

**Dwivedi Anand Prakash Sharma**

Delhi College of Arts & Commerce (Univ. of Delhi), India, New Delhi  
e-mail: dapsharma@dcac.du.ac.in

**CHANGING CHARACTERISTICS  
OF THE CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA**

In India, during the last three decades, the caste system's characteristics have changed significantly. The caste system has never been an uncontested reality in India. The tradition of resistance to the caste system and the sentiment of reform about it are as old as the caste system's history. The caste (Jati) system has been transformed under the ruling elites from ancient to modern times. However, multiple socioeconomic and political factors are behind the changes that have come after India's independence. But, the most significant changes have occurred after 1991. The unexpected changes that have come in the last three decades are different in many ways than before. The market-driven new economy, rise of caste identity, access to quality education, and empowerment schemes have made the change possible. This paper explores the changing facets of the Indian caste system, factors of change, and its impact on Indian socio-political life in contemporary India.

**Key words:** Varna, Jan, Jati, Dalit, Gunas, Varna ashram-Dharma, Dwij.

Двиведи Ананд Пракаш Шарма  
Дели Университеті, Үндістан, Нью-Дели қ.,  
e-mail: dapsharma@dcac.du.ac.in

**Үндістандағы касталық жүйенің  
сипаттамаларының өзгеруі**

Үндістанда соңғы үш онжылдықта касталық жүйенің сипаттамалары айтарлықтай өзгерді. Касталық жүйе Үндістанда ешқашан даусыз шындық болған емес. Касталық жүйеге қарсы тұру дәстүрі және ол туралы реформа сезімі касталық жүйенің тарихымен бірдей. Касталық (Джати) жүйесі басқарушы элита кезінде ежелгі заманнан қазіргі заманға өзгерді. Алайда Үндістан тәуелсіздік алғаннан кейін болған өзгерістердің артында көптеген әлеуметтік-экономикалық және саяси факторлар жатыр. Бірақ, ең маңызды өзгерістер 1991 жылдан кейін орын алды. Каста – әлеуметтік тұрғыда: қоғамдық өмірдің едәуір күрделі құбылысы, оны барынша “оқшаулық өлшемдеріне құрылған қатаң иерархиялық қоғамдық бөлінудің” мінсіз типін іздеушілер тым қарабайырландырып жіберді. Егер Үндістанның қоғамдық-саяси өміріне бір нәрсе әсер етсе, онда бұл касталар жүйесі. Тарихи даму барысында ол ежелгі дәуірден бастап билеуші элиталардың әсерінен өзгерді. Бастапқыда сабақтар мен еңбек бөлінісіне негізделген касталар жүйесі иерархиялық әлеуметтік құрылымға қалай айналғанын білу қызықты болар еді. Соңғы екі онжылдықта касталық жүйенің сипаттамалары бұрынғыға қарағанда едәуір өзгерді және бірнеше әлеуметтік-экономикалық және саяси факторлардың әсерінен тез трансформациялануда. Бүгінгі касталық жүйе жалпы индиялық кемсітушілік құбылыс деп ойламау керек. Үнді мәдениетіндегі касталық жүйеге қарсы тұру дәстүрі касталық жүйенің өзі сияқты көне дәуірде екендігі де ақиқат. Бұл жұмыста үнділік касталық жүйенің өзгермелі қырлары зерттеліп, касталық жүйенің маңызды аспектілері мен оның үндістердің қоғамдық-саяси өміріне әсері туралы қысқаша сыни зерттеулер келтірілген.

**Түйін сөздер:** Варна, Джан, Джати, Далит, Гун, Варна ашрам-Дхарма, движ.

Двиведи Ананд Пракаш Шарма  
Университет Дели, Индия, г. Нью-Дели  
e-mail: dapsharma@dcac.du.ac.in

**Изменение характеристик кастовой системы в Индии**

В Индии за последние три десятилетия характеристики кастовой системы существенно изменились. Кастовая система никогда не была неоспоримой реальностью в Индии. Традиция сопротивления кастовой системе и отношение к ней реформ так же стары, как история кастовой системы. Кастовая (джати) система трансформировалась при правящих элитах с древних времен до наших дней. Однако за изменениями, произошедшими после обретения Индией независимости,

стоит множество социально-экономических и политических факторов. Но наиболее значительные перемены произошли после 1991 года. Неожиданные изменения, произошедшие за последние три десятилетия, во многом отличаются от прежних. Новая экономика, управляемая рынком, рост кастовой идентичности, доступ к качественному образованию и схемы расширения прав и возможностей способствовали появлению перемен в различных областях. В этой статье исследуются меняющиеся грани кастовой системы Индии, факторы изменений и их влияние на индийскую социально-политическую жизнь в современной Индии. Не следует думать, что сегодняшняя кастовая система является, по существу, паниндийским дискриминационным явлением. Верно и то, что традиция сопротивления кастовой системе в индийской культуре так же стара, как и сама история кастовой системы.

**Ключевые слова:** Варна, Джан, Джати, Далит, Гуны, Варна ашрам-Дхарма, Движдж.

## Introduction

The caste system, a widely discussed and debated topic in India has been one of the most significant ethnographic features of Indian social life that classifies people based on inherited social status. If anything has influenced Indian socio-cultural life the most, it is the caste system. We should not think that the caste system is like it used to be even today. Many characteristics of the caste system have changed, and the process of change continues. Diverse aspects of the caste system have been addressed in several studies during the last two decades. However, the general area of change in the caste system's characteristics has yet to be studied, mainly the recent phenomenon of change. In this regard, multiple socio-economic circumstances, their causes, their implications and their process and methods need to be investigated from diverse perspectives. This paper intends to touch upon the objective mentioned above.

## Review of literature

Due to caste system's uniqueness, numerous studies have been done on this subject in India and abroad. Vedic literature and Dharmashastras (scriptures) are the primary sources to know the Varna system. Sociologists and anthropologists have conducted period-wise studies on the Varna system and the caste (jati) system. Devotional poetry in modern Indian languages is also an essential source on this subject which challenged the caste hierarchy and narrow customs of the caste system. Reformists, those who opposed the caste system in the 19th and 20th century, have too produced sufficient literature attacking the caste system's inevitability. After independence, there have been significant economic studies on the caste system, especially in the last three decades. Despite this, I am adding one more review to this subject, so there must be some reasons. In other words, what new facts or

trends related to the study of the cast systems do I want to draw attention to, which we need to know? The significant change in the characteristics of the caste system occurred during the last thirty years. It was the economic reforms of 1991 onward that exposed India to the market-driven global economy. The fruits of economic reforms have resulted in diverse types of social change in India. In the era of modernity and the market economy, the caste system's characteristics have undergone a drastic change. During the last two decades, studies have been conducted on this subject; however, considering the dimensions of change and the vast scope of the topic, the possibilities of further studies are immense.

## Methodology

I have identified three problems and tried to address them with a new perspective. First, *Varna* and *Jati* are considered synonyms of the word caste and used interchangeably to refer to the caste system, which is not right. We need to know that Varna is a book-view system found in ancient Hindu books, different from the Jati, a prevalent contextual phenomenon. Thus, the classification of the Varna-system should not be considered the same as Jati or caste system. I have proved this with logical and authentic references. Secondly, it is commonly believed that resistance to the caste system and reformist consciousness is a modern age thought emerged in the nineteenth-century. I have shown in this study that the consciousness of resistance and reform began in ancient India. Instead, two parallel streams of traditional and reformist about the caste system continued to flow simultaneously from ancient to modern. Thirdly, I have noticed that outside India, generally, it is believed that characteristics of the caste system even today remain the same as it was in the past; it is uniform across India and is essentially a discriminatory system. Contradicting this perception, I have presented a brief study of

changing characteristics and new trends about the caste system under multiple socioeconomic and political factors, mainly after 1991. As a social study, the qualitative research method has been followed based on social patterns and behaviour. The caste system's changing behavioural patterns have been analyzed basically on incidents, reports, and observations.

## Discussion

### *Caste, Varna, jati and outcastes*

During their presence in India, Portuguese used the word *casta* for the *Jati*, hereditary Indian social groups to which the British called *Caste* in English. Later, *Caste* has been used interchangeably to refer to both *Varna* and *Jati*, but both the concepts are distinct. Sociologist Andre Beteille opined that *Varna* played the role of *Caste* in classical Hindu literature while it is the *Jati* which has been instrumental in present times. He suggests that *Caste* is not an accurate representation of *Jati* in English. The term ethnicity, ethnic identity and ethnic group would be a better replacement for *Jati* (Beteille: 1996; 15-25).

*Varna*'s first mention found in the tenth and last chapter of Rig-Veda the oldest Hindu text as part of its cosmic philosophy. *Varna*, which means colour or shades, texture or feature, characteristic, refers to social groups based on *Gun*as representing qualities. *Varna* is not equivalent to the word *caste*. There is no evidence showing that the *Varna* in the Vedic era was the hierarchical or stratified classification of the society; however, it is true about the *Jati* system, a post-Vedic notion.

The Sanskrit word *Jati* originates from the root *Jan* that means being born or being produced. Hence, *Jati* implies taking birth. Each *Jati* had its specific occupation, and that was its livelihood. His birth determined the *Jati* of a person. Along with being a caste member, a person's occupation was also determined according to his *Caste*'s specified hereditary occupation. When, how and why *Jati* emerged is difficult to determine. It seems that the four *Varnas* were later divided into different *jatis*. Due to increased population and diversified occupations, several occupational groups emerged that came to be known as *Jati*. Social anthropologist Dipankar Gupta [2000:212] traces its emergence during the Mauryan period [322-185BCE]. However, it is still difficult to establish when and how *Jati* came into existence.

*Varna-vyavastha* (*Varna* system) is found today only in post-Vedic texts whereas, *Jati* is found in

reality today. *Varnas* are only four; whereas more than four thousand *jatis* exist. The *Varna* is a pan Indian phenomenon whereas, *jatis* vary from region to region, and nearly two hundred *jatis* are found in each region. In general, the *Varna* hierarchy was uniform across India in which *Brahmins* are on the top, *Kshatriyas* are on the second, *Vaishyas* are at the third, and *Shudras* are in the fourth position. In *Jati*, uniform hierarchy throughout India is not found. In *Varna*-system, religious criteria regulate the system whereas, in *Jati*, socioeconomic and political measures are mainly found. In *Varna*-system, initially, untouchables are not found whereas; untouchables are there in *jati*-system. Thus, *Varna* and *Jati* should not be considered synonymously.

At the very bottom and outside the caste system are the untouchables. The untouchables' work is cleaning toilets, removing garbage, scavenging bodily fluids, skinning dead animals, etc. Due to their work's nature, untouchables are considered polluted, not to be touched and thus outcastes. They were not allowed to use public amenities, and they usually lived in a cluster separate from the villages. In Vedic texts, there is no mention of untouchables and untouchability. In later Vedic texts, some occupations are viewed as inferior, but untouchability like the thing is not found in them in any way. Post-Vedic scriptures (Dharmashastras), especially the Manusmriti [2nd – 3rd CE] include outcastes and ostracizing them. Patrick Olivelle, has interpreted the above view of Dharmashastras from a different perspective. He believes that these references of purity and impurity are much of individuals concerns irrespective of *Varna* affiliation [2008: ch-9].

### *Why is the caste system infamous?*

There are three big reasons for the caste system being maligned: heredity (birth determines the caste of a person, not the achieved and earned qualities), hierarchal structure (castes are ranked from higher to lower according to their importance, purity and impurity of occupation) and discrimination based on purity and pollution. Purity and pollution were judged based on occupation, eating habits, lifestyle etc. Generally, consuming liquor, non-veg food, eating left-over food, occupation like leather craft, bamboo craft, pig raising, scavenging, and skinning dead animals are considered impure. It was the criteria of untouchability and ostracizing outcastes. Social hierarchy gave birth to segmental division, and upper castes (*Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and *vaishya*) have developed the right lifestyle while the lives of lower castes were pathetic. Outcastes in rural areas

can be seen still living in an inferior condition. On the very basis of purity and pollution, restrictions on taking food and drink from lower castes and untouchables were imposed. Religious practices like performing rituals and entering into temples; cultural practices like wearing gold ornaments, following practices similar to upper castes etc. were debarred for these casts. Changing hereditary occupation was infrequent, and inter-caste marriages were not allowed. However, a lot has changed concerning the caste system's characteristics during the last three decades, which we will discuss in the following pages.

#### *Is the caste system rooted in Vedic Varna?*

A scholar of ideological perspective believes that the caste system is rooted in Vedic *Varans*. The first mention of the *Varna* found in the *Purushsukta* of the tenth and last book of Rig-Veda which says “*Brahmanas were his (Purush the cosmic man) mouth, the Rajanya (Kshatriyas) became his arms, the vaishyas were his thighs, and the Shudras were assigned to his feet* [Rig-Veda; 10\_90\_11, 12]. The same thing is recreated with a subtle difference in the Yajurveda and the Atharvaveda [Yajurveda; 31\_10\_11 and Atharvaveda; 19\_6\_5, 6].

Scholars have accused the above hymn of Rig-Veda as a fountainhead of the caste-based hierarchy in India. They believe that the *Varna* hierarchy is determined by the descending order of the different organs from which the above four *Varnas* are associated. This idea was formulated and developed during the British colonial period. However, Vedic scholars and Indian thinkers refute this notion that the above reference of *Purushsukt* is by no means a hierarchical description of *Varna* system which can be linked to the pyramidal caste system and hierarchy based on that. They believe that without closely investigating the meaning, context and metaphor of the Vedic text, successive generations of scholars have recreated and reiterated the same assumption. Some Indologists and Vedic experts have even questioned the *Purushsukt* of the Rig-Veda, referring to the *Varna* mentioned only once. Moreover, the tenth Mandala (book) includes the said *Sukta* is now considered to have been inserted at a later date into the Rig-veda [Lahiri: 2005].

Indologists believe that the first three groups of *Varna*, i.e. Brahman, Kshatriya, and Vaisya, have parallel status. They doubt that the addition of the Shudras as a fourth group is perhaps a Brahmanical addition [Samuel: 2008, 86-87]. The Rig-Veda does not provide us with *Varna*-system details; much later, the Manusmriti gives an extensive commentary on the *Varna*-system. Bayly believes that Manusmriti

and other post-Vedic scriptures elevated Brahmins in the social hierarchy, which can be a factor in the making of the *Varna*-system however; these texts have not created the phenomenon of caste in India. He also reveals that many revered Hindu texts and doctrines in disagreement with the scriptures question social classification [2001: 9; 29]

According to the *Varna* classification's biological explanation, all living beings inherit one of three *Gunas* or qualities/virtues – *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. *Sattva Gun* includes virtues that relate to wisdom, intelligence, honesty, and all good qualities. *Rajas* have characteristics of valour, pride etc. *Tamas* encapsulates negative attributes such as dullness, stupidity etc. *Varna* represents shades of texture, characteristics and temperament. People inherent with different qualities and skills adopted fitting occupation. This theory considers that Brahmanas inherit *Sattva* qualities, the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas inherit *Rajas* qualities, and the Shudras inherit *Tamas* qualities. *Varna's* division is determined by the type of person's action, his nature and mental temper, and his virtues inherent in him.

A full study of Vedic references about *Varna*-system is out of this paper's scope; however, it seems that the hymn of *Purush Sukta* has been misrepresented about the hierarchical formation of *Varnas* and the birth-based caste system in India.

#### **Caste system: resistance and reforms**

*In the post-Vedic era, it is believed that with the increasing population, there was the emergence of new classes due to which the sanctity of the original Varna-system could not be protected. It seems that the risk of losing social status was increasing for the regulators of Varna-system. Consequently, on the one hand, there was an attempt to implement the Varna-system sternly; on the other hand, Varna-system's certainty began to be challenged. Varna-system's provisions mentioned in the Dharmashastras (scriptures) represent the traditional stream and the anti-Varna system thought of Buddhism and Jainism represent the reformist stream. This is the time (6th-5th BCE) when two parallel streams, of traditional and reformists about the caste system go almost simultaneously. Buddha asserted against the birth-based caste system, pointing out that biological birth is common to all men and that a person's occupation is not a divine decision. He also endorsed social mobility in the caste system. Mahavir, 24th Tirthankara of Jainism brought comprehensive reforms introducing dissolution of all the four Varnas calling it outdated. He taught that all human beings should be treated equally.*

Bhakti movement (theistic devotional trend of Hinduism) began in south India (Tamilnadu) around 6th-7th centuries, spread northwards and remained active as a pan Indian socio-cultural-religious movement until 16th-17th century. It challenged the hierarchy and narrow customs of the caste system. It was the first time in Indian history when many devotee poets from lower castes, especially untouchables from all the regions across India, spoke fearlessly in regional languages against the caste system. They firmly believed individuals' direct connection to god and the possibility of salvation for all through good deeds and simple living. Undoubtedly, this social consciousness questioning inevitability of the caste system proved a catalyst for the 19th and 20th-century social reform movements. It is a happy coincidence that on the one hand, Hindu spiritual leaders like Shankar, Vallabh, Ramanuj and Ramanand were reinvigorating Hinduism. On the other hand, devout poets from across the region were trying to free Hinduism from the caste system. It would be pertinent to mention Haridas Thakur (15th century), a Vaishnava saint from eastern India questioned the Brahmanical texts that supported caste hierarchy. He worked for the betterment of Chandalas and founded Matua sect. Similarly; Guru Ghasidas (1756-1850) founded the Satnami movement to improve untouchables' social status, especially the leatherworkers.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the process of change about social customs and practices became apparent. The main reason for this change was the introduction of modern education and new forms of communication. In Maharashtra, the middle part of India, Jyotirao Phule, educated from Christian missionary school attacked the caste system, Brahmanical texts, Brahmanas, and the concept of superior-inferior based on caste hierarchy. He wrote a famous book *Gulamgiri* (slavery) and dedicated the book to those entire American who fought to free black slaves in America. His wife Savitribai Phule (1831-1879), regarded as India's first female teacher, worked tirelessly for women's education and rights. Her outstanding works towards the upliftment of lower castes women is an ideal even today. In south India (Kerala), Shri Narayan Guru (1855-1928), from a lower caste called Ezhava, opposed people's unequal treatment based on caste hierarchy. One of his famous teachings is '*one caste, one religion and one god for humankind*'.

The caste reform movement of the nineteenth century continued in the twentieth century too. The most influential leader of modern India's anti-caste movement was Dr B. R. Ambedkar who brought the

discourse into the political domain and ultimately to its logical end by ensuring positive discrimination (reservation) policy as a constitutional provision. His voluminous writings on upper caste power and prejudice in Hindu society are a valuable reference. From 1927 to 1935 he organized three temple entry movements. He believed Hindu society should be recognized on two primary principles – equality and absence of caste system. Another revolutionary of the twentieth century was E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker (popularly known as Periyar) from south India (Tamilnadu). He was an outspoken critique of Brahmins and Hindu scriptures. He founded the Self Respect Movement advocating that untouchables had to free themselves from all types of oppression.

Gandhi and Ambedkar both fought for the oppressed castes and campaigned for eradicating untouchability; however, due to their distinct philosophy, they were on different paths. The Gandhi-Ambedkar debate is frequently mentioned even today on this subject. Gandhi was a devout Hindu and not opposed to the caste system, but he considered untouchability a sin. Throughout his life, Gandhi worked for Harijans' (outcastes) upliftment and emancipation and talked against untouchability. In 1923 he founded *Harijan Sevak Sangh*, residential schools providing vocational studies for untouchables. However, Ambedkar believed that untouchability could not be removed without completely eradicating the caste system. Contrary to Gandhi for whom caste system was a social issue, Ambedkar considered untouchability and caste-oppressions a political and economic issue. Their fundamental difference reflected in the 1931 *Poona Pact* that shaped Dalit political representation in independent India.

From their own experience, Phule and Ambedkar identified the power of education. They emphasized educating Dalits, empowering them with judgment capacity, political consciousness, socioeconomic status, and dignified life. They believed that if Dalits have the power, they do not have to beg for their rights before the upper castes. Through education, Phule and Ambedkar envisioned that the Dalits would control the country's economy and politics. To realize this vision, Ambedkar gave call "Educate, Organize and Agitate".

After independence, Indian govt paid much importance to Ambedkar's vision and formalized policies to empower Dalit community and lower castes and tribes making reservation policy in legislature, jobs and education a constitutional provision and declared all forms including caste-based discrimination illegal, thus a punishable offence.



*Decisive two decades of Dalit movement: Emergence of Dalit Panthers, Dalit literary movement, and Bahujan Samaj movement*

Even after two decades of independence, there was no significant change in the social status of Dalits. In such a situation, it was natural for the emerging Dalit consciousness to become restless. Restlessness led to three movements that shaped the future course of action for the fight for Dalit rights. Inspired by the Black Panthers Party, a revolutionary movement amongst African-Americans, Namdev Dhasal founded *Dalit Panthers* (1972), a socio-political movement. This movement was a radical departure from the earlier Dalit actions as it used militancy to resist oppressors. Soon it became popular amongst oppressed classes across the state of Maharashtra; however, it has not impacted much in other parts of the country because of its left-leaning and militancy, contrary to Ambedkar's legacy. The seeds of *the Dalit literary movement* sprouted from the formation of Dalit Panthers. It was apparent that the upper caste scholars would not include Dalit writings against the caste system, exposing forms of oppressions and challenging the hegemony of upper castes. Hence, Dalit writers floated their literary movement to express sufferings and sensitize masses against the caste system and its discriminatory customs through books and magazines. It has a significant presence in modern Indian languages, now an established trend of contemporary Indian literature. In 1984 Kanshiram, a follower of Ambedkar founded a political party – *Bahujan Samaj Party* to fulfill Dalit consciousness dreams. The *Bahujan* identity encompassed SCs, STs, OBCs, and religious minorities but practically represented only the scheduled castes. In 1993 it won the election and came in power with the support of a regional party in India's largest province known as Uttar Pradesh. Since then, it has changed the power dynamics of north India.

*Changing characteristics of the caste system in India: modernity and market economy after 1991*

*Loosening grip of the caste system*

Due to various affirmative action policies, legal reforms, political awareness, social movements, industrialization, urbanization, and economic growth, the cast system has undergone a drastic change in the era of modernity and market economy. The situation in big cities and metropolitan cities is entirely different from that of villages and small towns concerning the caste system. In tier-1 cities, the features of the caste system are rarely seen. Though the caste system's heredity is there, social stratification is based mainly on economic

factors in urban India. Occupational hierarchy too has significantly changed except priesthood and cleaning sewer and skinning dead animals. Upper caste people are today doing all the jobs which are opposite to their caste status. Due to the positive discrimination policy (reservation policy) in jobs and education, members of the Dalit community are no longer considered impure or polluted in an organization. Restrictions on food and drink are no longer exists in such cases. Inter-caste marriages among educated Indians, especially in urban areas, are increasing day-by-day. Socio-cultural restrictions on privileges and distinction in custom and speech are hardly found today. The spread of quality education, availability of jobs and new economic opportunities have changed many things. However, in rural areas and small towns, the process of change and its result are not as visible as in big cities, and a lot is yet to change particularly with the social status of Dalit community.

*Rise of caste identity, caste-conflict and renewed debate on the caste system*

The thinking and social behaviour of the generation born after 1990 have undergone a significant change. This change is reflected differently in the social action of upper castes and lower castes. The new generation of upper caste has no rigidity regarding occupational hierarchy, although it does not look interested in giving up its caste identity. On the other hand, Dalits born in this new era are unapologetic and unashamed of their caste identity. They wear a Dalit tag as a badge of honour and feel that their destiny is not dependent on the state or any dominant power in the society. They have not experienced humiliation as a lower caste; thus, they see themselves as part of the mainstream culture. While the modern means of communication and market economy opened up new possibilities and a paradigm of socio-economic parity among all citizens, society has not embraced the change. New Dalit consciousness is not satisfied with tokenism like eating with them and honouring their ideas, etc., they want parity in all terms, including the intellectual equal. This is the gap out of which the renewed debate on the caste system has emerged.

When the lower castes are not ready to compromise on parity and their rights and the upper castes' dominance is eroding; it is natural for the conflict to happen. According to a report '*Quest for Justice*' prepared by the National Dalit Movement for Justice, crimes against Dalits increased by 6% from 2009 to 2018.

*The growing tension between pro and anti-reservation sentiment*

The reservation system in India has been the most debatable and contentious topic in India. Reservation policy instructs 49.5% (15+7.5+27) seats to be reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in government jobs and educational institutions and the rest of the seats are open for the General category referred as Unreserved (UR). In 2011 the then union govt established a sub-quota of 4.5% for religious minorities within the existing 27% reservation for OBCs. Reading the growing anti-reservation sentiments among unreserved category, the union govt before the Parliamentary election in 2019, introduced 10% reservation for the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) in the General category; finally, the unreserved category stands at 40% at present.

The age-old hierarchal caste system is responsible for the quota-based affirmative action or positive discrimination or reservation policy. The idea of a reservation system was conceived by William Hunter and Jyotirao Phule in 1882 and was first introduced in 1933 during India's colonial rule. The rationale behind the reservation system is to improve the socio-economic and educational status of unprivileged lower castes that have been historically oppressed and discriminated against due to the caste system. It is meant to correct historical injustice by ensuring equality as enshrined in India's constitution to those who have been at the lower level or out of the caste system. The reservation system gives a level playing field for socially-economically unprivileged sections of the society who cannot compete with those having access to power and resources for centuries.

Until 1989, the anti-reservation sentiment was not prominently visible in the general category. The major incident that provoked and fuelled the anti-reservation sentiment was implementing the Mandal Commission Report, which recommended a 27% reservation for OBCs. In 1979, the then union govt constituted a commission with a mandate to identify the socially or educationally backward classes of India and consider giving them reservation on socio-economic backwardness. Parliamentarian B. P. Mandal headed the commission. In 1980, the commission identified 52% (now a disputed data) of the Indian population as Other Backward Classes (OBC) on socio-economic indicators. It recommended granting 27% reservation in jobs, making the total reservation for SC, ST and OBC 49.5%. It would be pertinent to mention that OBCs

have never been socially discriminated against by the caste system. In 1990, out of its political game plan to save its minority govt, the then Prime Minister declared implementing the above-said report to get support from the OBCs. In response, spontaneous and widespread student's protests stir up across India against this move. Academic activities in universities and colleges did not function for three consecutive months. The stir claimed many lives of students' and witnessed attempts of self-immolation. Reporting the incident, *India Today* wrote, "From the north to the south, the anti-reservation stir may have taken a haphazard, even disjointed path. But, the message that a large section of the nation's people had overnight been alienated from their rulers was flashed loud and clear" (September 30, 1990).

Since then, anti-reservation sentiment kept growing among the general category. The govt that implemented 27% reservation for OBCs lost power due to lack of majority in the Parliament succeeded by a govt that implemented economic reforms that became a significant social change factor in India after 1991. But it was not like everything had happened well. The agriculture sector, a backbone of the Indian economy, has been neglected by India's successive governments. Market-driven new economy increased the people's needs and aspirations, but the income from farming was insufficient to meet those needs. This situation brought discontent and distress among the farming class, which constitutes a big part of the general category. The Double whammy of eroding dominance and loss of opportunity and farm distress has augmented anti-reservation sentiment in India. On the other hand, caste identity was rising among the social groups across India. The beneficiaries consider that the reservation policy is not a privilege but a constitutional right for them being historically oppressed. This complex social phenomenon provides opportunities for politics to polarize votes in the election. Precisely, the continued anti and pro-reservation sentiments feed each other, and both social groups have arguments favoring their cause. I believe the reservation system is linked to the social hierarchy of the caste system. Without addressing the social justice delivery system, a debate on the reservation would be a futile exercise.

**Demand for reservation by advantaged castes**

We have witnessed an utterly unexpected trend in this era; it was the violent agitations, to press for the demand for reservation in jobs and education by those not lower or oppressed castes. Instead, they have been socially influential and economically well-

off castes. These castes are Gujjars of Rajasthan, Jats of Haryana, Marathas of Maharashtra, Patidars/Patels of Gujrat and Lingayats of Karnataka. Apart from the caste polarization for political gain, some factors seem active behind the above-said demand. All the castes mentioned above are mainly agrarian castes who believe that reservation would ensure job security for them as the best solution to their distress during the agricultural crisis. Increasing unemployment, eroding social privilege and inability to cope with change is also the factors behind the demand for reservation by the advantaged castes. In this scenario, it would not be incorrect to say that the affirmative action aimed to bring socio-economic parity has become more of a tool to grab power. Besides, this trend also indicates the ensuing inevitability of change in the characteristics of the caste system.

#### *Politics of caste and caste in politics in independent India*

We have noticed that caste in India has traditionally been a significant influence over access to power. Thus, the relationship between caste and politics is analyzed on two levels – how caste identities influence politics, and how electoral politics affects the caste system? We have seen how the caste hierarchy was institutionalized in British colonial India as part of an elaborate patronage system for achieving the colonial objectives. In independent India, the Congress party maintained the patron-client (voter) ties along the caste and community lines and the party remained in power until the relationship worked well. By the early 1990s, the patron-client relations in Indian politics started changing, bringing a significant shift in caste politics, especially the nature of vote bank politics. It was mainly due to the upsurge in caste-based regional parties in north India those made the lower caste empowerment their sole political agenda. This was hugely impacted to the upper caste domination in Indian politics. The rise of BJP's nationalist politics and caste-based regional parties' upsurge took place almost the same period. Caste-based political parties were an obstacle to the success of nationalist politics. In recent years, the nationalist politics of the BJP, especially after the Modi era, has given a severe challenge to the caste-based parties hurting their power equations.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the importance of caste has diminished in Indian politics. Interestingly, BJP's nationalist politics success also lies indirectly in its balanced equations with various castes without compromising national interest. This fact underlines the importance of caste in Indian

politics that can be construed by the pattern of representation of different castes in political parties.

#### *Qualitative impact of empowerment schemes: a factor of change*

The upliftment of Dalits has been the most prominent for the governments in India since independence. Empowerment policies and schemes of the Ministry of Social Justice and empowerment, Government of India, such as the *National Overseas Scholarship Scheme for SC Students for Higher Education abroad*, *Credit Guarantee Scheme for the Scheduled Castes*, *Self Enhancement Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers*, *Babu Jagjivan Ram Chhaatravas Yojana*, and *Venture Capital Fund for Scheduled Castes* brought qualitative changes uplifting and empowering lower castes and Dalit community. It is evident from the report of the Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment (2019-20) and Handbook on Social Welfare Statistics (2018) that the above schemes have qualitatively impacted the deprived community of the society. In this context, the most revolutionary scheme of the Central Government is the Venture Capital Fund (VCF) for Scheduled Castes, which was launched in 2014-15 with the unique feature of a higher level of loans for Schedule caste entrepreneurs. VCF is the first initiative of its kind which attempts to make Dalits an entrepreneur. Dalits were given reservations in govt. Jobs, educational institutions and Legislature, but there was no scheme or policy to nurture Dalit entrepreneurship connecting them to the new market economy and making Dalits job-givers instead of job-seekers.

#### **Conclusion**

As long as the caste system serves socio-political group alliances, it does not appear that it will end shortly. Also, even if the caste system's social vices come to an end, it seems almost impossible to completely vanish from people's mindset. In such a situation, the most effective way is to eradicate all forms of discrimination from the caste system and strive for social parity. Once social equity is established at the practical level, even if castes remain in the form of identity, their impact will be negligible as it is happening in the educated societies. Economic empowerment is important and inevitable; however, it has been observed that educational empowerment is the powerful instruments to achieve the goal of equity and social justice. India Human Development Survey (IHDS-2) results, carried out in 2011-12 by National Council of Applied Economic Research suggest that "high



*income do not dent the social discrimination practice but education makes a difference*” (The Indian Express, November 29, 2014). Therefore, ensuring access to quality education to all social groups is the need of the hour. Information technology and mass media are two significant factors that will continue to play an important role in this direction. As far as external factors are concerned, Global Awareness Education and Global Citizenship Education’s role in making equity, dignity, and mutual respect possible also cannot be ignored.

There are many references in Indian culture and literature from ancient to modern that reject

caste hierarchy based on birth. It would be relevant to mention at least one such reference from *Skand Puraan* (8<sup>th</sup> CE) that says “*Everyone is born a shudra and only by samskara (conduct) one upgrades to dwij (regenerate) status*” (18\_VI\_239\_31-34). It is high time for the Indian society, mostly the Hindus to get out of caste hierarchy and eradicate all forms of visible or invisible discriminations and consider all social groups equal in real sense. India, a vibrant democracy and an emerging economic power, after ten years from now will be a new India on all counts, however; much depends on how far Indian society embraces equality, fraternity and harmony.

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