A National seminar on ‘Caste, democratic politics and Nation Building: Historical and Contemporary India’ was organised by the School of Interdisciplinary and Trans-disciplinary Studies at the Convention Centre in IGNOU on 10th-11th March, 2011. The seminar was sponsored by Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi. About 20 paper presentations 60 participants were attended the seminar.

In the inaugural address, Prof. Gopal Guru talked about the caste and democratic politics. “It is an undeniable fact that to eradicate the caste, the government has initiated several measures but much to our misfortune the caste still has a big role to play not only in Indian society but also in politics, economic development and so on” he mentioned. It is mandatory for the state not only to recognize the problem but to confront it whole-heartedly. The people need to be conscious about the role of caste system in the life of democracy and politics. He said that there should be consciousness for realization of caste for not to manipulate it but to understand it deeply. Caste threatens the notion of nation-building. Inferences from the quotes of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa have been drawn that the emergence of caste system has brought Kaliyug with itself. Prof. Guru said that Caste is a moral danger to a nation, it needs to be cleaned, sanitized.

A clean, secular, distinct image is ardently required. Crucial questions crop up while dealing with the issue of caste. Why people do resort to caste and why do they participate in democracy through caste? Is there any historical, pathological compulsion or is it natural to them? Why people are casteist? Rajni Kothari would argue that democracy had been enriched by caste and caste had been used as a source of mobilization. Prof. Guru said that “Castes have their own languages and caste is the category available to all of us to express ourselves in comparison to class, religion and language”. Caste is not properly sociologically, pathologically defined and it needs to be reconstructed. Debate revolves on how to substantialise caste. Whether caste of politics or politicization of caste. He said “people have to sociologically, mentally and analytically fight out this moral problem”. His thought provoking conceptualization set the tone for the further discussion on the theme of the seminar.
The chief guest of the seminar, Mr B S Baswan, IAS, Former Secretary, Ministry of Social Justice and Human Resource Development, explained that Indian racism is deeply rooted in our psyche and our culture. There is conflict between Hinduism and modernity. How can this coexist? He elaborated saying that emphasis has been given on the importance of English as an instrument of growth internationally and globally as English is the language of social and economic mobility. Poverty can be eradicated through growth, and inequalities can be curbed to a certain extent. He professes that with advancement of time, caste will inevitably fade. He also added that Indians have not tried to write their own history resulting misunderstanding and misinterpretation of their past. Indian history is written by non-Indian i.e Magasthnes and Ibn Batuta, the Chinese and Arabian historian who recorded the Indian history. He also traced that 1931 census of India included the caste as a matter of study. Though as a phenomenon it was existed much before.

In Introductory remarks, Prof. Vijay Kapur, Adviser to VC on Special Project, elaborated that constitutional imperative and the right to education should blur the caste system in India. Liberty, equality and fraternity are important for that purpose. Representation of critique of caste practice through education is needed to make democracy to sustain. There are certain problems with the issues of caste in India. According to him, evolution of caste-structure does not follow the same trajectory. Data are not being presented in homogenous manner. Caste does not follow a single pattern as it is different from place to place, culture to culture, locales and regions. Caste and democracy are paradoxical. Caste is primordial and traditional while democracy is modern and contemporary. The connection is not that simplistic but problematic. Indian democracy is conspicuous by the emergence of caste groups. Rebellious slogans are often associated with these caste groups. Those groups face challenges like- to retain larger caste support base, to expand country wide base, to come out of symbolism, to develop second line leadership and to include democratisation within. Other denominations like class, language, gender, state structure, religion were also being reinforced in the discussion. In modern era Brahmins talk about modernity, secularity and dalits talk about caste. Caste is now discussed from below. Dalits participating in democratic politics realised that they would not be able to claim democracy unless they could prove exclusion which could be articulated through the language of caste. They were not attracted by the idiom of class but by caste.
Session I

The chair of the first session of the seminar, Prof. R S Mann raised the important question: whether caste is really functional or dysfunctional? It has to be accepted that caste resides in India as a social reality and empirical fact. There has been a recurrent change in Indian society as far as caste is concerned. “Caste is a mindset” he said. The questions that occupy one's mind are whether caste is functional or dysfunctional and whether it is an ‘empirical fact’ or ‘state of mind’. He mentioned that many books were written in different time in relation to caste system. In 19th century Vilden wrote a book on “Indian Village republic” where he explained caste group in the village subscribe homogeneity. In 20th century one book was published on Jajmani System. Talcot Parsons and Kensley discussed on Caste hierarchy; David Goodman Mandelbaum studied in various part of India and commented that caste is reality in India. People are still governed by the rules and regulation of caste.

Prof. Kumkum Roy in her paper “Exploring Perception of Caste” explained certain core aspects - acceptance of caste system, creation of alternative strategy or identities or narratives of contestation need to be represented. Notions of hierarchy Uchakula and Nichakula are there in the caste system. Notions of identities are being transmitted through birth (kulaputra) i.e representation of Brahmana and Kshatriya relationship. Characters were often assigned to the categories which do not comply with varna jati categories (Brahmanical framework). There were instances wherein the identities were practiced according to Buddhism rather than Varna jati identities. Narratives seem to replicate Brahmanical connection to social hierarchies. She also explained how the Jataka consider the issues of caste. She pointed that there was a caste order in Jataka, which were alternative mode of identity like Upasika, Bhiku and Bhikuni.

Prof. Susan Visvanathan presented a paper on “Question for Integration of Children of Local Community into Neighborhood School”. She talked how globalization brought hybrid of culture that affected the caste system. Caste identity will disappear if there is education. Everyone has the right to live and have right to education. Political structure of the society is also one of the factors to get the equal access to education. Right to access university education is an important point to be considered. Local community is looking forth to the universalisation of the education. For instance, Lutheran Mission School of Dalit children (Tamil Nadu), Rammana Maharishi experimental School and also some state supporting school.
Prof. Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, on his paper “Past and Present: The Case of Oriya Society”, explained about the social structure of the Oriya society. He said that in the early Oriya society there is a Varna system and there is a division according to Hindu Caste system like Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaisya and Shudra. There are also occupational categories like Ghrapati, Pitaka, Potter, Goldsmith etc. The Caste and stratification of the society can be seen through the Mandal Commission. In Oriya society, there are cultural variation in respect to the localities and sub-region. Caste is related to the locality and region. Mahi, Damuna and Mori are also some caste exist only in Oriya society. Emergence of Pattra and Mahapatra is also important to be considered in respect to the changing time and place which shaping the caste structure. In 11th century there was neo-caste structure in the Oriya society.

Dr Christy Carmel, presented paper on “Mediating/ Constituting Sexuality and Caste”. She explained that how the media focusing the vulnerable section of the society with special reference to Kerela. She focused on the reservation for the lower class minority and how the public space discussion on it after the post independence era. She also emphasized the position of the Dalit Christian in Kerala society and how judgmental the media on them. She highlighted the number of rape cases taken place in Kerala on the year of 1990 which is the case of growing violence on Dalits.

Dr. Narender Kumar in his paper Interweaving Caste and Democratic politics: Bahujan Samaj Party’s Itinerary towards Sarvajan highlighted three phase of Bahujan Samaj Party. The first phase Radical (1984-95) which making caste double edged. It also criticized the mainstream political parties. Second Phase, Coalition (1996-2000), compulsion of survival and coalition with BJP. Destroying Hegemony and constructing Hegemony. Third Phase Sarvajan (2003), which is never Brahmin Centric but caste are focus on mobilization. It gave importance to Savrana but not moving from Dalit.

Dr. Nilika Merhotra who was the discussant of this session critically analyzed the all papers of the session. She stressed on how the nation “democratic politics” has impact on the caste system. She mentioned that the caste system is emerged in all section of the society.

Session II

The second session is chaired by Prof. Surinder S. Jodhka and he also presented a paper on “Caste and Religious Identity: An overview”. He explained that theoretically caste is viewed as hyphenation of religion i.e. Hinduism. It is an oriental construct. Caste is much more than religion. The materiality of caste comes from the outcomes of religion. Materiality of social life gets marginalised and religionosity of social life gets prioritized. It has influence in social reformers reforming society. Popular understanding of caste comes from these colonial constructs. Untouchability was a religious phenomenon- it was a negation of materiality of caste. India can be regarded as a transformative dynamic society. On the one hand there is enormous economic growth, on the other, inequality, marginalisation of people. Caste is posing threat to mobilisation. He asked whether caste is an empirical intellectual liability or empirical intellectual resource. Transformation is taking place from legitimizing identity to protesting identity. Social anti movement is being used as a weapon to face exclusion. The difference prevails between caste-system among Hindus and caste system among Muslims. Significant queries generated in the seminar as- in context of Dalits what is religion? What term “Dalit” stands for today? What is religion in India? How are religion and caste interrelated? What made Dalits untouchable? Is Dalits' approach to religion spiritual or materialist?
**Prof. Debal Singharoy** presented a paper on “Caste, Identity and Social Movement”, where he mentioned about various movements intertwined with caste system of West Bengal citing the example of Tehe-Bhaga Movement, Naxal Movement and also ULFA Movement. He gave emphasis on Rajbanshi community of West Bengal and how they are being deprived of due to the international migration and the Rajbanshi’s are cultivator. Due to the economic downward, they are deprived section of the society. In West Bengal the Dalit are also a deprived section of the society. The Rajbanshi are not getting Patta as a land holder. To get their due, they are forming some kind of social movement and trying to identify themselves. People in the Kamatapur area form the Kamatapur Sammiti and fighting for their identity. Government Rehabilitation Programmes were launched to up-lift the condition of these marginalized people.

**Dr Mujubur Rahman** discussed on the paper “Iron Caste Rule and Muslim Politics”. He tried to probe whether there are any Muslim politics in modern India? He mentioned that certain parts such as in Hyderabad, Kerela and some part of Assam shows there exists Muslim Politics. They are popularly known as Congress and Muslim Politics, BJP and Muslim Politics BSP and Muslim Politics so on and so forth. He talked that Muslim are the minority community and they too have the caste system which is quite similar to the Hindu society. According to History there was a politics which is known as Muslim League. There are Dalits among Muslim too. Indian Muslims who are converted from Hinduism naturally have some inheritance.

**Dr Gurram Srinivas**, presented paper on “Dalit and Religion:Past and Present” and he discussed about how the religion and caste interrelated. He explained the term how “Dalit” stand today. He told that Dalit is a political category used frequently today. But question is why they are Dalit today? Dalit is a part of Hindu society still they are considered as untouchable and marginalized section of the society. Bakti movement is the first recorded movement discussed about the Dalit issues. To get their identity in the society, the Dalits are converted into Christian and Muslims.

The Discussant of the session is **Prof Velayutham Saravanan** who explained that caste and religious identity has been important in different phase of colonial time. Social Movements were originated to identify themselves and to raise their economic position in the society and the reason to affiliate with different political party is only related to strengthening their identity. Though there is Muslim politics in India, are they getting attention from the Ambedkarian point of view?, he querried. Dalit and religion is really an important issue to be discussed because the Dalit is also associated in Indian Constitution and Dalit and Religion are interconnected with the historical acccordance and perspective. The paper looks into the process of deepening democracy within the ‘modern and secular’ development space of Kerala and the changing power relations at the local political arena, with a focus on Western Ghat region of Wayanad. Deepening democracy is also understood as a process negotiated as well as contested by individuals belonging to different communities/castes in their everyday interactions within a new regime of state decentralisation.
Day 2: Session III

The third session was chaired by Prof Gail Omvedt and discussed on “Ambedkar’s Theory of Caste”. Omvedt started with what Caste is and where is its origin. She discussed about Ambedkar’s argument on caste and she also talked about Gandhi and its terminology. She mentioned about Ambedkar’s criticism on mass conversion of 1925. She discussed about the Jatt-Paath Todo Movement by different groups in Punjab. According to her, caste affect only lower range of the society, it is not a division of labour but a division of labourers. She discussed that how the social revolution is presided by religion. She analysed that Ambedkar denounced caste system for violating the respect and dignity of the individual; yet his critique of caste-ridden society also foregrounds the limits of the theory and practice of citizenship and liberal politics in India. Since membership of a caste group was not a voluntary choice, but determined by birth and hence a coercive association, the liberal view of the self as a totally unencumbered and radically free subject seemed plagued with difficulties. Though the nation-state envisages a political community co-extensive with one cultural community, it need not, Ambedkar argued, necessarily lead to abolition of discriminatory caste practices in civil society. To restore the cultural rights of stigmatised populations, unredeemed by the nation state, propelled Ambedkar to seek solution in Buddhism. Mr Ambedkar explained the difference between the backward caste and the Brahmin bu- reaucracy. Also he told what suffering one who tries to sympathies has to undergo at the hand of bureaucrats Brahmins who claim to have democratic ideas, wish to raise the backward caste but who really crave nothing better than an oligarchy for themselves.

Dr. Nandini Sahu in her paper on “Depiction of caste and politics in modern India English literature: A study of Mulk Raj Anand’s ‘Untouchable and Coolie’” discussed about the story of Mulk Raj Anand’s ‘Untouchable and Coolie’. It is the story of a boy who cleans toilet and also has great dreams. She focused on socio-economic condition of child labourer in India. She pointed out that the largest number of child labourers are in India. She discussed about various rights for children like Right to Education, Right love etc. She also mentioned various causes of the Child-labour in India and discussed about the role of Government and NGOs and Civil Society

Dr. Savita Singh in her paper “India’s Democratic experience: A theoretical framework” discussed about democracy and caste. She also discussed about what the democracy is about. She explained what the democracy mean for the Dalit’s, workers specially who are marginalized and deprived from mainstream of the society. She discussed about the common principle of democracy and contradiction of democracy. She explained about the different types of languages like – what is replicative language, what is interpretive language and radical feminist. She said that modernity itself is colonialization of others culture. She discussed about multi-culturalism of language.
Dr C P Vinod’s paper on “Politics of reciprocity and the breaking the silence: An Ethnography inquiry into the communities (castes) in the making of local democracy in highland region of Kerala, India” is about the political inclusion of settler communities, comprised mostly of Christians and Hindu OBCs along with the local forward caste communities. The phase of ‘nation building’ project and subsequent political alienation of native erstwhile landholding Chetty communities from the locus of power has made them to search for an alternative ‘Hindu’ political space. Irrespective of the changing relations of power, the condition of marginality continued for most of the adivasis in the region. However, a political shift towards the state decentralization has been instrumental in creating a horizontal space of social interaction on the basis of reciprocity among various communities in their negotiations with the local power structures. The paper analyses the resultant contested political arena at the local which also provides space for the communities like Chettys an opportunity to transcend their silences at margins.

Dr Parmod Kumar presented a paper on “Caste, Literature and the Representation of Margins: A case study of Laxman Gaikwad’s the Branded”. He mentioned that literature offers the document, a powerful way of expression. He mentioned about the crisis of Indian literature. According to him, in Hindu society, everyone belongs to a particular caste and the caste system divided in terms of pure and impure, high and low. The British used the term “Uchalya” to denote caste. Especially Dr Kumar emphasized Laxman Gaikwad’s novel on Dalit, who is a Marathi translator. He also discussed about the social hegemony system.

G Niranjani, Research and Teaching Assistant (RTA), IGNOU, presented a paper and discussed about what is caste and she described the caste system in Hindu society according to the Manuscript. She stressed that economic development will make the caste system to disappear. She also gave a classification of development like economic, social and political.

The discussant of this session Prof Debal Singharoy critically discussed all the papers. He gave an overview of India’s current picture, like India have 20% richest, 25% parliamentary are criminal, 40 % people are illiterate, 90% migrant for economy, 19% are slum dweller, 92% work in un-organized sectors. He analyzed the whole developmental scenario of India considering the women movements, development of people and inclusive growth rate etc.
A discussion was made on the basis of a film *Nageswra Rao Star* by Dr P K. Rathees. The story of the film was about a young Dalit student who is not at peace with his identity. It has always made him different from others, and he carries with him childhood memories of caste violence and oppression. As he grows up, he realizes that he cannot run away from his identity and he decides to confront it. He goes back to his village and there he meets with various people and visits places which finally make him understand and define his identity. But the story and the character is more than that, it is about a person who has much more to him than simply his caste identity.

**Session IV: Student Panel**

In the student panel, Ms Sanghamitra Sarker, RTA, IGNOU, presented paper on *An overview of the changes in the geopolitical setup of Sikkim: Past and Present*. She explained that Sikkim is a land of massive natural uniqueness; Sikkim portrays its distinctiveness in the process of its nation building process too. Ruled for a long time by the monarchs and their monarchies, the state was isolated for a very long time from the main landmass of India. The population change of the area, as it was constantly immigrated by people from the neighboring regions had a great reflectance on the change of kingship in the past to its present political set up. Related to this phenomenon is the division of people in various castes and groups. Its history of modernity in every walks of life and politics is very recent. Hence the present paper is just an effort to highlight yet another piece of rarity of the land in terms of its past and present caste, geographic boundary shifting in the administrative arena as well as its reflectance on the societal structure.

Ms Beauty Gogoi, RTA, IGNOU, presented paper on *Caste system in Assam with special reference to Budhism*. She pointed out that caste system still prevails in Assamese. The Man Tai, which is a smallest tribe in Assam profess Buddhism is considered as lower caste or untouchable by the Assamese higher caste society. Earlier they cannot take the water from the same pond which the upper caste society was used and they are not taking food in the same place. Due to the literacy among the Man Tai people this notion of caste has been changed considerably but still it is exist.

Mridusmita Boruah, RTA, IGNOU, presented paper on *Bodo Society and Casteism: a retrospect of the influence of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma* according to her, just like Ambedkar who was a Crusader of Caste System in India, Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma played a pioneering role in introducing reforms in the Bodo Society of Assam and had been instrumental in initiating various measures. This is extended from preaching the Brahma Religion to encouraging the people to accept new social changes and adopting to a new way of life. He urged his fellow villagers to renounce the age-old Bathow religion and to adopt the Brahma religion, which will be able to chart the course of the Bodo society towards unity, progress and prosperity while keeping their identity intact. Thousands of people accepted the new religion and Kalicharan became “Gurudev” for them. The Brahma religion indeed went a long way to reform the Bodos which ushered into a united and strong Community and this further enabled them to get into mainstream.
Mr Firoz, MA Student, IGNOU presented paper on **Caste and Panchayat**. His paper raised the issue of reservation in the Panchayati raj institutions. He talked on Balwant Rai Mehta Committee, which was the first committee who proposed three tiers Panchayati Raj system in the country and Ashok Mehta Committee who first recommended the reservation for SCs, STs, OBC and Women reservation in the Panchayati Raj system. He talked on 73rd amendment act of 1992 and raised the issues like are we sowing the seeds of caste politics from the grass root level and related reservation issues like Gujjar agitation and youth agitation.

Mr Amardeep, MA student, IGNOU, presented a paper on **MG NREGA: Breaking the barrier of Caste System**. He discussed how the people under the MGNREGA project work together to develop the village infrastructure by forgetting their caste and creed.

In the valedictory session **Prof Gail Omvedt** was the Speaker who elaborately delivered the lecture on caste issues and **Prof. Vijay Kapur** also shared his experience and **Dr Sadananda Sahoo**, Joint Coordinator gave the vote of thanks to all the participants and delegates on behalf of SOITS, IGNOU.

The seminar was successful in dealing with multifaceted dimensions of caste from assertion of identities by low caste people to detailed analysis of multiple identities. It also portrayed how caste issues got reflected historically in Indian society. The different academic sessions of the Seminar delved into the summing up of the invaluable insights and recommendations gained from the significant contribution made by the participants, and focused on the necessity of bringing the problem of caste to the limelight. The success of the Seminar did highlight the wholehearted endeavor of SOITS in making this topic a focal point of comprehensive research.

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