Philosophy and Dynamics of Caste

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In his apology for writing a new book on caste in 1945, Dr J H Hutton mentions that an American indologist has compiled a list of over 5,000 works on caste.

Dr Irawati Karve does not waste her time on excuses for the publication of yet another book on caste.

In spite of the voluminous literature on the subject, we are just becoming aware of the issues raised by this complicated Indian social phenomenon.

While answering old questions Dr Karve raises new issues which would surely trigger fresh discussions and this is as it should be in any growing discipline.

Though we have had a number of comprehensive studies on caste and the problems have been attacked from several points of view, it is only recently that the primary methodological approaches have been somewhat defined. Just as political scientists have been discussing the definition of "nation", sociologists have been asking the question: What is a society? If society "consists of all individuals and groups that have some significant number of common expectations" Hindu society is a society. Similarly, every one is agreed that the word caste has a dual meaning: a caste is a group, while caste is an institution. The question whether caste should be used to refer to every rigid social stratification system, as some sociologists do, is answered by Leach when he said that, since no other society shares all the characteristics of the Hindu caste system, caste cannot correctly be used to refer to any other kind of social structure. The chief methodological contribution made by anthropologists to the study of caste is that, to understand caste, it has to be taken as a part of the whole culture of the Hindus. It is for this reason that Dr Karve very aptly makes an attempt to see caste against the background of Hindu philosophy or Hindu world view.

Caste is a precipitate of at least 3500 years of known history however scrappy our knowledge of that history may be. Most of our difficulties in our study of caste arise from the absence of historical documents and the poor quality of the social-historical studies of India. The number of anthropologists and sociologists who have a respectable knowledge of history of Indian society is also small. The leading historian of South India was not in a position to answer this simple query: Was Raja Raja Chola a Kshatriya or Vellala? Dr Karve not only knows whatever history is there to know of her region but uses it skillfully in her analysis of the caste situation of Maharashtra. The point needs to be emphasized, namely that history holds the key to our understanding of caste. If, as some sociologists try to do, we read the present into the past, grave mistakes are likely to be made, for history is not a logically ordered series of happenings.

Need for Regional Studies

Dr Karve has shown — I think she is the first to do so — that what older writers have described as castes are really caste-clusters composed of smaller endogamous units or Jatis. The number of Jatis in a cluster varies in the different regions of India. When we consider the details of ranking of castes in these regions, the absence of congruence in the order becomes evident. We have yet to get full pictures of the ranking order and axis in the sub-cultural areas of India; hence the need for more regional and comparative studies.

Her historical predilection takes Dr Karve into a search for origins. It is of course likely that the Indo-Aryan class system and the pre-Aryan social system (of which we know so little) might have interacted to produce caste society. If, as she says later, the mystic monistic Hindu philosophy provided the world view of the caste society, is this philosophy also the result of an interaction? Was the pre-Aryan Dravidian and the Mundari social systems of the same order or which one of them was it that interacted? On the basis of Harappan evidence, Wheeler has suggested that a Sumerian type of social organization might have been present in India. Let us hope that future research will throw light on some of these problems.

Diversity: Loose Structure

Discussing the structural features of caste society, Dr Karve says that it is "loose" and "very elastic" and uses the analogy of the structure of the tape-worm to explain the point. Internally a Jati has its own near-independent organization and its own Jati-hound culture: no Government or other agency has used the steam-roller to produce standardised patterns of behaviour in India: each Jati is viable by itself as are the segments of a tape-worm. The absence of standardization and the great tolerance of diversity, in her view are the expression and a consequence of the world view of the Hindu, with its basic notion of unity in diversity. When we talk of a social structure, its rigidity or looseness is not a matter of the internal properties of the units, but the inter-unit relations and the strength of social control exercised to maintain the statuses in the hierarchical order. In the ideal caste type, the statuses and roles are maintained so unalterably that elasticity is foreign to it. When a tribal group becomes Hinduised, it remains a separate...
named group, for no Jati is open to admit it. The absorption of a tribe only enlarges the coverage of the system and is in no way a demonstration of its structural looseness.

When we come to a consideration of the power and economic structures of the traditional caste system, the tolerance and the live-and-let-live attitude referred to above vanish completely. The supra-ethical philosophy is transformed into the unethical variety which we associate with the fascist philosophy. It is no wonder that Nietzsche, the fascist prophet, found Manu Smriti "a work which is spiritual and superior beyond comparison". Dr Karve has paid little attention to the "strictures" of caste, may be for the reason that others have done it. But if the philosophy of the Hindus had any part in their making, the contradiction has to be explained.

The following three points made by Toynbee are given to place caste in a world perspective:

(a) Caste establishes itself when one community makes itself master of another community without being able or willing to exterminate or assimilate it.

(b) Caste involves segregation.

(c) Unlike the case of South Africa or U S A, caste in India has been given the support of religion.

(d) Caste in India has begotten the unparalleled social abuse of untouchability.

If the fruit gives any indication of the character of the tree, I would, with some trepidation, venture to say that there has been something radically wrong with our philosophy. I would add that its poor ethics are contrary to the democratic ideals of our Constitution. What we want is a philosophy of world and life affirmation.