

BEING A CASTE: A JOURNEY DOWN MEMORY LANE

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Caste continues to be a topic of research, intriguing many, who are working towards addressing its dynamics, which has gained pace in the fast moving world of today. The traditional as well as the modern characteristics of caste share many things in common as well as greatly differ with each other. The present paper is a personal reflection of the author, as she goes back in time to discuss how 'caste' decided and controlled, the turn of events in her family, and how with the changing times, the generations down the line accept caste not as a determinant, rather as a malleable entity, fit to be moulded as per individual wisdom, choice and rationale.

Caste is a characteristic feature of Indian society, something very specific to India. Other forms of social stratification are found in other parts of the world and in its history. Caste, class, race, ethnicity, and gender are some of the pertinent categories of social hierarchy and differentiation in many societies (Subedi, 2013:52), but none are as institutionalised as caste system in India. The dynamics in caste continues to intrigue the researchers. The caste system in India has several unique features, among which are its religious aspects, its complexity, and the degree to which the caste is a cohesive group that regulates the behaviour of its members (Berreman, 1960:120). Scholarly works on caste are replete in addressing the origin, changes and continuities in the system. From varna/caste being attributed to *karma* to its transition of becoming ordained by birth, from its interpretation as *Homo hierarchicus* (Dumont, 1980) to its exploration as the product of the mind (Dirks, 1992), explanations to caste have traversed a long journey. Caste is a lived experience which finds natural inroads to the formation of the personality of a person who belongs to a caste society. Lived experiences share and reveal the finer nuances, which, at times, are lost in theoretical and conceptual rigmarole. The idea here is not to praise or ridicule the caste system, rather to tell how the *self* perceives the caste as a system which does not exist in isolation, but, is rather moulded by other factors such as education, urbanization and the changing economy. The present article is a personal exploration of the way caste has played a manifest as well as a latent role in my life so far.

I am a Hindu Brahmin, born in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. My ancestral place from my father's side is Balia and my maternal roots are in Jhansi. My great grandfather from the paternal side, Lalji Tripathi, was a head master of a school in the British era. His eldest son (my father's father) Pandit Indra Dev Tiwari did his masters in Philosophy and was the Registrar of Banaras Hindu University at the

time when Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya was the Vice Chancellor of the University. My grandfather died prematurely at the age of 39 years. My *dadi* or grandmother (my father's mother) Rameshwari became a widow at the age of 35 years with four sons and two daughters. Being an illiterate Brahmin widow at that time (early 1930s) was akin to leading a life sans all colour - figuratively and literally speaking. After my grandfather's death, my grandmother stayed alone in the village and would be visited time to time by her sons (my father and his brothers) who were pursuing their education at Allahabad University. She came to stay with us after my father's marriage to my mother. My grandmother died at the age of 77 years when I was six years old. My memory of my grandmother is of one wearing a white sari, following a strict routine of taking bath in cold water very early morning and sitting in the *verandah* with the *rudraksha mala*, religiously moving the beads while chanting. I cannot recall the contents of the prayers as she rapidly mumbled some barely audible words in *Bhojpuri*, but I do very vividly remember the names of some 'gods' that she extolled in her chants - *Ram ji, Hanuman ji, Nepal ji, and Bhutan ji*. Ram and Hanuman are part of the pantheon of Hindu gods but the mention of Bhutan and Nepal amused all who heard her prayers. She never showed any interest in entertaining curious questions on upholding Bhutan and Nepal as deities, as for her, they were too sacrosanct to indulge in a secular conversation. Sometimes faith has no explanation, or is left unexplored as in this case. If on one hand, she represented a Brahmin widow respected in the family and in the village for her God fearing, pious nature, for leading a life in line with the societal mores which rendered a young Brahmin widow, voiceless and choice less, my father's aunt (my father's father's younger brother's wife) symbolised a matriarch in the true sense of the word. She had a double MA – in Sanskrit and in Hindi. She was the *de facto* decision maker of the entire extended family. Despite being junior to my grandmother in terms of relationship and in age too, she called the shots in the broad arena of kinship relations. She epitomised power and control with all the supportive attributes donning her - a well established husband, children and very importantly, an education to be proud of. She stood in stark contrast to my grandmother who was a picture of powerlessness - no husband, no education and hence no voice. Caste needs to be understood as it exists in juxtaposition with other aspects such as education and joint family system.

As I reflect on the situation of my grandmother, I also recall a woman, one generation senior to my grandmother - my father's father's eldest sister whom we all called *phua*. I remember, as a child when I went to Varanasi, my parents, on entering our ancestral house, would foremost lead us to a small room where we would find a tiny, very old woman in white sari, our *phua* eagerly waiting for us. *Phua* died at the age of 95, when I was four or five years old. I learnt from my father and his brothers that she had become a widow when she was fourteen years old. She was married at the age of 10-11 years. Child marriage was the norm in

those days. After marriage, as per the custom, she continued to stay with her parents. After three-four years, she was to be sent to her husband's home. The ceremony is known as *gauna*, when the bridegroom comes again with the *baraat* of his kith and kin to take his wife from her parent's home. *Phua's* groom, a young lad, on his way to his bride's house to do her *gauna*, fell from the horse he was sitting on and died soon after. Ever since *phua* led the life of a widow. Those were the days when remarriage of a Brahmin widow was considered almost blasphemous. My grandfather and his brothers were younger to *phua* and by the time they grew up and found their bearing, *phua* was already *settled* in the life of widowhood.

Rules of commensality were closely adhered to in the generation preceding my father's. In our ancestral home at Varanasi, till the time my father's uncles (father's father's brothers) were alive, food was cooked by a Brahmin couple whom we referred to as *Maharaj* and *Maharajin*. Cooking of non-vegetarian food inside the house was a taboo. The first generation which took to eating meat was my father's. He took to the non-vegetarian diet while living in Philippines. His younger brother also took to it in the company of his friends. Having lost his father, at the age of three years and with the mother relegated to the village, my father, his two brothers and two sisters were brought up by their uncles (their father's brothers). The uncles and their wives, with their children and my father and his siblings formed a large extended family. My father went on a scholarship to pursue further research at Philippines. Both his sisters were married at the age of 14-16 years. They continued with their education after marriage and the younger of the two did post-graduation in Sanskrit with the support of her husband, Ramji Upadhyay, Professor of Sanskrit at Sagar University (Sagar is a place in Madhya Pradesh). Among many students pursuing PhD under Pandit Ramji Upadhyay's supervision, one was Manorama Saxena. She hailed from the city of Jhansi, in Uttar Pradesh. Professor Upadhyay and his wife (my father's sister) arranged Manorama's marriage with my father. It is rather interesting to learn that a stereotypical, staunch looking, *dhoti-kurta* clad Brahmin, like Pandit Ramji Upadhyay not only arranged the marriage of his wife's brother, a Brahmin with a Kayastha girl but also took the initiative as the latter's guardian to convince my father's uncles for this inter-caste marriage. He also went to Jhansi to ask my *nani* (mother's mother) and my *mama* (mother's brother) for my mother's hand for marriage with his brother-in-law (my *nana* i.e. mother's father had died long back). Kayastha, is a high caste in the so-called hierarchy of castes, but considered lower to the Brahmins. To have an *arranged* inter-caste marriage almost forty years ago was not a regular feature. I am sometimes asked if my parents had a love marriage as it is normally believed that inter-caste marriages are seldom arranged.

After marriage my parents went to meet my grandmother in the village. They were apprehensive about how she would react to this inter-caste marriage. Contrary to their apprehensions, my grandmother was very happy to meet my mother. My

mother garnered courage to tell her that she is a Kayastha. To this my grandmother replied, “*Hamara bachua bahman toh hamara bahu bahman*” (My son is a Brahmin, so my daughter-in-law is also a Brahmin), and she went about distributing sweets to the entire village. How simply she internalized and interpreted the patrilineal system of the society. As my parents tell me about such incidents, I cannot help but think that a woman - illiterate and village bound, could manifest such profound wisdom, such enlightenment which we so often superficially associate only with the educated urbane intellectuals. On my parents’ persistence, my *dadi* agreed to live with them in Lucknow. My father joined Lucknow University as a Lecturer in the department of Public Administration and my mother joined as Lecturer of Sanskrit at a degree college in Lucknow.

My *nana* (mother’s father), Mathura Prasad Saxena was a medical doctor in Indian Railways. Kayastha are known for being avid meat eaters. My *nana* was a strict vegetarian and this had a lot to do with him being a devout follower of the Aryasamaj¹. My *nani* (mother’s mother) loved eating meat. The cook in the household was a Brahmin and did not cook non-vegetarian food. My *nani* had her own vessels and she cooked meat almost daily for herself. She was the sole non-vegetarian food eater in the household. My mother and her siblings were all vegetarian by choice. Later the boys took to eating meat but the girls, remained strict vegetarians. My *nana* never pressurized my *nani* to give up on non-vegetarian food and my *nani* never tried to encourage him or the children to take to it. It was a mutually accepted and respected agreement.

The early years of my life were spent in a Lucknow University campus flat where I stayed with my parents, my *dadi* and my two sisters. As I look back at my life, I try to remember those ‘first times’ when I started becoming conscious of something called ‘caste’. This consciousness was absent in my early childhood. As both my parents became busier with their teaching profession and in bringing up three daughters, the cooking of food was handed over to the domestic helps whose caste status was not inquired about as it was not important. Getting trustworthy domestic help in the city was a bigger issue than getting into their caste identity. I never saw any friction in the family about this and my *dadi* was equally accommodative. When my mother was appointed as the Principal of a prestigious degree college at Lucknow, we shifted to the Principal’s residence inside the college. We three sisters were still very young - my elder sister was 10 years old, myself 8 and the youngest one had not started school. We played with each other and sometimes when our games required a bigger number of players, the children from the servant’s quarters, the only ones of our age group in the vicinity, joined us. As children, there are less complications. The caste-class consciousness was missing. Sometimes I would hear from some child that the parents of another child were rude to the others as they were proud of belonging to *unchi jati* (high caste). Yet such random talks were soon forgotten by us.

I *actually* became aware of caste and its dimensions when the implementation of Mandal Commission decision shook the country like a storm in the year 1990. Several works have thrown light on the policy of reservation and how it has affected the people in India (Galanter, 1984; Jenkins, 2003; Grinsell, 2010) and now when I go through them, a kaleidoscope of experiences get unfolded before the eyes. I was in standard eleven at that time and had started paying attention to daily newspaper coverage of protests against and in support of the policy of reservation. Our classroom in the school would be buzzing with talks about how youngsters were immolating themselves to show their protest. We started noticing each others' surnames. Realizing that the issue was a sensitive and a controversial one, open discussions and arguments were being avoided for fear of personal attacks, but the mounting tension due to the realization of the *self* and the *other* was eroding the innocuous chatter that otherwise pervaded in the ambience of the classroom. I was well past childhood. At 16-17 years of age, as one, giving a serious thought about making a career and grappling with the spells of insecurity about the probability of failing to make it in the over competitive job scenario of the country, I could sense similar questions and tensions in many of my classmates. For the first time, I was becoming aware of my surname "Ranjan" which did not convey a thing, the *thing* being of course, the caste I belonged to. On different situations and settings I would be relieved that my surname is Ranjan, ambiguous enough to protect my identity where it needed to be protected; and at other times I fretted that why is it Ranjan and wanted to yell out that I am actually a Tiwari. As an adolescent, company of my peer-group and their opinions were becoming very important for me. Naive minds led to naive conclusions of judging some others as a privileged but without potential lot. I am grateful to my parents for helping me to see things objectively and calmly and to understand these waves of politicization of caste against the backdrop of history. Most importantly, they drove home to me and my sisters, the simple but priceless adage - *do your best and God will help you*. Looking back, I realize how pertinent it is that parents and elders instil in the young, the relevance of resilience and absorption in personal grooming, in order to protect them from getting engulfed in the flames of hatred and animosity so often engineered by vested interests.

After passing standard twelve, the rest of my educational life was accompanied by an unobtrusive presence of caste. It was present in as simple a form as notice boards carrying lists of names of those who got admission under different categories in educational centres. Years went by and I started teaching anthropology in a degree college at Lucknow in 1999. College, a centre of learning, had almost 45 teachers and almost the same number of the non-teaching staff. Teachers shared a common room. It is a girls' college and students come from different walks of life. I observed that the attendance of some students was very less. Anthropology being a subject dealing with laboratory practicals, called for regular attendance on the

part of the students, if they were to keep pace with the curriculum. Despite repeated reminders, there was no major improvement. The anthropologist in us always finds issues to explore in the field called life. I called these students separately to understand their problem and to counsel them. I learnt that they came from very poor families. As I went through their identity data available in the practical files, like name, age, religion, caste, sub-caste etc which one takes into account when conducting interviews and anthropometric measurements on a subject, I learned that they belonged to the so-called low castes. Being low castes and also being poor cannot be taken as a mere coincidence as I shall explain further. These students were first generation school/college going learners. They were living in the villages on the outskirts of Lucknow city and had to commute a long distance on foot walking from their village to the main road and then taking the bus for the city. I asked them if this was the problem, they could have sought admission in a college near their villages. They informed that the college near their home was opened only recently. As they had been reading in the present college since the preparatory class, they wanted to continue their education here. Their parents also considered the familiar locale of the college a safer territory for their young daughters. Moreover all along their educational life in the college, they never faced any major problem. The customary scolding by the teachers was soon forgotten. Their parents were also not interested in sending their daughters to college everyday as the work at home and in the fields suffered. All along there was no major problem except now when they had opted to learn Anthropology - a discipline dealing with practicals. The association of caste with economic status goes back a long time. The high castes were the land owning castes and the lower castes worked as labourers and were further forced to make a living by doing the *unclean* jobs. The present cannot be correctly understood if we divorce it from the past. The State sponsored developmental measures have been introduced in the post-independence era for the amelioration of those castes which have suffered down the ages for surviving on the pollution side of the purity - pollution pole. Yet instances like the case mentioned above reminds us that we still have a long way to go. The students shared, that they did not have enough money to buy the file paper to write down the experiments. I tried to help. I lent them some nominal amount of money to buy the file paper and also encouraged them to make the effort to improve their attendance. This gesture did more than immediate alleviation of paper related problem. They not only returned the money to me soon after, but also started attending the college more regularly. I understand that what they actually needed was pep talk to motivate them to look forward to seeking education while dealing with the struggles of their daily existence.

We, the teachers in the college were educated, wise individuals never getting into meaningless debates about religion, caste and creed. Even as we sat together and a burning caste related issue in the media was enough to trigger an animated

discussion on the same in the staff room, it was avoided lest it hurt some sentiments. Yet, interestingly, at fewer times, expressions of caste alignments could be seen. Any work related issue or policy matter, or any order from the management, would have its supporters and protestors. Yet, at times, these groups of protestors and supporters were not formed on the basis of the issue in question, rather on *who* is supporting what. One might disagree with a certain order/policy but expressed support for it as the others supporting it were of the same caste as one. Being united on the basis of caste rather than the issue, was a manifestation, albeit in a subtle manner of the deep rooted caste awareness among individuals which, at times, is enough to cloud the best of reason.

Now I am working in Shillong, northeast India where in my journey, a term like 'caste' has taken a back seat and other terms such as 'tribe' and 'non tribe' are finding place in my thought process. I shall not delve on this in the present paper as it would be a new sojourn of sorts. Coming from a hard core caste based, Hindi speaking area to a totally new culture requires pages and pages of rendition. In my experience so far, I have understood that systems are there in the society to facilitate the working of the social structure. However, shadows are cast over these systems when the pristine values of just being human are relegated to the background.

Note

1. Aryasamaj is a Hindu social reform movement started by Dayanad Saraswati in 1875. Equality of all human beings, empowerment of women, and authority of the Vedas and rejection of idol worship are its chief characteristics.

References

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