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Corporate Sector and the Breakdown of Caste

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In this article, I investigate the transformative impact of industrialization and the corporate sector on the traditional caste hierarchy in India. I begin by tracing the scriptural origins of the Varna system through the Purusha-Sukta of the Rig Veda, contrasting its ideological rigidity with textual evidence of early social mobility. I argue that the transition from agrarian feudalism to industrial production serves as a catalyst for humanism, as the "standardization" of labour in factories and corporate offices necessitates the abandonment of medieval parochialism. By comparing the industrial advancement of Southern India with the agrarian Gangetic belt, I demonstrate how economic structures directly correlate with the frequency of caste-based atrocities. Furthermore, I analyse the role of the modern corporate sector as a social stabilizer, where meritocratic recruitment and global codes of conduct condition inclusive behaviour. However, I conclude with a critique of persistent inequalities, specifically the "parasitic" nature of upper-management ownership and the "digital feudalism" faced by the gig economy's lower strata, suggesting that while the "machine" has weakened caste, the struggle for true economic equity remains.

Keywords: Varnashrama Dharma, Industrialization, Agrarian Feudalism, Corporate Meritocracy, Social Mobility, Gig Economy.

The Rig Veda is the earliest piece of literature available to us which gives an insight into the society of the Indian subcontinent. Though it was not a popular literature and covers a region comprising only a part of the Indian subcontinent, nevertheless, its impact on the Indic way of thinking and culture right up to the modern times makes it indispensable to any discussion regarding the society of India. The 10th book of the Rig Veda has a famous hymn called Purusha-Sukta. This hymn gives a Vedic view of the cosmological origin of the world and is quite philosophical in nature. It talks about a primeval giant called Purusha who was sacrificed. As a result of this sacrifice, the sun, moon, wind, Indra, Agni and even the varnas emerged. The specific line in the hymn which mentions this says, "His mouth became the Brahmana; his arms were made into the Rajanya (Kshatriya of the later times); his thighs the Vaishya, and from his feet the Shudras were born". The main purpose of this symbolism must have been to showcase that these varnas were naturally ordained (along with the sun and moon) and not manually fabricated. The caste system wasn't always as rigid in the early Vedic period, corresponding to 1500 BC to 1000 BC. The Purusha Sukta was

itself mentioned in the 10th book or mandala which is a work of later times. In fact, we have textual evidences of social mobility in the Rig Veda. Rig Veda 9.112.3 says, "I am a reciter of hymns, my father is a physician and my mother grinds (corn) with stones. We desire to obtain wealth in various actions." However, as society became more complex, the various occupational roles became fixed, an ideal that was chased right up to the medieval period. It was thought that people not following their respective professions prescribed by their births would cause chaos in the society. A major duty of a King who ruled by Brahmanical norms was the maintenance of Varnashrama Dharma- seeing to it that people followed their respective professions and punishing those who didn't do so. All the Brahmanical lawmakers- Vasistha, Baudhayana, Apastamba, Gautama etc. solidified the concept of varnas by incorporating these identities into their lawbooks as the basis for meting out judgement. When the society became even more complex in the common era, the four varnas got further subdivided into many castes or jatis whose origins were explained through fictitious stories just like the Purusha Sukta. Though the conception of castes may have seen a temporary and not a complete eclipse under the Mauryan rule, especially under Ashoka, who espoused the cause equality between humans and also when Buddhism was at its peak, as it did not discriminate on the basis of caste at least in theory, the Gupta period onward saw probably the worst conditions for the lower castes. Though Gupta Age has been talked about as a Golden Age by nationalist historians in the past, it was certainly nothing less than the worst Kaliyuga for the lower castes, the law of the land being guided by books like Manu Smriti- a devil incarnate. When the Turks arrived in India, they brought with them Islam, which in theory talks about universal brotherhood-millat. Though there were distinctions and notions of racial purity even among these newcomers, Islamic law might have provided relatively better conditions for the lower castes but the stigma against them wasn't completely extinguished. Balban, the Delhi Sultan is famously quoted as having said that his eyes turn red whenever he saw a base born ignoble man. Even if the Islamic law was followed by the court of Delhi, large populations of India were still governed by the same Puranic laws. Coming to the modern period, we aren't unaware of these atrocities, in fact there is a high chance that we ourselves or someone in our family has at some point of time or the other, dabbled in such atrocious practices. From the inhuman experiences of the great Babasaheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar to present day reports of atrocities committed against lower caste on an almost daily basis, casteism rots our country just as rust does to iron.

We should be clear that such disabilities for people have existed all over the world throughout history and India is not a special case. But when we compare ourselves to industrialised western nations, we can clearly see that in the modern period, these nations have outshone India in the treatment of different sections of people in their society. Though the disabilities haven't been completely eliminated even in these countries, we can safely say that the situation in India is much worse. We must study carefully as to what changed in these countries to identify the specific lacunae precipitating the crisis in our country. One important distinction between us is the level of industrialization in our countries.

Agrarian feudalism was prevalent all over the world in different forms in the medieval times, be it India or the western nations. Such an order meant that people were essentially tied to a hierarchical order offering very limited if no mobility on the social ladder. It also meant that people were essentially tied to a certain place, though migrations have occurred all throughout history. When early industrialization began in the western countries, people from different communities and ethnicities began to work together in proximity to each other, thereby dispelling prevalent notions about

other groups of people, which were generally baseless stereotypes. It helped people to understand the basic oneness of the human nature. The machine did not discriminate between the hand of a farmer or a poet or a singer. It just needed a human to operate. Thus, these industries also served as the progenitor of the notions of humanism in western Europe. The workers were essentially standardized into units of production wearing the same safety gear, uniforms, working for similar hours and receiving similar wages. Even the housing of these workers was built on similar constructs. While an agrarian-feudal society might show discrepancy in the housing of various people, the modern workers were often housed in similar residential units. All of them received similar amenities such as water, electricity and sewer thereby creating a broad equality in the possession of resources.

Industrialization began in India with the coming of the British though on a very small scale when compared to western Europe or the US. This limited industrialization in India meant that caste got a breathing space and could not be completely or even majorly obliterated in India. This can be seen in the early industrial cities in India such as Bombay, where chawls were often arranged on the basis of castes and subcastes and there were glaring difference in the conditions of different castes living in different parts of the city. Even today it is not uncommon to see people of a particular caste living in a particular region in a city thereby repeating the old order of ancient and medieval villages. And since the penetration of industrialization in India was and even still is quite limited, the Indian village remained the primary economic unit of the economy, which of course retained its medieval character. Even the British census codified these castes into political identities which further cemented their social standing.

Here we can easily compare the impact of industrialization within India as we already know that South India is much more industrialized than the north, especially the Gangetic belt. Agrarian states like Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh still lead the tally in the atrocities that are committed on the basis of caste. Land and labour are still controlled and organized on the basis of caste which actually normalizes the oppressive order. Hence, it is not uncommon for a person in the northern states to routinely come across derogatory slurs even inside their homes. The regular exposure to such indecency neutralizes the reaction that a modern man ought to have against such inhumanity. On the other hand, states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala, while not completely devoid of such practices show considerable differences in the treatment meted out to lower castes. Years of industrialization have altered the relationship between the different castes and have endowed the values of humanism much more deeply in stark contrast to the states of the north. Reports correspond to this altered structure as we see far lesser instances of crime against the lower castes in southern states. We also see massive amount of people migrating from Bihar and UP to the southern states in the work season based on the same reasons. The same phenomenon can also explain why a more agrarian southern United States has historically been more racist and gun-violent than the more industrialized north and the coasts.

In today's time along with the limited industrialization, the corporate sector acts as the major stabilizer of the Indian society and its presence is directly linked to the social advancement of a particular region. Recruitment in the corporate sector is based upon the skill and merit of the individual and not their caste or origins. This gives a chance for people of different castes and communities to work in proximity with each other with shared experiences and ultimately a belief in equality with their peers. A person who has worked hard to become a software engineer or a data analyst or a salesperson, will assume that particular part of himself as his primary identity as he has put in considerable efforts into the achievement of the required skill. On the other

side, the companies themselves have diversity and inclusion policies which regard harassment on the basis of caste as serious offences and may easily become grounds for termination. This results in a formal personality of the person working in the company even though their informal ideologies might still be biased towards others. However, the intolerance for such behaviour in formal spaces and a general leaning of the people towards inclusion may eventually condition even the odd ones out into a more inclusive thought pattern. Multi-national corporations follow global codes of conduct which see such medieval hierarchies as obsolete and incredibly offensive. Even posting of stereotypical content on personal social media can be objected to by the workplace if reported. This allows an overall transformation first as a requirement followed by its naturalization. However, even in today's corporate world, things are not squeaky clean. Firstly, many of the owners of large corporations and companies are simply the descendants of the zamindars and landed classes of the yesteryears, which have retained their position on the economic and social ladder. Since they have grown up in the same environments, their basic nature is mostly the same as their ancestors. The middle strata has seen considerable shuffling in the corporate era, but the lower ends-majorly consisting of the lower castes and the economically weaker sections have almost retained their past social distinctions with little to minimal changes. A case in point are the gig workers who serve as delivery people and suffer the harshest of conditions even in the corporate sector. One should not be surprised to find out the congruence of this lowest level of the corporate with the lower castes. The modern owner just like his ancestor zamindar contributes little to no productivity in the economic output while the lowest strata bears the maximum brunt with minimum compensation. The upper level's ownership is the only reason for their parasitic presence in the corporate. Even if we see the increase in salaries of major companies in the last decades, while the salaries of the upper management have had a meteoric if not exponential rise, the lowest strata and entry level still draw almost the same salary as did their counterparts twenty years ago.

However, India has come a long way. When I was getting my house constructed, I used to have regular chats with the workers engaged in the construction. Most of them told me that they don't follow the caste restrictions like what they do back in their villages. Of course, I also noticed that the practice of eating separately of different communities was also practiced by them.

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