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The Caste Problem: the Ideas of Tagore, Gandhi, and Nehru

Social stratification in India has been largely practiced in the form of the Hindu caste system. The caste system dates back to the origins of Hinduism and is one of the oldest forms of social stratification based purely on birth; Hinduism teaches that people are born into castes based on the actions taken in their previous life, so caste cannot be changed. The people who suffer the most because of caste are the untouchables, whose mere presence can ‘pollute’ other castes. Under British colonial rule the division caused by the caste system intensified and worsened. Britain used the caste system to deepen the separation between the people of India, reducing the risk of a rebellion of the masses against colonial rule. By exploiting an internal problem within society, the British were able to maintain control in India. During the struggle for independence from the British, caste became a priority issue to those leading the rebellion. Leaders before, during, and after the fight for independence raised the issue of the caste system in India and its detrimental affects to Indian nationalism. Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru are three prominent Indian figures that played an important role in eradicating the caste system. Tagore saw the flaws in the caste system long before Gandhi or Nehru emerged into the social and political arena, and, through his writings, helped increase the sentiments against caste. When Gandhi arrived preaching equality, he took firm actions against the caste system and encouraged his followers to do the same. Lastly, Nehru criminalized discrimination based on caste and attempted to sustain the social and economic changes that resulted from equality. All three knew that true and virtuous nationalism could not be achieved without the unification of the people. They understood that the caste system was a deterrent to the fight for independence, and they each had ideas of what caused, resulted from, and could fix the problem of caste. They consequently took actions based on their ideas; all of which greatly influenced India as a nation today.

Rabindranath Tagore was one of the first novelists to bring up issues of inequality in his writing. In Tagore’s novel The Home and the World, Tagore implies that inequality based on socio-economic status and gender is a major problem that exists in India. These problems, he concludes, lead to radical nationalism; which, according to Tagore, is an even more severe dilemma. The protagonist of the novel, Nikhil, is often surprised at the blatant mistreatment of Panchu, a tenant on the land of a neighboring *zamindar* (landownder). Panchu is in a lower caste of peasants and can hardly afford to feed his children. He is, according to Nikhil, ridiculously taxed for his wife’s death and trading British goods. Nikhil observes that the caste system has been ingrained in the minds of the people of India to the point where they not only have to accept their dismal fate, but they also participate in practices that are part of the system that oppresses them.

“‘The old woman is not a bad sort’, my master went on musingly, ‘Panchu was not sure of her caste and would not let her touch the water-jar, or anything at all of his. So they were continually bickering. When she found I had no objection to her touch, she looked after me devotedly. She is a splendid cook! But all remnants of Panchu’s respect for me vanished!’” (Tagore, 135)

Panchu suffers because of the predicaments that he is forced into by society and by his *zamindar*, but he himself oppresses those in lower castes. This hypocrisy feeds the cycle that sustains the caste system. Of course, Panchu is ignorant to the ultimate consequences of his actions, and this is the root of the problem according to Tagore. He believes that the hardships forced on those in the lower castes are unnecessary and are enforced solely to maintain a rigid social structure. Because the people do not understand that their actions are further promoting their oppression, they continue to take part in a backward tradition.

For this reason Tagore supported the modernization of India. He embraced and encouraged it because he believed that traditionalism held India back and that there were aspects of western society that could help India in the long-run. The caste system was a continued practice because people were prisoners to the past and could not move forward to form their own ideas. The reason he believed caste was still so prominent was because the people of India were not properly educated. He thought if the people had a better understanding of the world, they would definitely make the right and logical decision to not partake in the caste system; they would realize that the caste system was a means by which the British kept the Indians under control. The people of India did not have enough opportunities for acquiring knowledge, and it was hindering them. Having this belief was a reason that Tagore had opposition; he separated himself from the majority of people in India because he was more educated. A criticism against Tagore was that he did not truly understand the plight of the poor and untouchables, and ultimately did nothing to change it. Tagore seemed to be part of an elite class of intellectuals, so it was harder for him to connect with the masses. Although he may not have actually practiced discrimination, he was part of a system that did.

Nonetheless, many of Tagore’s ideas about the problems of inequality (religious, socio-economic, gender, etc.) were unheard of in India and were the liberal thoughts at the time he was publishing. Much of Tagore’s writing was read and appreciated abroad, so it created foreign support for the fight for independence as well as opposition to the caste system. His idea of an independent India was contingent on fixing the larger problem of radical nationalism. Tagore was much more skeptical of nationalism than Gandhi and Nehru because he believed that nationalism was corruptible, and that power-seeking individuals with persuasive oratory skills could too easily sway the masses.

The corruption of nationalism was just fed by the caste system; the many people in lower castes would be easily influenced by radical ideas; it was an easy solution to their problem. Those who are oppressed can be excited and mobilized by mere words of change that may not guarantee anything in the long-run. This radical nationalism instigates violence and encourages the practice of discrimination, even if it may not be towards lower castes. In The Home and the World, Bimala, Nikhil’s wife, is taught English by a British woman named Miss Gilby. Miss Gilby is essentially forced to go back to England because she is being verbally and physically abused by many members of the society. Tagore argued that discrimination against anyone was an obstacle to gaining independence, and that radical nationalism propagated that obstacle. Tagore did not believe that true and virtuous nationalism could exist because the overbearing force of radical nationalism would overshadow and destroy any virtuous actions taken.

Mohandas Gandhi, unlike Tagore, easily connected with the masses of India because of his honest words and actions. He became known as the “Father of India”, and though they often did not agree, Tagore respectfully called him the “soul” of India, giving Gandhi the title *Mahatma*. Contrary to what Tagore believed, Gandhi *did* think that virtuous nationalism could be established, and his life’s work reinforced this claim. During the fight for independence he took passive-aggressive actions against the wrongs of the British and Indian society. Hunger strikes to end religious conflict and boycotting of British goods are just two examples of the actions led and taken by Gandhi. His ideas of civil disobedience and peaceful protest garnered the support of millions of men and women all across India. Gandhi was also extremely active in expressing his views on caste, which allowed him to gain the support of the millions oppressed by the crippling system.

“...Gandhism provided for the first time in Indian politics an ideological basis for including the *whole people* within the political nation. In order to do this, it quite consciously sought to bridge even the most sanctified cultural barriers that divided the people in an immensely complex agrarian society. Thus, it was not simple a matter of bringing the peasantry into the national movement, but of consciously seeking the ideological means for bringing it in *as a whole*. This, for instance, is how one can interpret the strenuous efforts by Gandhi to obliterate the ‘sin’ of the existing *jati* divisions in Indian society and the ‘deadly sin’ of untouchability in particular...” (Chatterjee, 110)

Gandhi was able to gain so much support because he practiced and preached complete equality: socially, politically, economically and spiritually. He included all people, the peasantry (the masses) in a way that no other politician or social leader in India had done before. Defying Tagore, Gandhi inspired virtuous and just nationalism that encompassed and accepted all. Like other nationalistic movements, Gandhi’s required the support of masses and he used his oratory skills to influence the masses. The difference was that Gandhi’s nationalism was based on the ideology of equality, and his use of colloquial language showed that he was not only the people’s leader, but he was also one of them. Unprecedented, was Gandhi’s bold acceptance of untouchables, whom he called Harijans (“children of God”). Gandhi rejected materialism and modernization, and took up an ascetic lifestyle; he often lived among the Harijans in immense poverty. This only solidified his image as the man of the people; he was able to empathize with those in the poorest of states.

Gandhi understood that if one could renounce the barriers of caste, unification of India could be achieved. Nehru and Tagore argued that the caste system was part of a backwards religious tradition (that could be cured by modernization), but Gandhi argued against this. Gandhi, unlike both Nehru and Tagore, was against modernization. He did not believe that modernization could eradicate the caste system. Modernization would only lead to more inequality because it would worsen economic stratifications. For this same reason, Gandhi opposed affirmative action in India; it instigated economic inequality. He believed economic inequality had created an obsession with money within Indian society, and this would only worsen with increased modernization. Gandhi wanted to eliminate economic inequality all together by promoting self-sufficiency. This is why he promoted the practice of *khadi*, or handlooms for spinning clothing. His idea was that self-sufficiency allows people to look past economic barriers because they are no longer dependent on others for essential goods (food, clothing, shelter). If people are too reliant on others for things they need, then it is more likely that immoral practices, corruption, and inequality would persist. Gandhi spun and wore his own clothing and encouraged the people of India to do so as well. Greed and thirst for power were both consequences of modernization according to Gandhi.

Gandhi was often criticized because, as a devoutly religious Hindu, he rejected the caste system, which was a largely Hindu practice. He refuted this claim against him by saying that the caste system was not actually religious in any way. Those who were Brahmins may have preached it to secure their own power, but its origins were not religious. Gandhi saw the caste system as “harmful to both spiritual and national growth.” Furthermore, the system was additionally corrupted by the British. The nationalism Gandhi inspired was based on principles that, according to Gandhi, upheld absolute and moral Truths; these Truths were unchanging and universal. Gandhi’s higher absolute Truths renounce the practice of caste. In rejecting the caste system, Gandhi was upholding the Truth that all people are equal. He was able to preach this message to his followers, unifying the masses of India against the British and eventually leading to India’s independence. Gandhi may have led the masses, but he neither was a true politician nor desired to be one. For this reason when it came time to form a new government only Gandhi’s strong ideologies became part of the political system; Gandhi himself would not politically lead the nation.

Jawaharlal Nehru became the first Prime Minister of India after playing a significant role (along with his good friend, Gandhi) in the struggle for independence. Although Gandhi and Nehru sometimes disagreed on the solutions to the problems afflicting India, they both had similar absolute morals that they upheld in the actions they took. Nehru was an advocate of secularism and therefore opposed the caste system as well as gender discrimination. He believed religion was used as justification to oppress the poor or weak (as the caste system and gender discrimination show) and established India as a secular state.

Unlike Tagore and Gandhi, Nehru had the political authority to implement laws and he had the support of the judiciary to enforce the laws he helped to conceive. Criminalization of the caste system became part of the Constitution of India that Nehru helped to create. The constitution made discrimination based on caste illegal; however, it did not end discriminatory practices. Discrimination was still plaguing the lower castes and the former untouchables, who were still not able to get the jobs for which they just been allowed to apply. This proved that political change did not always equate to social change. Nehru strongly opposed socio-economic stratification and wanted to establish economic equality for everyone in India. Nehru particularly stressed equal economic opportunity. He also had a very Marxist view that agreed with the concept of social welfare.

Nehru saw poverty as India’s greatest problem. The poor, or depressed classes, were still being prevented from improving their economic status even though the law was on their side. Nehru realized that not only did he have to establish a law that would end the caste system, but he also had to establish a law that would fix the deep-rooted problems that the caste system had left.

“...every effort should be made by the state as well as by private agencies to remove all invidious social and customary barriers which came in the way of the full development of the individual as well as any group, and that educationally and economically backward classes should be helped to get rid of their disabilities as rapidly as possible. This applied especially to the depressed classes.” (Chatterjee, 141)

For this reason, Nehru established protective discrimination in India, a form of affirmative action. It established quotas within the government that would ensure the representation of the formerly oppressed classes. Furthermore, it lowers qualification standards for specific groups when applying for jobs and colleges. According to Nehru, this would eventually allow the poor to rise out of the slums and establish themselves. Overtime, their former caste would be forgotten and everybody in society would work to help those who were depressed and unable to escape from poverty. Of course, for this economic equality to occur, India first needed to establish itself as an economically viable nation through the process of modernization. Nehru, like Tagore, also believed that modernization was the key to destroying the caste system. He believed modernization would force India to practice non-discrimination policies because without these policies India could not be an economically viable nation in the modern world; he advocated interdependence with other nations. The practice of the caste system tied people down to their set duties and constricted any inventive thought, which hindered progress in education and philosophical, political, social and scientific thought. Nehru believed this lack of innovative thought was the reason that the British were so easily able to colonize India. Though he advocated modernization he also admitted that there were excesses of scientific progress that could result in inequality and materialism.

Ultimately, Nehru, as the first Prime Minister, established a state based on the founding principles of freedom and equality. He was able to reconcile Gandhi’s ideal ideologies with the realistic politics of the world and created the nation that is rising today as one of the major economic powers in the East. Nehru applied the nationalistic idea of equality (i.e. rejection of the caste system) in the Constitution of India and created the solid foundation for the newly independent nation.

Many people today are still appalled by the horrible treatment of some untouchables in India, but the effects of Tagore, Gandhi, and Nehru’s ideas are still prevailing and influencing Indian society today. Unfortunately, these people do not bother to reflect on their own societies. Social stratification based on socio-economic status still exists even in America, though most Americans argue that the problem no longer exists. The dilemma is that the law may forbid discrimination and promote integration, but it cannot so easily change the minds of people. India preceded America in their efforts to end inequality. Long before the end of Apartheid in South Africa and Brown vs. Board of Education in the United States, India established political equality and abolished discrimination based on religion, sex, and socio-economic status. Protective discrimination was established in India years before the concept of affirmative action was even brought up in the United States.

Still today, anthropologists continue to do studies on the genetic origins of the caste system to determine whether families were placed in certain castes based on their individual skills, but as humans evolved so did their required skill-sets. The caste system may have once been implemented because hereditary skills were passed down but times have changed and success is no longer based on skill alone. Tagore, Gandhi, and Nehru could obviously not completely eradicate discrimination; this is not a mark of their failure but rather an indication of how difficult it is to change social norms. The laws may change, but social practices can remain the same. Ideas can only go so far, but the application and eventual enforcement of these ideas is what is needed to turn the ideas into reality. Partha Chatterjee, in his book, describes three phases that led to the formation of India: The Moment of Departure, in which the nationalist thought is ignited, the Moment of Maneuver, in which the nationalist thought is applied and taught, and the Moment of Arrival, in which the newly formed state establishes the nationalist thought as a founding principle. In applying this to the abolition of the caste system it can be said that Tagore sparked the idea of equality in India, Gandhi practiced and preached it to the masses, and Nehru enforced and created laws to sustain it in the newly formed nation. Fundamentally they all believed that the caste system was morally wrong and that an independent Indian nation could not be formed on unjust principles. Prior to the formation of India, the caste system was an obstacle in the fight against the British. The caste system existed long before the arrival of the British, but colonial rule amplified the negative effects of caste and created a social, political and economic division that is still being debated over in India. The lasting effects of the caste system can be seen in many rural areas in India. Despite caste still being an issue in these rural villages, it has been mostly eradicated in urban cities. Opportunities to improve economic status are now available; people are no longer bound to the socio-economic status into which they are born. Indian popular culture, largely dominated by the Bollywood film industry, is often nationalistic and negatively portrays prejudice based on socio-economic status. For example, in the movie *Lagaan* the protagonist, Bhuvan, boldly touches an untouchable stressing that his help is needed to defeat the British in a cricket match (an obvious metaphor for Indian independence) and that it does not matter what caste he is; the message is that caste only separates and the Indians need unification to defeat the British. Renouncement of caste in urban areas and in popular culture are just a couple examples of the continuing legacy of the founding principles that were conceived, taught, and practiced by the countless men and women, including Tagore, Gandhi, and Nehru, who came together and formed the independent state of India.