Untouchability" (Henri Tiphagne, 2011; IDCR, Loyola College, 2010).

5. CONCLUSION

"The Constitution of India, inspired by the ideals of the national movement for Independence and in particular by Dr. Ambedkar’s philosophy, has clearly mandated the Indian State, both at the Central level and the level of the States of India, to protect the SCs and STs from social injustice and all forms of exploitation and to promote with special care their educational and economic interest, and also incorporated various Articles spelling out the means for achieving this objective and for achieving the Constitutional goal of Social Justice and Social Equality. Notwithstanding this Constitutional mandate, the Governments in India including Governments in Tamil Nadu have failed to follow this Constitutional mandate and the various Constitutional provisions in full. Therefore, while the Scheduled Castes, encouraged by the Constitution and with growing consciousness and awareness with the spread of education among them, have been increasingly asserting their rights and defyng the inhuman unconstitutional and illegal interdicts of "Untouchability", they have been largely left to the mercy of locally powerful castes to which the major landholders of the area belong and who want to maintain the unconstitutional status-quo ante.

"My final word of advice to you is educate, agitate, and organize. Have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing
Indian Journal of Arts • PERSPECTIVES • CASTE SYSTEM

material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality.” - Dr. Ambedkar (from a speech made at the All-India Depressed Classes Conference - 1942).

REFERENCES

2. Caste And Violence A Case Study of Tamil Nadu, Institute of Dialogue With Cultures and Religions (IDCR), Loyola College, Chennai 600 034

RELATED RESOURCES

1. Age-old rivalry behind Khairlanji violence. NDTV. Retrieved on 10-12-2006
2. Banerjee, Shoumojit. All accused in 1996 Bihar Dalit carnage acquitted. The Hindu (Chennai, India), 17-04-2012
3. Banerjee, Shoumojit. For residents of Bathani, it is a horror they cannot forget. The Hindu (Chennai, India), 19-04-2012
4. Bathani Tola case: Bihar Govt to move SC against verdict. The Hindu (Chennai, India), 18-04-2012
12. John Arquilla. Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits, 245–251
13. Khairlanji to Kanpur. The Indian Express, 02-12-2006. Retrieved on 02-12-2006
17. Situation in Mumbai, state back to normal. The Times of India. 02-12-2006. Retrieved on 02-12-2006
18. Sixteen sentenced to death in 1997 carnage in Bihar. The Hindu (Chennai, India), 07-04-2010
19. Supreme Court reserves verdict in Melavalavu case. The Hindu (Chennai, India), 23-09-2009
20. Two killed as tribals, police clash. The Hindu (Chennai, India), 20-02-2003