



Caste System in India and Racial Discrimination in the United States

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *It is well known that racial discrimination has been a continuous problem for the United States, but similar issues are also faced by the government of India with its caste system. Both India and the United States have developed affirmative action programs that are aimed at benefiting and compensating those who are targets of discrimination. An issue that is common to both the racial discrimination in the United States and the caste system in India is the isolation and segregation of those considered low in social status. Similar to the lower castes in India, the Blacks were prohibited from entering certain neighbourhoods and certain areas, and were even separated on public transport. In this context this paper makes an attempt to study the following objectives*

- *To review the various legal measures introduced in favour of Dalits in India and Blacks in USA during pre and post-independence periods and its impact*
- *To examine and analyse the nature and causes behind the discrimination in general and dalits and Blacks in Particular.*

In this context this article makes an attempt to study the liberal, Democratic and more inclusive policy for the development and inclusive growth of the marginalised communities and to suggest some alternatives to combat violation, their rights for social justice and equality.

Most people would agree that equal opportunity to participate as a full and functioning member of society is important. Nonetheless, existing social and economic disparities among racial, ethnic and caste groups suggest that our society has yet to achieve this goal. It is well known that racial discrimination has been a continuous problem for the United States, but similar legal issues are also faced by the government of India with its caste system. Although it can be said that discrimination produces similar outcomes, the differences between the race issue in the United States and the caste system in India should also be taken into account. An issue that is common to both the racial discrimination in the United States and the caste system in India is the isolation and segregation of those considered low in social status. Both India and the United States have developed affirmative action programs that are aimed at benefiting and compensating those who are targets of discrimination. Despite the improvements in recent years and discrimination now being illegal, the lower castes still face problems such as being forbidden from entering high-class neighbourhoods, being considered 'pollution' so no one approaches them or wants them in their presence, and in extreme cases being subject to violence and assault. This is especially prevalent in rural, rather than urban, areas. The Ati-Shudra and the Shudra castes are also pressured to perform the unpleasant jobs such as street cleaning and manual work. In most cases they do not have the opportunity to establish a well-paid career, and may not be provided with education. This exclusion of the lower castes is similar to the racial discrimination that was faced by the Blacks in the United States.

Despite the idea that "all men are created equal", stated in the Declaration of Independence, throughout the history of the United States there has been racial discrimination against minority groups. The racial conflict in the United States goes back to the mistreatment of the Native Americans and the African slaves by the European settlers. Blacks were given no rights under slavery, and were treated violently and as an inferior race. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 was the beginning of the movement towards equality and it made citizenship rights available to everyone, and made it illegal to remove anyone of these rights based on discrimination. However, this did not solve the issue of racial discrimination as Blacks were still suffering through segregation and separation from the Whites.

Similar to the lower castes in India, the Blacks were prohibited from entering certain neighbourhoods and certain areas,

and were even separated on public transport. Like the 'untouchables', the Blacks were faced with violence, abuse and in some cases murder by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. They were also left with the undesirable jobs, and the Black children were very rarely allowed to go to a White school. It was only after 1954 that racial segregation was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, after *Brown vs. Board of Education*. The effects of racial and caste discrimination can be compared, but the systems themselves differ.

Although racial discrimination in the United States and caste in India create similar outcomes, there are also differences between the two. Racism, in this case in the United States, is based on individual prejudice against a race due to the association between actions and appearance. It is the belief in superiority over a group of people whether it is intentional or not. However, caste in India is not based on appearance or skin colour, but rather is determined by occupation, hereditary and endogamous. Dissimilar to racism, this system does not involve ascribing certain characteristics to the different castes. There is little class mobility; unlike in the United States where citizens can freely move between classes with little difficulty. The caste system in India is also affiliated with religion, in particular Hinduism. This suggests the caste discrimination is based on religious grounds and beliefs, with the higher castes even being considered 'priestly'. Despite the differences in the race and caste systems, the issues have been addressed in similar ways through affirmative action policies.

The problem of racial discrimination in the United States has been addressed over recent years through affirmative action policies which aim to benefit and improve opportunities for minority groups. Racial discrimination has come a long way since the 1960's, but there are still racist problems in the United States, particularly labour market and housing discrimination. John F Kennedy coined the term 'affirmative action' in 1961, and his administrative order declared that employees must be treated fairly with no regards to race, creed, colour or national origin. This idea was then enhanced by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the institutions that were established and the rulings of the Supreme Court became the definition of affirmative action. Affirmative action in the United States is approximately forty years old, quotas are ruled out and it is not constitutionally guaranteed. Legal action and court cases can be used to weaken the power of affirmative action.

As there is an almost voluntary aspect to affirmative action, it can either be strengthened through improved innovation, or the opposite could occur and it would be weakened. The benefits of the way the United States uses affirmative action include improved education and employment opportunities for Blacks. However, affirmative action has not been successful in completely solving racial discrimination. Also, strength of this system is the existence of an enforcement mechanism. A similar way of addressing discrimination is found in affirmative action in India.

As the Shudras and the Ati-Shudras are at the lower end of the castes they are challenged with constant discrimination, violence, segregation and oppression. For this reason, affirmative action in India has been implemented to provide compensation and attempt to improve the situation. Indian affirmative action policies have been around far longer than the United States' program. The arguments for continuing affirmative action in India include the desire to improve standard of living, to eradicate the suffering of the lower castes, to achieve equality and to compensate for the years of suffering.

In 1955 the Untouchability Offences Act prohibited discrimination against the 'untouchables', however discrimination is still found in India, mainly in the rural areas. Contrasting to the United States, affirmative action in India takes the form of quotas and is constitutionally guaranteed. This is strength of the Indian program as affirmative action is protected and it cannot be weakened through legal action.

Conclusion:

It can be seen that there are strong similarities between the outcomes of the racial discrimination in the United States, and the caste discrimination in India. Both systems resulted in suffering by the minority groups and unfair treatment that has led to current social and economic problems. However, the differences between racial and caste issues is important to note to have a sound understanding, as they are different types of discrimination. Although America has been successful in reducing the effects of racial discrimination, it has not been eradicated completely. Thus, before considering assisting the elimination of the caste system in India, America must continue to work towards destroying its own discrimination.

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