ORIGIN OF CASTE SYSTEM IN TAMILNADU-A STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

The word 'caste' is originated from the Portuguese word 'casta' means 'lineage', 'breed' or 'race',[15] which again derived from a Latin word 'castus' meaning 'pure'. It is believed that Spaniards were the first to use it in common parlance.

Definitions of Caste

Risely has defined caste as "a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling, and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community".[1]

Nesfield defines a caste as "a class of the community which disowns any connection with any other class or can neither intermarry nor eat nor drink with any but persons of their own community".[2]

Caste to E.A.Gailt "is an endogamous group or collection of such groups bearing a common name, having the same traditional occupational claiming descent from the same source, and commonly regarded as forming a single homogeneous community".[3]

Thus caste is a collection of families or groups bearing a common name and quite often claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor human or divine.[23] A caste is a social group, having a divine or mythical ancestor, hereditary characteristic features like birth, occupation, system of matrimonial alliances within their caste groups, mutual relations between different castes are ritually determined in a graded scale, and restriction on social mobility, further placed in the ladder of the social gradations on the basis of their professional value.

Tolkappiyam written by Tolkappiyar reveals the earlier social life of the Tamils. It mentioned a system akin to caste system but not related to the Aryan four-fold system.[26] It refers to four castes viz., Arasar [Rulers or Kshatriyas], Anthanar or Parpar [Brahmins], Vanikar [Merchants] and Vellalar [Agriculturists]. There is no evidence about the term 'Sudra' in the whole of Tolkappiam. The fourth class of Tolkappiam never identify with the North Indian fourth class Sudra.[4]

This word 'Caste' was first used in the year 1563 A.D. when Garcia de Orta wrote "no one changes from his father's trade and all those of the same caste (casta) of shoemakers are the same". Further, in 1567, in an order of the Sacred Council of Goa, the term caste was used in the same sense. It described that the Gentoos (Hindus) had divided themselves "into distinct races or castes (castas) of greater or less dignity, holding the Christians as of lower degree, and keep them so superstitiously, that no

one of a higher caste can eat or drink with those of a labour". The word caste emphasized certain characteristic features, on the basis of which, it became an institutionalized one.

Characteristic features of Caste system

The caste system has the following characteristic features,

(a)   Caste of a person is determined by his or her birth. A person born in a caste cannot change it until his or her death. It can be given up only by expulsion.

(b)   Under the caste system endogamy was in practice. A person must marry within his or her caste. Inter-caste marriages were not allowed.

(c)   Hereditary occupations were followed. The son of a cobbler became a cobbler, the son of a soldier became a soldier, the son of a smith became a smith. Each caste was assigned a particular profession. Standard of living was also fixed by their professions.

(c)   Institutionalized norms and rules were imposed upon the conduct of different groups.

(e)   The concept of pollution was applied to food, drink, inter-marriages and social relationships, and

(f)   There was no social intercourse between different castes. Each caste is having common traditions, customs and language.

The caste is an extreme form of social immobility. There was virtually no mobility for individual persons between one caste and another. He has fixed position from which neither wealth nor poverty, neither success nor disaster could dislodge him.[5]

Theories about the Origin of Caste

Many believed that the Brahmins, imposed the Hindu code and created the four varnas. Ambedkar believed that it was not easy to impose upon the people by an individual's law. Further, a single man could not create the whole of Indian social stratification and this system must be there before him on the basis of other factors like hereditary occupation, amalgamation of different races of people in search of new professions, etc.

Many theories like racial theory, political theory, religious theory, theory of cultural conduct, habitational theory, traditional theory and so on have identified factors for the formation of caste system. According to the racial theory, caste system was the outcome of the practice of Aryan race.[41] The political theory explains that the caste institution was invented by the Brahmins to maintain their superior position. As per the occupational theory, caste was formed on the basis of the professions performed by the people. The religious theory states that Hindu religion was responsible for the formation of caste institution. The followers of one particular deity considered themselves as descendants of the same family. The theory of cultural contact says that amalgamation of Aryan and Dravidian cultures produced a new form of social order. According to the traditional theory it is believed that caste system was the divine origin of Hindu

religion.[42] Moreover, the theories reveal that many factors were responsible for the evolution of the caste institution. They include hereditary occupations, living in the form of groups, Aryan's efforts to maintain their superior status and racial superiority, frequent alien invasions and amalgamation of various cultures, economic and administrative measures of the rulers of different dynasties.

The indegeneous people were dark in complexion and varied from the physical features of the Aryans. Partly by their racial features and partly by their vedic religious rituals, they subjugated the Tamils and relegated the majority of the local population to the lower position of manual labourers. The caste institution helped a lot to segregate the people at various cadres.[6]

On the contrary, in the following years, castes and sub-castes increased innumerably. The castes, which were left by the Brahminical Sastras, were recognized later as different sub-divisions. Probably, the following are the causes for the emergence of innumerable castes:

(a) migration of four major castes to different parts of the country;

(b) practice of different professions by different groups;

(c) elevation of one caste or degradation of another caste;

(d) quarrels between different sections within the caste for the social status; and

(e) multiplication of the different religious leaders.

Differences between the castes, unequal status based on caste were openly recognized by the rulers and religious institutions also. During the period of the Imperial Cholas, the aggravation of the caste system attained its peak. A Chola inscription refers that the castes like Panar, Paraiyar, Chakkiliyan, Irular and others functioned in the society with the Brahmins at the top.[69] Factions among the caste groups became a common one. There was a formation of two factions comprising of different castes irrespective of their status, viz., Valangai [right-hand] and Idangai [left-hand] castes. It was a peculiar feature of the Tamil society.[7]

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