

## Chapter II

### Re-examining caste: Postcolonial Theory and Practice

Aizah Tabassum

Student, B A English (H) II Yr, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi

#### Abstract

The term "post-colonial" emerged as a theoretical framework in the latter half of the 20th century, coinciding with the wave of decolonization that swept across Africa and Asia. It is crucial to note that "post-colonial" does not signify a clean break from colonial legacies; instead, it highlights the enduring impact of colonization on various aspects of society. In this term, the prefix "post" helps in defining the suffix "colonial" instead of negating it. The foundations of post-colonial thought were laid during the late colonial period through nationalist movements that sought self-determination and opposed imperialism. India's post-colonial era saw a vibrant literary and artistic scene exploring cultural identity, colonial legacies, and the clash of traditional and modern values. B.R. Ambedkar, in his work "Who Were the Shudras?", challenged the caste system's marginalization of the shudras.

Ambedkar's concept of 'dalit', which translates to "oppressed," is a means of reclaiming agency and challenging the hierarchical structures of the caste system. By asserting the dignity and worth of the marginalized, Ambedkar shifts the focus away from their perceived inferiority and towards their potential for social and political transformation. 'dalit' concept challenges the caste system's hierarchy by asserting the dignity and potential of the marginalized. The post-colonial era, marked by the lasting impact of colonialism, has fueled intellectual and cultural movements. India's post-colonial thinkers, like Ambedkar, offer a path towards social justice and equality, inspiring future generations to continue the struggle against discrimination and marginalization.

**Keywords:** *Post-colonialism, colonial legacies, cultural identity, Dalit movement, social justice*

## Reexamining caste: Postcolonial Theory and Practice

### Introduction

The caste system has been ingrained in society for centuries and is still a major subject of study today because of its sunken impact on society and marginalized groups. It is very important to understand the origins and colonial impacts, the caste system has had on access to resources, opportunities for millions of people and how it continues to shape social hierarchies to this very day. Factors such as power dynamics and multiple historical occurrences play a vital role in shaping the caste system as it stands today. Through a critical analysis of Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, Edward Said's *Orientalism* and, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's *The Annihilation of Caste* will map the interplay between discrimination, marginalization, and the history of colonialism by examining the historical roots, colonial influences, and modern display of the caste system.

The term 'postcolonial' emerged as a theoretical framework in the latter half of the 20th century, coinciding with the wave of decolonization that swept across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The term 'postcolonial' does not mean a clean break from colonial history, instead, it highlights the significant impact of colonization on the multiple levels on which our society stands. In this term "post" helps in defining the suffix "colonial" instead of rescinding it. The seeds of post-colonial thought were sown in the intellectual and political discourses of the late colonial period. The mid - 20th century witnessed a significant shift as the diplomatic boundaries of the former colonies gained independence after a series of political and social turmoil. There was a rise in nationalist movements by influential figures which emphasized on the ideals of self-determination and anti-imperialism. These movements laid a foundation for the dismantling of colonial structures. After World War II, with the decline of European powers and the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers, a contributive environment for decolonization was created. India's independence in 1947 sped up the momentum of partition of colonial empires.

Post-colonialism as a theoretical framework crystallized in response to the challenges faced by newly independent nations. Scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, well known for their knowledge in topics such as cultural, literary, and linguistic scope of the post-colonial sphere helped in sculpting the post-colonial theory. Said's *Orientalism*, a seminal work in cultural criticism, critically examines how the West constructed and represented the "Orient" – a broad geographical and cultural region encompassing the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa – throughout history. This work challenged Western perspectives and exposed the power dynamics underlying these representations. Similarly, Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* has had a profound impact on postcolonial studies and cultural theory. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the third space have become influential frameworks for understanding the complexities of cultural identity, cultural difference, and the postcolonial world. These concepts challenge static notions of culture and emphasize the dynamic nature of cultural identities in the face of postcolonial encounters.

Caste system remains a significant topic for research due to its systematic impact on Indian society and its relevance to issues of social justice and equality. By studying the caste system, scholars can contribute to a deeper understanding of its historical roots and colonial influences, by identifying the causes of caste-based discrimination researchers can help develop targeted policies that promote inclusion, social justice, and work on the development of crucial strategies.

#### Impact of colonialism on dalit and Shudras in India

The colonial policies in the Indian subcontinent aggravated the discrimination faced by the dalits and shudras, the lowest castes. These groups displayed remarkable resilience and resistance despite facing severe legal, social, economic, and political marginalization. They developed social movements, preserved cultural traditions, and challenged dominant power structures. B.R. Ambedkar, a prominent figure in Indian social reform, challenged the hierarchical structure of the caste system, particularly the marginalized position of the shudra class. His activism is evident in his writings, where he openly defies the caste system. *Who Were the Shudras?* offers a radical reinterpretation of their origins. Challenging the traditional view of Shudras as an inherently inferior caste, he argues that they were

originally part of the *kshatriya* (warrior) class. According to Ambedkar, a conflict with the brahmins led to their "degradation" and eventual banishment to the lowest position in the caste hierarchy. He supports this claim by critically examining ancient Hindu scriptures, arguing that the portrayal of Shudras as an inferior class is a later invention and a result of Brahminical dominance. This perspective rejects the latter-day justifications for caste, such as the division of labor, notions of racial purity, and claims of historical legitimacy. Instead, he asserted understanding the historical and colonial influences on the caste system is critical for promoting social justice and equality. Understanding the intersection of caste with other forms of social inequality is significant for effectively addressing these issues.

#### **Intersection of caste with other forms of social inequality**

The caste system in India is not a secluded phenomenon but intersects with other forms of social inequality, such as gender and class. This intersectionality creates rare experiences of marginalization and discrimination for individuals belonging to various disadvantaged groups such as gender and class. Postcolonial literature shows from the vessel of imperial history, offering a space for writers to involve the power structures that have shaped their societies. Postcolonial texts often characterize the individual experience of cultural displacement as characters work the intersection of traditional values and the influence of Western ideologies. Authors deal with the impact of colonialism on individual and communal identities, exploring the ways in which cultural displacement creeps in linguistic evolution, cross cultural identities, and the reinterpretation of cultural symbols. Homi Bhabha uses the term "mimicry" to describe the discourse of post-Enlightenment English colonialism. What Homi Bhabha is suggesting is not that condition of colonialism which refers merely to a state of material and physical oppression; they refer primarily to the element of cultural and ideological bondage implied by inaction, gender-based discrimination, and economic disparities are interconnected factors that contribute to the marginalization of women from lower-caste groups. Addressing these issues requires a varied approach that challenges both caste and gender hierarchies and promotes colonialism. "Post-colonial" is the appropriate term that would suggest this ideological bondage emanating from the imperial process.

### **The Intersecting Impacts of Caste, Gender, and Class**

The statement “caste-based discrimination acts as a stimulus towards the marginalization of women belonging to the lower caste and how economic disparities can further perpetuate caste hierarchies” highlights the complex meshing of caste, gender, and class in Indian society. Caste based discrimination refers to the prejudice and discrimination experienced by individuals based on their caste, a social system that has been deep rooted in Indian culture for centuries. Lower-caste groups, historically considered "untouchable" or "impure," have been victims of severe discrimination and marginalization in various aspects of life, including education, employment, and social interactions. The marginalization of women from lower-caste groups is inflated by the effects of gender-based discrimination. Women from lower-caste backgrounds often have to face twofold discrimination, both due to their caste and their gender. This leads to limited access to education, employment opportunities, and decision-making power, further restricting their freedom and well-being. Economic disparities can additionally aggravate caste hierarchies. Lower-caste groups are more likely to be concentrated in low-income and marginalized communities, with little to no access to resources and opportunities. The economic disadvantage shows caste-based discrimination, as it reinforces the power dynamics and social hierarchies that aid higher-caste groups. In principle, the statement focuses on caste-based discrimination empowerment for marginalized communities.

### **Lasting Legacy of Colonialism**

The British colonization of India split the social, political, and economic nature of the country. They ruled like a monarch on the land for two centuries during the British Raj, leaving a profound impact on society. Like every other form of injustice, caste-based discrimination is a social issue that has plagued India since centuries. It was further strengthened during the colonial policies of practice like the Permanent Settlement Act that built a further rigid structure to the caste system, favoring a small elite class gaining access to resources like land. In Modern India, the plight of these marginalized communities suffering due to discrimination based on caste has remained largely unaltered and continues in different forms, be it concerning employment, education opportunities or even social

exchange. Discrimination towards lower caste individuals makes them vulnerable to violence, ostracization, and limits their access to available resources. Alongside gender and class, oppressive caste systems further isolate women in lower castes from society.

With the passage of time and forgetful conquering via colonization, efforts have been made to promote and support discrimination against the caste-based negative prejudices. The Indian Constitution, drafted and put into action after the British Raj, was adopted after independence, abolished untouchability and provided for affirmative action measures to uplift marginalized communities. Additionally, numerous social movements and organizations have worked tirelessly to raise awareness about caste-based discrimination and to demand equality and justice. The caste system, which was reinforced and institutionalized during the British Raj, continues to shape the lives of millions of Indians today. While significant progress has been made in addressing caste-based discrimination, the struggle for social justice remains prevalent. By understanding the historical roots of the caste system and the enduring impact of colonialism, we can work towards building a more equitable and inclusive society for all.

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