10. RELIGION & CASTE

10.1. Introduction

Human beings often find themselves classified into categories like religion, race, ethnicity and caste by which they are identified. These socially construed classifications based on attributes like birth, occupation, and colour deeply embedded in the social structure through accentuating differences often pave way for discrimination. In some societies racial and ethnic diversities are the paramount elements of diversities and in some religion and caste acts as the origin of differences. Governments through legislations, dedicated agencies/departments and organizations through policies try to address ill effects of such categorizations. In this section my objective is to explore the role of religion and caste, one of the primary diversity dimensions in Indian society and assess its significance in Indian IT and ITES sector.

10.2. An Overview

India is the country of origin of world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Though majority of people practice Hinduism (around 80%) almost all religions, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Judaism co-exist in India. Religion plays a central role in Indian society and forms the core of identity for a vast number of Indians. Its influence can be discerned is visible in all arenas of social life ranging from culture, customs and traditions, philosophy, politics etc.

There are many instances in the history of India where religion was a key contributor to conflict, confrontation and discrimination. Another interesting aspect in Indian society is the existence of caste system. Caste in India is fairly definable as an endogamous group or even as a collection of endogamous group, bearing a common name, whose members follow traditionally a single

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19 Caste and race have similar implications in society. Attempts to equate race and caste based discrimination (Context–UN race summit in Durban) led to controversies with Indian government opposing the move.

20 Apart from India there are other regions like Japan, Korea, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Africa and Latin America where elements of caste based distinctions are found.
occupation or certain cognate occupations, have by fact or fiction a common origin and are generally deemed to form a homogeneous unit, whose constituent parts are more closely allied to one another than to any other section of the society (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 4, 1920). These endogamous groups in India, called jatis21, describe the social stratification in Indian subcontinent. While religion is easily understood and identifiable, caste system with its web of intricacies sometimes remain unfathomable for an onlooker. Caste system though is largely identified with Hinduism sections of other religions, Muslims and Christians also follow caste system. Though several viewpoints exist on the origin of caste system in India, the widely accepted one is the classification based on varnas, called ‘Chaturvarnyam’. This classification ‘Chaturvarnyam’ based on “Guna”22 and “karma”23 consist of four varnas:

- The Brahmins (teachers, scholars and priests)
- The Kshatriyas (kings and warriors)
- The Vaishyas (agriculturists and traders) and
- The Shudras (service providers and artisans.)

The priestly and ruling class was considered the foremost in the caste structure. They enjoyed all the privileges of social life. Shudras were considered as the lowest rung in the society among the chaturvarnyam. Apart from this, there exists a class which is dubbed as untouchables, who face severe social segregation and restrictions. Each of these varnas is further subdivided into sub castes called jati. Observance of caste system progressively grew rigid and discriminatory with the lower caste being denied social equality and being continuously oppressed in all rungs of social life. It became further compartmentalized during the British regime creating greater divide among the so called upper class and backward classes.

Upon gaining independence, Indian constitution upholding its democratic spirit declared itself to be a secular state. Realizing the volatile nature and significance of religion and caste in Indian

21 Varnas and Jati – Varna is the general classification based on occupation while jati refers to an endogamous group or community
22 Guna – Quality, positive attributes or virtue
23 Karma means "deed" or "act" and more broadly names the universal principle of cause and effect, action and reaction that governs all life
society, in an attempt to preserve inclusivity and contain possible adverse situations Indian constitution in Fundamental Rights and Directive principles have provisions to deal with discrimination on the grounds of religion, caste and race. Also the government engaged dedicated ministries, agencies and policies and proposals to mitigate the consequences of centuries of oppression. Among this, Indian government’s ‘Quota’ system based on the principle of positive reservation where a certain percentage of posts are earmarked in government and public sectors in the field of employment and education implied a direct impact in workplaces. Social equalization aiming to bring the oppressed section to the mainstream was the guiding factor behind this. Quota system though pragmatic in principle, in practice brought about a lot of confusion regarding grouping of castes into categories (Forward, Back ward, other backward, SC/ST) etc. Interference and manipulation by political parties patronizing castes for their vested interests further complicated the matter. Views that reservation based on caste further amplifies the differences were also prevalent. Many advocated reservation on the basis of economic situation to be a better parameter than caste. Also the question of reverse discrimination, by which people belonging to forward caste being denied opportunities in spite of merit loomed\textsuperscript{24}. As of today quota system prevails with modification, trying to identify the deserving among the castes that come under quota system in applicable in public sector jobs and educational institutions with the exception of private sector.

10.3. Impact of Caste & Religion in Indian IT and ITES Industry.

While looking in the effect of religion or caste as a diversity dimension, the organizations on their part maintains that this diversity dimension which has a great impact on the socio cultural fabric doesn’t have much prominence in Indian IT and ITES industry. Organizations maintain the viewpoint that all employment decisions are based on the qualifications and religion and caste doesn’t play any part in it. Religion and caste became a point of interest in the IT and ITES circle when the certain political parties started pressurizing the government to extend the caste based reservation to private sectors. This move was vociferously resisted by private sector

\textsuperscript{24}When Mandal Commission (1979) with the purpose of identifying socially backward class to address seat reservations supported the affirmative action nation-wide protests erupted with students belonging to the upper castes opposing the reservation based on caste.
including IT and ITES sector. Industry pioneers like made their views clear that compulsory imposed reservation will interfere with the quality of employees. They stressed that employees are the primary investment and resource the job being intellectual in nature in IT, reservation system might impinge on the quality of their human resources. Instead they put forward the proposition of voluntary allocation of resources targeted at supporting education and training of deserving castes.

When queried on the focal areas of diversity in organizations in the organizations response (survey and HR managers) was that caste and religion is not considered as a prominent diversity dimension in their organization. I was not able to find any substantial information in any public domain which could alter this conclusion that religion and caste as of now doesn’t play an important role as a source of diversity in Indian IT and ITES sector.

However, as IT and ITES functions in a global environment, Indian organizations with presence in foreign countries should be aware of socio-cultural diversity determinants in those countries. For example in United States race and ethnicity is considered as an important diversity dimension. Hence Indian IT and ITES sector should will well aware of the dynamics of this diversity dimension in tune with socio-cultural and legal framework of the country in which it operates. On the basis of the information collected it is clear that religion and caste though is a prominent diversity dimension in India, the industry apart from the communal celebrations of religious holidays (Deepavali/id/Christmas) and voluntary schemes targeted on the underprivileged in the society doesn’t address the intricacies associated with the dimension.

10.4. Observations

From the previous sections it is clear that religion and caste is one of the dimensions which are accorded the least focus in IT and ITES industry as far as organizational endeavours are concerned. Whether it is truly insignificant in the industry and in that case why the significance of religion/caste felt in the Indian environment doesn’t translate in the same dimension and degree to Indian IT and ITES sector is an avenue where further exploration is warranted. One
logical conclusion is that the industry’s firm stand to base employment decisions on the basis of qualifications and skills overrides the influence of religion and caste.