Caste System in Perspective of Swami Vivekananda
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Abstract: The present study is purported to examine and understand the Indian caste system as the unique ideology of exclusivist doctrine which has its distinctive and continuous impact on Indian social, political and cultural life. A central element in the humanization debate in the Indian context is the desire to return to the concept of equality and social justice. The most distinctive feature of Swami Vivekananda’s teaching is that he applied his philosophical principles of Vedanta to the affairs of everyday life. Being a Vedantin, Vivekananda has firm faith in the inner unity of all. He depicts Vedantic society as the ideal form of society as it was based on equality. His ideals and principles of Vedanta are instrumental in patterning and structuring the cultural spheres of people. Every social and cultural change alters the essence of the activities in the different social spheres and is manifested in new interconnections between those spheres. Thus, we observe tremendous changes occur in the progress in traditional India, and the old values relating to caste system. We are especially taking a re-look at the present research topic in a deeper level by taking recourse to the major mode of reformation of caste system in perspective of Swami Vivekananda.

Keywords: Vivekananda, Caste System, Vedanta, Purusha-Sukta, Varnas.

INTRODUCTION
Swami Vivekananda, the great son of modern India was a multifaceted personality. He was an awakener of modern India, who had traveled extensively across the world, speaking about India. He was possibly the foremost person of his times who confronted the question of caste, religion, minorities, modernism, economics and politics of India and he brought about an inspirational perspective to the same. Though a monk and a spiritual personality he does not turn off his eyes from the problems faced by Indian society. He travelled extensively all over India and thereby acquainted himself with the social and economic conditions of the country. Swami Vivekananda sought to realize the root cause of India’s miserable condition. He found two great evils in India: poor treatment given to women and subjugation of underprivileged through caste restrictions. Vivekananda considers priest- craft, untouchability etc. as the main evils of the degenerated caste system. Throughout his lifetime he preached against these evils and tried to generate public consciousness against these problems. His suggestions on reforms in Indian life shows that he was in favour of removing these evils not only in religious thought and practice but also in social theories and customs, principles and method of education. According to him, attitude towards low caste has never been in accordance with the teachings of Vedanta which hinders the growth of spiritual life.

CASTE SYSTEM
Historically, caste was justified by interpreting the Purusha-Sukta in a particular way by saying not only that differences of function in society and their interrelations are part of the natural order of things, but also that attribution of their differences on the basis of births among a certain group of people are part of the natural order too. In Purusha-Sukta of the Rig-Veda, there is reference to the division of Hindu society into four classes. It is described there that the Brahmins came out of the face of the Lord, the Creator, and Kshatriyas from His arms and Vaisyas from His thighs and the Sudras from His feet. This division is done according to the Guna and Karma. Guna (quality) and Karma (action/ work) determines the caste of a man. This is supported by Lord Krishna in the Gita who advocates that the four castes were emanated by him as well as He is the author of them and thus one needs to know Him.

There are authors like S.C. Roy, [1] N.K. Dutta [2] and G.S. Ghurye [3] who have linked caste with racial factor. The initiation of the Indian caste structure has been credited to the Indo-Aryans and the Varnas were said to be of racial origin, diluted in course of time through race mixture and hybridization. The basis of caste system and its classification is the “division of labour” [4] or what is sometimes called “specialization
Vivekananda seems to be the first person to have discovered the link with what is today known in India “caste is class” theory and also to have seen that such was not a perfect formulation. His vision of combining and reading caste and class together is even by today’s standard extremely radical and innovative. He was the originator of the word “Dalit”, a word to be used for the “pariahs”, since it is a direct translation from the word “suppressed” to describe the situation of the “pariahs” of his time. What Swamiji means is that the modern rigid system of caste distinctions, involving inequality, is very different from its old flexible form, and such a transformation is the cause of the downfall of India. He also holds the priests responsible for it. “It is in the books written by the priests”, says he, “that madness like that of caste are to be found; and not in books that revealed from God” [7]. He continues: “But even in spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallized social institution, which, after doing its service, is now filling the atmosphere of India with stench; and it can only be removed by giving back to the people their lost social individuality” [5]. He puts his finger on the evils of modern caste system when he says, “the idea of caste is the greatest dividing factor, modern caste distinction is a barrier to India’s progress, it narrows, restricts, separates” [6]. Indeed, he hoped that it will crumble before the advancement of ideas. Signs are not wanting that his prophecy is on the way to fulfillment at no distant date; Swamiji did not recommend the total abolition of caste, but suggested its readjustment according to modern modifications, as would appear from the following passages: “From the time of the Upanishads down to the present day, nearly all our great teachers have wanted to break through the barriers of caste, i.e., caste in its degenerated state, not the original system. What little good you see in its degenerated state, not the original system. What little good you see in the present caste clings to it from the original caste, which was the most glorious social institutions” [6]. Castes should not go; but, should only be readjusted accordingly. Within the old structure is to be found life enough for the re-building of two hundred thousand new ones. It is sheer nonsense to desire the abolition of caste. The new method is evolution of the old [6].

1 The word “Dalit (a)” comes from the Sanskrit - root “dal” - means “held under check” , “suppressed”, or “crushed”, or in a looser sense, “oppressed”.

2 A translation of Vivekananda’s use of the English word “suppressed” for the untouchables; Navajivan, 27-3-1927, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi ; Vol 38 ; page 240.

Vivekananda has firm conviction that in ancient India, castes were not really hereditary, but based on qualifications [6]. Hence, if one acquires higher qualities, there is every chance of elevation to a higher status. In this connection he mentions the examples of Vyasa, the son of a fisherwoman; servant with uncertain parentage, and many others of like nature, attaining Rishihood or becoming revered saints or sages [8]. He believes that in the beginning caste system was a functional division of society, working almost on the principle of spiritual unity of all castes. Besides, it was also an excellent mechanism of social adjustment. But with the passage of time, the vested interests arose and became powerful and the system degenerated into a closed society [9].

Swami Vivekananda is inspired by the ideal of social harmony and synthesis embodied in the theory of Varna system of ancient India. Generally he uses the term caste in the sense of Varna without distinguishing it from the latter. There were four Varnas- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. “This system of division into different Vivekananda explains, “is the stepping stone to civilization, making one rise higher and higher in proportion to one’s learning and culture” [7].

Varna should be considered as the basis of the congenial vocational temperaments and aptitudes of the people, and not to uphold the superiority or the privileges of some individuals because of their birth and heredity. He translates the term ‘caste’ as ‘first idea of creation’. Creation connotes variation or diversity (vichitrata), and ‘jati means ‘creation’. According to him, “the original idea of Jati (caste) was- this freedom of the individual to express his nature, his Prakriti, his Jati, his caste; and so it remained for thousands of years” [7]. According to Vivekananda, caste is excellent only in natural way of solving life. Men must form themselves into groups, and you cannot get rid of that. Wherever you go, there will be caste. But that does not mean that there should be these privileges. They should be knocked on the head. And that is why we want no privilege for any one, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that the divine within, and every one will work out his own salvation [10].

An interesting observation made by Vivekananda on caste is his perception that everybody is composed of all castes. As there are Sattva, Rajas and Tamas—one or other of these Gunas more or less—in every man, so the qualities which makes a man Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra are inherent in every man more or less. But at times one or other of these qualities predominates in him in varying degrees, and it is manifested accordingly. “Take a man in his different pursuits, for example, when he is engaged in serving another for pay, he is in Sudrahood; when he is
busy transacting some piece of business for profit, on
his own account, he is a Vaisya; when he fights to right
wrongs, then the qualities of a Ksatriya come out in
him; and when he meditates on God or pass his time in
conversation about Him, then he is a Brahmin” [7]. The
above observation undergirds the idea that it is quite
possible for one to change from one caste into another.
Otherwise, how did Viswamitra become a Brahmin and
Parasurama a Ksatriya? This awareness of sharing the
to which all castes will hit at the root of arrogant
caste consciousness. To him, caste is a means to help
everybody in attaining the status of a true Brahmin. A
Brahmin is the one who has exterminated all selfishness.
To be a Brahmin is to be spiritually enlightened. Thus, basically, by caste, Vivekananda
meant the raising of individuals gently and slowly
towards the realization of the noble ideal of spiritually
enlightened man [9]. As a worshipper of humanity,
Vivekananda devotes his whole life to uplift the so-
called lower castes. In this regard he says that the
plan in India is to make everybody Brahmin. Here Brahmin
is considered as the ideal of humanity. By the Brahmin
ideal he meant the ideal Brahmin-ness in which
worldliness is altogether absent and true wisdom is
abundantly present [7].

He believes that when people belonging to the
various strata of society evolve up to this ideal, the
differences among castes will reduce and may totally
disappear one day. This is what he means by ‘leveling
up’. He says that from the highest man to the lowest
Pariah, everyone has to try and become the ideal
Brahmin [11]. But the original caste system of India
unfortunately degenerated in the course of time into a
kind of rigid, cruel casteism bringing about numerous
social evils in its wake as well as working for
permanent injuries in the social structure of India. Thus
human nature being what it is, men of different caste
groups – originally formed purely on the basis of
inclinations, abilities and qualifications implying
flexibility, allowing all to change their caste groups,
according to corresponding changes in their
inclinations, abilities and qualifications began after a
time to claim rights and privileges, even without
proportionate duties and abilities. Thus a question arose
of the higher and the lower; the Brahmin, the scholar
and the spiritual being taken as the highest class; the
Ksatriya, the warrior and the political ruler, coming
second; the Vaisya the trader and the economic guide,
coming third, the Sudra, the labourer, coming last. Thus
the original sublime idea that “All work is equal, hence
all human beings are also so, was soon lost and the
great unifying institution of caste soon degenerated into
great a diverging factor” [8]. The degenerated caste system
opens the flood gate to a host of social evils headed by
priest-craft on the one hand, in the case of the
Brahmins, the highest caste; and untouchability on the
other hand, in the case of the Sudras, the lowest one.

Swami Vivekananda, the living symbol of
justice and love, naturally could not on any account
tolerate such injustice and callousness for a single
moment. Hence, just as he is full of praise for the real,
original caste system of India, he is equally full of
blame for the latter, degenerated, so-called casteism of
India. According to him, the present caste is not the real
Jati, but a hindrance to its progress. It really prevented
the free action of Jati, i.e., caste on variation. Any
crystallized custom or privilege or hereditary class in
any shape really prevents caste (Jati) from having its
full sway. Every frozen aristocracy or privileged class is
a blow to caste and is not caste. Let Jati have its sway;
break down every barrier in the way of caste, and we
shall rise [7]. In his day to day activity we find a clear
instance of violating this custom. In his wandering life
as a monk, Swami Vivekananda neither hesitates to
drink water from an outcaste nor be indecisive to share
hubble-bubble with a low-caste people. He has eaten
food of the poorest and humblest people whom no caste
man (upper caste people) would condescend to touch,
and he has accepted their hospitality with thankfulness.

Swamiji condemns hereditary caste and says,
“Modern caste distinction is a barrier to India’s
progress. It narrows, restricts, separates. It will crumble
before the advance of ideas” [8]. According to
Vivekananda, evils like caste system (in the degraded
form) and untouchability are obstacles to our national
integrity. He publicly criticizes and advocates against
the prevalent caste system. He even supports inter-caste
marriage so as to establish equality in the society for
breaking the concept of privilege. To him, the prevalent
caste system handicapped the Hindu society to progress.
Hence, the evils of caste system should be rooted out
for the unity of Indian society which is totally irrelevant
in the present socio-economic condition. He strongly
refutes the thesis of religious sanction for the caste
system. He says that from Buddha to Ram Mohan, all
consider caste as a religious concept and try to abolish
it; but they fail in their attempt because caste is not a
religious custom [12]. According to him, caste is a
social custom. He observes that the doctrine of caste in
the ‘Purusa Sukta’ of Rig Veda, does not make it
hereditary. He maintains that “the caste system is
opposed to the religion of Vedanta” [12]. According to him,
caste system became hereditary much before the
Puranic age.

CONCLUSION
Vivekananda realizes that the problems
relating to caste cannot be solved within a short period
of time. He says that the solution is not by bringing
down the higher, but by raising the lower up to the level
of the higher. The ideal at one end is the Brahmin, and
the ideal at the other end is the Chandala; and the whole
work is to raise the Chandala up to the Brahmin.
Vivekananda points out that he has nothing to do directly with the castes or with social reformation. What he wants is a thorough overhauling of society. As in the case of caste system Vivekananda wants reforms to come not from above but from below, not through the efforts of the social reformers with the help of government legislation, but through the endeavour of the common educated people as a result of the growth of a new social consciousness. Though Vivekananda strongly criticizes the degenerated caste system of his time, yet he is definitely against the total and permanent abolition of the caste system. Rather he wants the total and permanent abolition of the cruel and unjust social customs, due to a misinterpretation — perhaps intentional, perhaps not of the real, original implications of the caste system. He always is of the opinion that the real, original caste system was highly beneficial one; and so, should be properly adjusted to suit modern societies, instead of being totally rejected. Caste is continually changing, rituals are continually changing, and so are the forms. It is the substance, the principle that does not change. Castes should not go; but, should only be re-adjusted — occasionally, within the old structure is to be found life enough for the re-building of two hundred thousand new ones. It is sheer nonsense to desire the abolition of caste. The new method is — evolution of the old. Thus, Swamiji suggests that caste system is just a form of order to run the society smoothly. It is not water tight compartment. This classification is only on the basis of the work but not on the basis of anybody’s birth. To him, a man belonging to any caste should not be treated as lower and higher. Being a Vedantin, Vivekananda has firm faith in the inner unity of all. He depicts Vedantic society as the ideal form of society as it was based on equality. The most distinctive feature of Swami Vivekananda’s teaching is that he applied his philosophical principles of Vedanta to the affairs of everyday life. Vedanta philosophy is based upon a thesis that the metaphysical concepts of oneness and plurality view the society as an organism. A society is not a collection of individuals loosely joined by self interest but an integral unit like an organism made up of many different but interrelated and mutually dependent parts. Their interests are ameliorative and not antagonistic because they have basic needs and goals in common. Interdependence and harmony are therefore natural in this philosophy of Vedanta. It amounts to saying that each caste or group contributes to and receives from the whole. The good of one is tied up with the good of all. Thus, we can say that Swami Vivekananda was a saint in all ways engaged with the ideas of Vedanta which is the basic cultural ontology of this country.

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