INTO THE MIND OF THE OPPRESSOR IN THE INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERCEPTION

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Abstract:

Caste is a socio-psychological phenomenon which is existing now for more than 3000 years. Even though when the discrimination based on caste is banned, affirmative actions are taken in order to eliminate the unlawful acts, prevention of atrocities acts are put forward for the marginalised people, the ideology of caste still prevails in the minds of Indian people. Everyday there are news flooding into the media about the physical and sexual assaults against the marginalised people. Yet, the psychological effect of the caste system on an individual is an area of study that is explored rarely. In particular the psychology of the oppressor domain is yet to be explored. There is no clear framework to fully explain the psychology of the oppressor in the Indian context of the caste system. From the already existing research done in this domain, a holistic idea of how an individual become caste oppressor is discussed. Starting from learning, the observational learning and operant learning theories and applied to understand the initial stage, that an individual undergoes is discussed, further through social identity theory, how the individual forms their self-concept with group norms is elaborated. Additionally, the way the caste system inculcates the delusional ideas against the oppressed caste is explained and finally by dehumanising the individuals from the oppressed caste the violent discriminatory acts are perpetuated by the oppressed caste without the sense of guilt and conscience. This paper was just an attempt to frame a theoretical view of the oppressor mind with the already existing theories, but many research should be done and studied extensively, hence this paper also calls for the further research in the field.

Keywords: Caste discrimination, oppressor, India, social psychology, delusion, dehumanization.

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Introduction

The nature of human is to form a group and associate themselves with the other people. In every society there will be social group existing. In India it is the caste system which is the socio-psychological construct, but it is something that is beyond 'social group'. It is a complex construct which embodies many unjust ways from its origin. It is strict exclusive hierarchy system where there is no mobilisation between the hierarchy groups. There are lot of theories that explains the origin of caste, like traditional theory, evolutionary theory, occupational theory, racial theory, Gandhian theory (Kapur, 2022). In the ancient HINDU texts, there are two terms used, which include the varna and the Jati (Uma Chakravarthy, 2018). The varna system is social stratification, which is divided into four levels as brahmanas, kshatriyas, Vaishyas and shudras, later, the text further explains that these divisions are born out of the parts of brahmas and specify the occupation they can do and determine the ritual purity status of each varna. The brahmanas are from the mouth of brahma whose occupation include as priests, academics and are meant to acquire knowledge, they are kept in the topmost level in the system. Brahmins are considered to be ritually poor compared to other castes (Smith, 43). Next comes the kshatriyas who are from the arms and their occupation includes warriors and being kings, they are meant to protect and govern people. The Vaishyas are from the thighs, occupation includes as merchants, landowners who are meant to make wealth. The shudras are the lower most level who are considered to be from the feet of brahma, they are the commoners, and they need to serve the other levels of the system, their occupation includes as being servants, peasants. These four levels are in whole called as the Savarnas, later fifth colour was included who are named as avarnas or ashudra, they are further subdivided as the untouchable, unseeable and unapproachable whose touch, sight, or presence itself is considered as the pollution to the purity of the Savarnas. They are considered to be out of the system, and they don't origin from any parts of brahma, their occupation included as sweepers, cleaners (BBC, 2016). Jati's are the subdivision of the varna system, which is much nuanced and practice endogamy, unique ritual ways, dress code, food habits and even art forms (Uma Chakravarthy, 2018). This practice lasted till now although there were many changes over time, the essence of the system still stays intact. The system itself favours the caste who are placed in the top level and exploits the people comes under the caste placed in the lower levels. As the hierarchy goes down, the economy, education, social awareness, power, status also goes down. DR. B.R.

Ambedkar, who is a Dalit himself and experienced the discrimination, effectively framed the system of reservation, post-independence. The reservation system was to tackle the discrimination they faced for centuries and uplift them from the economy and social disadvantage. As of now the castes are represented as FC or General category, which includes the higher caste like brahmins who are economically and socially advantaged people, then comes the OBC, BC who are not economically and socially as advantaged as FC. Then the SC who were the Avarnas, who were considered to be impure and as a pollution to the others purity. The research in the field of psychology in context of caste is very rare, ST are tribes who are also socio-economically disadvantaged people, who were out of the mainland and are categorised by the geographical location they lived in. Although now there are research done in the perception of the oppressed, how they are affected by the discrimination, but the psychology of the oppressor is a domain where only single-digit number of papers are published. This paper will try to explore the perception of the oppressor.

Psychology as a lacking field in caste domain

The field of psychology is dominated by the Euro-American theories and perceptions. Joseph Henrich in his book *the WEIRDest people in the world* says that psychology is WEIRD, here weird stands for western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic. It is said that the WEIRD society occupies the 80 percent of the research in the field, but they are only 12 percent of the total population of the world. Many attempts are made to explain by the scholars to relate the theories to the Indian context, yet we still gave less than pleased attention to the caste discrimination. It is important for a psychologist to know about the social injustice that is causing the distress among the people and have the understanding about the way of functioning in the society and the perception of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Many scholars have criticized that most of the theories and the practices are working on the assumption that the individual is white, heterosexual, man thus the field itself have major exclusion problem in it (Fassinger & Richie Sperber, 1997). It is surprising to notice that even in the books that deals with the oppression psychology, they only talk about the oppressed, but the psychology of the oppressor is excluded (Sophan, 2023). In a research paper it was shown that between the years of 1970 to 2010 the research done on race in social psychology, development psychology and cognitive psychology gradually increased but the research on caste in the same field were 0 or 1 (Krittika Gorur and Patrick Forscher, 2023). There are some researches done in the

domain of racial discriminator but we cannot generalise all the discrimination and take up the theories of particular type of discrimination and apply to caste discrimination because there are lot of difference existing in between each discrimination from the origin to the reason why they still persist, that is the racial discrimination is shaped by US politics and history whereas caste is shaped by the religion and colonisation, hence they need to be studied separately, build the theoretical framework and appropriate practices should be found and followed (Krittika Gorur and Patrick Forscher, 2023).

Review of literature

Some attempts had been made to explain the oppressor caste group behaviour towards the oppressed caste. Padiyath (2020) conducted a study in which perceptual bias towards SC and ST, the oppressed population of the history were shown. The hypothesis of the study was that people belonging SC and ST were seen less human by the oppressor castes, the general category, which in turn will have negative effects on the oppressed caste who are dehumanized. Studies were designed in such a way to study the impact of caste on the social perception and the participants included both General category and SC/ST category. In the study 1 it was found that there is subtle dehumanization through implicit association test. In the study 2 it was extended the findings by adopting a moderately explicit measure of dehumanisation, and the results revealed a valence effect in the SC/ST subjects' impression of humanness. Using an explicit assessment, Study 3 indicated blatant dehumanisation of SC/ST. Overall, the findings point to a dehumanisation of the marginalised minority, which may have ramifications for attitudes and behaviours towards them. The author argues how the dehumanisation of the group make the oppressed caste to use violence against them and social ostracize them. Further the determinants of the dehumanisation been shown which includes as: nonhuman/animalistic association, disgust sensitivity. Engaging in dehumanisation would mitigate the feeling of guilt and disintegrate the empathy faced towards the victim.

Cotterill and colleagues (2014) tried to apply the theory of social dominance theory and dual process theory to the Indian context of caste system and did an empirical study on them. They tested for four hypotheses within the sample of 385 Indian university students. Their hypothesis includes as: Social dominance orientation (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) would both contribute rather strongly and independently to participants' support for Karma, also to their support for antiegalitarian social policies and

conventions, just the endorsement of the karma belief itself would be strongly related to support these policies, consistent with the view that Karma operates as a legitimising ideology, it would at least partially mediate the linkages between SDO and RWA, on the one hand, and antiegalitarian and traditional social policies, on the other. The findings of latent variable structural equation modelling supported all four hypotheses. Later Jogdand and colleagues (2016) commented of the paper saying that the work didn't examine the caste difference in the endorsement of the karma, and they took the behavioural asymmetry among the oppressed caste lightly. Also, they took the varna system which was an over simplified system of the hierarchal structure.

Dharapuri (2010) argued that the idea of caste and its ideology prevails are a delusion. Further in the chapter it was explained that not only the oppressor but the oppressed end up having delusional thoughts the intergroup members and themselves. About 18 delusional thoughts that are embedded in the minds of both oppressor and oppressed are listed out. Some of the delusional thoughts that the oppressor hold includes afraid of interacting with Dalits, afraid of facing Dalits early in the morning, can't bear Dalits owning property or any asserts, cant bear seeing the Dalits wearing good and clean cloths, cants bear Dalit children going to school, scoring good marks and the list goes on.

Sophan and Nair (2023) in their paper points out that to understand the Indian human behaviour and thoughts, it should be viewed through the lens of the colonial past, the caste system and the religion. In explaining the psyche of the oppressor two factors are taken into account that is the 'purity and pollution' ideology of the caste system where the oppressor caste have the ritual purity ideology and are afraid of being polluted by the people from the oppressed caste. The second factor that is been discussed is that the system is learned through modelling and intergenerational learning. With th ese factors the unequal power relation and discrimination is explained. The theoretical framework of the psyche of the oppressor is presented with the figure, where the oppressor mind is influenced by the colonial mindset, delusion of caste superiority, socially favoured caste behaviour and intergenerational learning.

Learning

The level of understanding about the varna and Jati system varies between individual to individual. Yet the individual does learn that there are people divided by caste and understand it as a hierarchy that is exclusive. The individual further learns who have power over who, who can marry who and who are considered as low life. Children are not born

with the prejudiced mind set, they learn their beliefs from the family, friends, media technically any social model. Research suggests that the intergroup bias in the individuals mind in very early stage of development. In sociology it is considered that the central point of the social influence is the social connection that we have (Friedkin and Cook 1990). According to the social learning theory, the social role models who are the child look up to, like parents, grandparents influenced their behaviour (bandura, 1977). Children tends to help and socialize well with members of the social group that they identify with and most probably they may make fun of, humiliate, or betray the children who are members of the outgroup. According to Webster (2002), child rearing practises in India socialise children into hierarchical family and village ties. Indian child raising promotes internalisation of a child's own and others' standing within this hierarchy. Hence the idea of caste system is planted into the young minds, as a part of their growth. It does not stop with family and peers; schools are also the part of institution where the children observe, learn, and socialize. The scheduled caste children are made to clean the toilets in schools when toilet facilities are offered. Female pupils face more discrimination, where they are asked to clean the restrooms (Mruthunjaya, 2019). Children, by seeing such acts, they would learn the behaviours exhibited by adults towards the children belonging to the marginalised community. Another theory that plays a major role in learning the caste system is the operant conditioning, children are discouraged to play with the children from the oppressed caste. Adults who have castiest mind would try to scold or even impose violence on the children to control their notion to mingle with the children from the oppressed caste. Thus, children perceive that being with children from other caste as an inappropriate thing to do.

Social identity

It doesn't stop with learning, then the individual start to identify themselves with these groups. As by the social identity theory, people derive their part of identity from the social group. According to Tajfel and Turner (2004), any group can serve as a source of pride and self-esteem. In case of the dominant caste, identifying or affiliating themselves with the caste group serves some psychological purposes like high esteem (Jaspal, 2011). Most of the dominant caste people take pride in their caste identity. This pride is something that is associated with the past, which can be understood in two ways. One is that the caste system relies on the karma theory of the past life, where if the person has done good deed then in the present life, he

would be born as a dominant caste and if he has committed lot of sins then the person would be born in the oppressed caste in the present (Cotterill et al, 2014), thus they hold pride in what they think they have done in their past life. Another way is that they hold pride in the history, that is., how their ancestors were great warriors, kings or of high significance. Thus, with the identity, a sense of pride also comes, it also extends to the length such that they start to stigmatise the marginalised group (Mahalingam, 2003). The social identity thus now become the self-concept. Then the norms that are related to the group would become the norms of self, any questioning to this norm would become a threat to the identity (Sankaran et al, 2017). For instance, the caste group hold the notion of the endogamy, when this practice is questioned, the individual would feel threatened such that they feel shameful and think it is something that is immoral. Norm violation will be considered as a serious problem by the social group as it threatens the group identity and thus the member would think of a way to stop this from happening. The attitude towards the in-group member would be ostracizing, devaluing, or excluding them from the group, it may even go to the extremity of imposing violence on them, but that would depend on the degree to which the person identify himself with the group (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Delusion

The caste system not only functions on the plain norms, but there is delusion embedded into the minds of the casteist, the system itself innately carries of idea of one is inferior and the other is superior. This can be explained in two ways of thinking. The first one is that the caste system teaches the concept of purity and pollution. It is that the caste which are placed upper in the hierarchy are ritually pure and can worship God directly, they need to maintain the purity by following some norms, the individual of the caste shouldn't do filthy acts or come in contact with any low life (Harper 1964), if a person of dominated encounters the dominant caste, then the individual of the dominant caste is considered to be polluted, the purity of ritual the individual holds is now ruined. Not only the contact of a person, but anything that they have used. A study conducted by the evidence organisation in tamilnadu shows that still in many places the two-tumbler system is followed, the stats are very scary showing that 83 percent of a village follows this system. This indicate that people are yet not ready to use the same glass, plates, bottles, seatings, not even the water taps or tanks and many more as the Dalits. Even today there are people who not allowed to enter the temple and worship the god. The concept of untouchability can be

explained with this belief, how the touch, or even an encounter of the individual from oppressed caste is considered polluting. There is even a ritual act performed for the person to acquire their ritual purity back (Harper, 1964).

The second way is that the belief that high caste people possess attributes like wisdom, intelligence, honesty, austerity, and morality, whereas low caste people possess qualities such as dullness, stupidity, immorality, impurity, and other undesirable characteristics (Deshpande, 2010). Those people who doesn't have much of belief or even any knowledge about the caste system also holds this belief that the individual from particular caste have particular characteristics with them. The belief is that it is the nature of the people who belong to the caste, and as if it runs in their bloodline. Hence the whole lineage will be considered and determined as the people with negative characters (De Vos, 1967). This explains how the practice of endogamy among the people even who doesn't hold any strong belief in the caste system. Thus, an individual doesn't want their lineage to be polluted by either way by marrying them, or even doesn't want to make any relationship with them.

This claim of ritual purity and specific characteristics that is linked with caste has no scientific proof, hence it is appropriate to mention this as a delusion (Sophan, 2023). Thus, this delusional belief leads to the feeling of unexplainable fear or to the extreme of anxiety of social contamination. The fear goes to the extend to where the touch of the individual itself instigate the anxiety in them (Sophan, 2023). According to Darapuri (2010) some of the delusional symptoms that an individual of dominant caste shows is the fear of interacting with Dalits, fear of sitting beside them, fear of working under Dalit, fear of sharing knowledge and the list extends.

Dehumanizing

In the name of caste, atrocities like rape, mob lynching, honour killing, and many others are committed. The report released by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) indicated that the violence against the marginalised people is high (Zaffar). The report indicates that every one hour, three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are assaulted, two Dalits are murdered (National Geographic, 2003). When the individual has social identity of caste and have the above-mentioned delusions, they would most probably have the belief that oppressed caste individuals are less human, thus the dehumanisation of the oppressed caste would cause the dominant caste people behave differently towards them (Padiyath, 2020). One of the characteristics of the caste system is the power imbalance, the people who are dominant caste had power whereas the oppressed people were treated as slaves. When there is negative intergroup relation, and somehow the aggression towards them is instigated, dehumanization is the way that an individual justifies their immoral action of violence towards them. (Bandura, 1975). This can be more understood with the social identity theory, when the group norm has become the self-concept, and a threat to the identity is noted, the dominant group would choose the violence to control them and remind them their place. In the caste system, the ideology of karma, purity, and pollution, natural characterisation itself makes the individual from the oppressed caste to be dehumanised. Thus, in addition to the intergroup relation theory, there is the ideology of caste system that makes the oppressed to be dehumanised in the minds of the oppressor. When an individual is considered less human, they are assumed to be thick skinned to the maltreatment and can have impacts only with the more primitive methods, thus the individual who is an oppressor would justify his inhumane action with dehumanisation (bandura, 1975). When the sense of conscience is suppressed by reason in such way, it becomes easy for the oppressor to assault the individual. In a study that is conducted by Hoff and colleagues (2009) showed that the individuals from the castes that are in the top of the hierarchy that is brahmins and thakur showed more willingness to punish the norm violators compared with the individuals who belong to the caste that placed in the lower level.

Conclusion

The caste system even though it is very old, the degree of its impacts on the individual is immense. To summarize the caste system has been thought to the children directly or indirectly. The child starts to observe, remember, imitate, and learn the ways of the society. Then these learnings don't stop there but continues to get imbedded in their self-identity itself, thus the norms of the social group would become the self-concept. When it becomes the self-concept the degree of the identity merging with the social group determines their behaviour and attitude towards the oppressed caste. There is another layer to this perception other than the inter group relation, it is the delusional beliefs that the caste system holds as its base. These delusion makes them more inhumane towards the oppressed caste as it promotes the idea of dehumanisation of the oppressed caste in the roots of the caste system. Thus, the discriminatory unjust acts are easily perpetuated without the sense of guilt and any conscience. This summarize the life cycle of the oppressor from the 'blank slate' to the 'inhumane being'.

The individual in the Indian society learns the way to become unconsciously iniquity in their behaviour and thought. The individual doesn't even have any awareness about their action and the painful consequences that would follow up. Thus, the societal indoctrination makes an individual to behave in an inhumane way. In the first place it is the system that is to
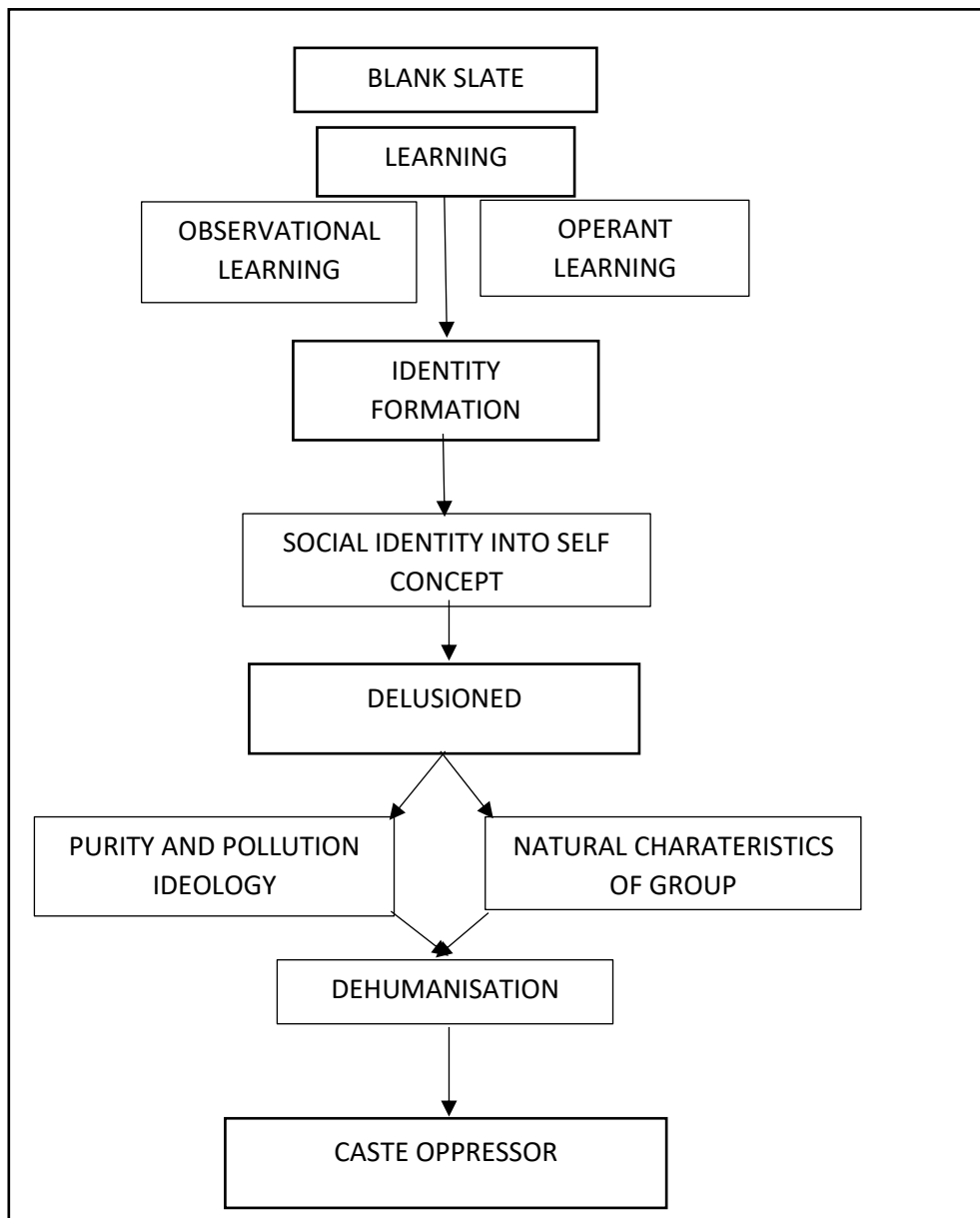

Fig: 1.1. The theoretical framework of stages of process an individual undergoes to turn into an oppressor.

be blamed for this flaw rather than the individual that is an oppressor. As a society we need to take responsibility and society as a whole should be made accountable. Finally concluding the paper with the question that need to be concentrated on in the further research. There is affirmative action which was framed to make a change in the systemic level but how the change in the minds of the people can be achieved?

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