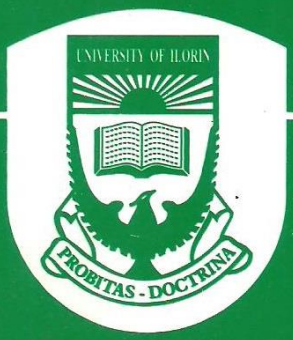
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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CASTE SYSTEM BETWEEN THE IGBO PEOPLE OF NIGERIA AND DALIT OF INDIA

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Abstract
Social inequality among people is a global phenomenon. However, the nature and dimension take different patterns. Apparently, the variations and divergent practices produce the same social disparity all over the world. It must be mentioned that social inequalities are naturally induced while others are artificially created or designed and insulated by traditions. A phenomenological appraisal of this cultural episteme represses ontological paradigms of fundamental global order. For instance, in plural societies like Nigeria and India, inter-marriages between different groups are encouraged to foster cordiality and unity. It is however true that caste system among the groups under consideration has defied this universal order. This paper focuses attention on caste system among the Osu of the Igbo stock in Nigeria and Dalit of India. The study explores tradition of their origin, nature and gravity of social deprivation they have been subjected to despite the enactment of laws and the declaration of the United Nations (UN), which appears to favor and guarantee equal protection of all citizens regardless of race, religion, sex or origin. It is paradoxically and universally an innuendo that these groups in question share similar experience of deprivation, torture and denial of social privileges. They are more or less second class people in their native homeland of origins. The study utilizes this conceptual framework to critically provide insight into the historical experience of the two groups through comparative study. It unravels how tradition and culture combine to produce a unique form of social bondage (caste), which in many circumstances has degenerated into violence, physical assault and humiliation. The methodology for this work relies on copious review of extant literature coupled with oral interviews conducted in Igboland and with some Indians in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Caste system; Discrimination; Institutionalisation; Violence*

Introduction

Caste system is not only a regional or continental phenomenon. A socio-cultural and behavioral study of people across the regions and boundaries has revealed clearly that caste system is a global phenomenon (Grolier, 1999:768-776; United Nations, 1948). What must be stressed however is the nature and dimension, which takes different and related patterns. Apparently, the variations and divergent connotations of paradigms are

correspondingly congeal into the same social order of horrendous ignominy and as such paving the way for social dichotomy, division and class stratification (Sarchet-Waller, 1996:). The social inequalities engendered are naturally induced while some are artificially created or designed and insulated by tradition. Thus, a phenomenological appraisal of these cultural episteme represses ontological paradigms of fundamental global acceptable norms and orders.

For instance, in plural societies like Algeria and India, inter-group relations inform of inter-tribal or inter-ethnic marriages between different groups are encouraged to foster cordiality and unity for the purpose of building a virile community and nation in spite of their diversities. However, the case of the group in this study appears to have defied this universal truth.

The thrust of this study, therefore, is to examine the prevalent practice of Osu caste system among the Igbo stock of Nigeria and the Dalit of India. It explores the traditions of their origin, nature and similar productions of social, political and economic deprivation, which have been their unalterable experience. Also captured is the baseless and ineffective enactment of laws and declaration of the United Nation (UN), which in practical term appears to favor as well guarantees equal protection of all citizens regardless of race, religion, sex or origin. It is paradoxically and universally an innuendo that these groups share similar experience of torture as well deny social privileges and conscripted as second class citizens in their home land of origins. The study utilizes this conceptual frame work to critically provide insight into the culture of two different groups through comparative study. Conclusively, it unravels how tradition and culture combine to produce a unique form of social bondage (caste), which in many circumstances has degenerated into violence, physical assault and humiliation contrary to the global order of fundamental human right thereby reconnecting Africa with Asia.

Institutionalization of Caste System among the Igbo People of Nigeria and Dalit of India

Igbo people are one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. They occupy predominantly the Southeastern and South central Nigeria (Isichei, 1976: 1). Like many other ethnic groups in Nigeria, the origin of the Igbo people is shrouded in obscurity and mostly eclipsed by traditions. One tradition suggests that the first human inhabitants of Igbo land came from the areas further north possibly from Niger confluence (Isichei, ibid). However, the above suggestion has been faulted with the argument by the archaeological evidence and interpretation around the area that men have been living in Igbo land for five thousand years since the dawn of human history

Another tradition of the *Umeri* clan, which includes the ancient state of *Nri*, states that "both they (Igbo) and the *Igala* descended from still more ancient community in that Anabra Valley." The tradition emphasizes further *Eri*, but *Igala* went one way, *Aguku* another, *Amanuke* another, *Nteje* another and *Igbariam* another: The separation was said to have happened so long ago that now both languages i.e. *Igbo* and *Igala* are not intelligible (Jeffries, 1960:121). In view of the above opinions, (Obiechima, 1971: 12-13) remarks, unless one is prepared to invest tribal myths of so called common historical origins with the seriousness of proven scientific facts, one must regard the common sense

identity of the Igbo, expressed in common name, in a linguistic traits (in spite again of local variations) on a much more solidity based interior for establishing the intractability of Igbo life and civilization than the dubious and highly suspected aristocratic fiction of the racial emergence from one commodious and central bosom. The incongruity of the origins as noted above should not necessarily delay us here. Based on archaeological evidence, as early as the ninth century (about 850 A.D), a certain measure of civilization was already flourishing in some parts of Igbo land. This belief is borne out of the archaeological discovery around Igbo-Ukwu by (shaw, 1980:26-53). It must be emphasized that in the absence of written records in Africa before the appearance of the Arabs and later Europeans, oral sources were the pivot on which the histories of Africans revolved (Obayemi, 1969).

Historically, Osu caste system in Igbo land dated back to the time immemorial and the thrust and practice were based on tradition. One version of the tradition relates that some centuries ago, some powerful deities created the need for much assistance for the high priest of major shrines Miniature (Monasteries). This was established within the vicinity of major shrines to train and maintain constant supply of assistants. And based on the assumptions that the deities were powerful, they must be attended to on a continuous basis, with intricate religious rituals in their shrines. Consequently, the indigenous monks upon mastering their spiritual functions (of learning to serve the gods) were unjustly assigned the Igbo pejorative name of Osu (Emeka, 2014). Another version contends that people become Osu after community, town or village lost war with their neigbours. (Isichei, 1977) argued that to placate the conquerors, the loser-town would give some of their kith and kin as appeasement to the gods and live in the deity's shrine, and as such became Osu. Yet, (Dike, 1999:126-129) traces the genesis of Osu caste system to the practice of offering human sacrifice to deities or gods. This source argues that the people offered as sacrifice might not necessarily be murdered to appease the gods for either a wrong they wish to be corrected, or to put a stop to streaks of tragic or bad occurrences. It was added that some of them lived and died in the god's shrine. The above represents some of the stories of the institution of Osu caste system in Igbo land. Obviously, Osu and their descendants belong to the gods, and properties of the shrines of major deities and for all practical purposes excluded themselves from routine engagements with the rest community. Being agents of the deities the Osu maintained aloof relationship with the rest of the civil society. Out of reverence or fear, the communities also maintained a set of rule that regulated their interaction with the Osu from the time past. This is perhaps, for the perceived powerful deities under, which they thrived and performed their religious function (Dike, ibid).

It is significant to emphasize that before the arrival of the white men (Europeans) and Christianity, the discriminating relationships that existed between the Osu and Diala (those perceived as free born) was quite a normal thing (Dike, 1999). The Osu fulfilled their lives in the communities by serving the deities. In return, they obtained a reasonable livelihood from the proceeds of offerings that poured steadily into the premises of the deities that they served. However, the appearance of the 'white men' (Europeans) led to a process of social change because many of the customs were described as barbaric (Agbaegbu, 2000:36). In the past, some Igbo states engaged in

communal wars with the purpose of procuring captives and slaves. During the Stone Age era, for example, human sacrifices were common and slaves were often used for this purpose. According to (Isiechei, 1977: 268), the dead rulers of Ugbo Ukwu were buried together with several slaves as sacrifice. In retrospect however, the Tran-Atlantic slave trade contributed to the frequency of inter-clan wars, which were experienced in eastern Nigeria in the nineteenth century. This in view of (Dike, 2002:73-76) often resulted in neighboring communities raiding and plundering each other for slaves and other booties. Small defenseless communities were often compelled to seek refuge in the premises of nearby shrines in order to avert impending doom and danger when under sudden attack from superior invading forces. Once the deity's priests acknowledge and grant protection from attack and harm to the refugees, they were automatically converted to the Osu status (Dike, ibid). In some circumstances, prisoners captured during the Inter-Communal wars could be sold off and their new owners could choose to enlist some of them to Osu status by giving them away as a gesture of and placation to a local deity (Dike, ibid). Other captives could be sold as slave or become object of ritual murder, which occurred mostly upon the death of powerful chieftains. However, (Isichei, 1977:270) further remarked that some war captives preferred Osu status rather than being sold far away to distant lands as slave thereby increasing the population of Osu in Igbo land.

Osu people were originally regarded with respect and honor apparently because they belong to the gods (Isichei, 1977). This unfortunately later snowballed into social ostracism. Their number became increased and their status deteriorated dramatically, in that they became outcast, despised, ridiculed and abhorred from the nineteenth century (Nwosu, 1999).

Dalits according to (Sivapragasam, 2001), are one of the despised and discriminated ethnic groups in India. Like in the case of the Osu in Nigeria, (Parsons, 1937) opined that the Dalits in India Caste model constitutes the lowest in the structural stratification. Caste System in India has remained operational for well over two thousand five hundred years (2500) ago (Reddy, 2013: 593-601). The India caste system is made up of closed social group or caste called 'Varnas', which are ranked in a fixed order of superior and inferior (David, 1996). The highest and most superior caste is known as the 'Brahmin', which constitutes the priest and the scholars. This category epitomizes purity, holiness and sanctity. They are advocate of learning, law, wisdom and truth. Most crucial religious issues and functions were restricted to the Brahmins. The next in the hierarchy is the 'Kshatriyas'. They are further divided into two namely; the 'Vshya' and 'Shidra'. The two categories represent the superior castes, which held the monopoly of the traditional land holding system (Embree, 1988; Kolenda, 1978; Srinivas, 1996). 'Vashyas' are the merchants and skilled artisans. The 'Shidra' are the common labourers. The last in the structure is called (Bishwakarma, 2001) the 'Harijans'. The group is further known as the outcast and the Shidras are called the untouchables, unclean and impure. The last category typifies the Dalit tribe, which is segregation against and made to perform the role of slaves in their homeland. Their roles are to perform unclean and degrading menial jobs e.g. sweeping, scavenging, and disposing of dead animals. They are denied social interactions with the generality of other Indian groups. They live in quarters isolated from association with other groups most especially in the remotest part

of the communities, squalor, which are mostly considered as inferior, scorned and snubbed (Smelser andLipset, 2014: 8-12). This structural arrangement perhaps informed (Jaffrelot, 2014: 145,) to define caste as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank or social esteem. This definition describes caste system as a system of social stratification, aggregating people in ranks that are unusually rigid and birth-ascribed, and permit no individual mobility.

Nature and General Implication of Caste System among the Igbo People of Nigeria and Dalit of India

The Osu Caste System in Igbo land promotes the ideology of supremacy of the Diala or those generally referred to as Osu. They (Osu) are derogatorily designated as people "sacrificed" or "dedicated" to the gods or goddesses in the Igbo community to appease the gods. (Achebe, 1959:47-63) clearly captured the nature of Osu in Igbo land when he calls them the outcasts. He went furthers that they are persons dedicated to gods; a thing sets apart, a taboo forever and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the freeborn i.e. the Dialas." They lived apart as outcasts in a special area of the village, close to the shrines. Igbo people referred to the Osu with various derogatory appellations. (Ilo, 1992:2) referred to Osu as *Adu-Ebo*, *Oruma*, *Nwani*, or *Ohualusi*. Other appellations are *Ume*, *Ohu*, *Omoni (Okpu-Aja)*, all these connote the same thing i.e. the unclean class or slaves in Igbo land. No matter their wealth or social status, the traditional societies and later churches could hardly appoint them to positions of responsibilities simply because of their ascribed Osu status. The Diala or the free born are traditionally abhorred or forbidden from engaging them in marriage. The community tends to ostracize any person who goes contrary to this practice. This perhaps justifies the reason Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe "No Longer at Ease" told his son, Obi that 'Osu' is like Leprosy in the minds of his people! The avid supporters of the system would refrain from eating with the Osu or drinking from the same water-pot with them. It stressed further that buying from the same market was regarded as a taboo (Achebe, 1960). It appears today things are no longer taken the same posture as it was in the original Igbo traditional system. There are no rules forbidding the Osu from buying in the same market today. However the above change does not imply that there is no segregation between the groups. Segregations are still conspicuously manifesting in the political sphere in the community. Castes system still influences peoples' voting behavior in Igbo land. Conservatives might vote against any politician who condemns or suggests jettisoning the system (Dike, 2002). Some communities may out-rightly refuse to support any politician from the group discriminated against (Osu) to represent them no matter his/her political endowments, and credentials and social standing in the community. The above despite contravenes Section 31 (1) of the 1999 Constitution, which provides that:

> Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either above or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief or worship, teaching, practice and observance.

Diametrically, the nature of Dalit caste system in India has long assumed a global problem. The original caste system in India, Verna, came about when the Aryan-speaking nomadic group migrated from the north to India in about 1500BC (Murthy, 1999). The caste system, which has been part of the Hindu religion, is believed to be nearly 3000 years old. The caste was an indicator of social and economic disparity in India. The Harijans (The unclean, the lowest of the low caste, outcast, or untouchable) were known to have performed menial jobs in the society. They were formally denied access to skilled jobs and landed property by virtue of their caste. Religious sanctions are used to impose an assignment of social hierarchy, which is impossible to escape, except by changing religion (Sarchet-Waller, 1996). Rigid social norms of purity and pollution are socially enforced through strict prohibitions on marriage or other social interaction between upper and lower castes. In India, the condemnation was quite severe, ranging from social ostracism to punitive violence. In North India state of Vttar Pradesh, an upper caste boy and lower caste girl, (Dalit) were dragged to the roof of a house and publicly hanged by member of their own family as hundreds of spectator looked on (Stephanie, 2001). The public lynching suffered by the boy who was punished for refusing to end an inter-caste relationship. In terms of labour, Dalit in India's capital made up the majority of over five thousand five hundred cleaners working for Dhaka City Corporation. They live in small, squalid quarters provided by the city corporation with no basic infrastructural facilities and are paid poor remuneration daily. Dalits also breed pigs for Dhaka's minority Hindu Christians population and work as vendors and rickshaw pullers (Sivapragasam, 2001). Most Dalits in India also continue to live in extreme poverty, without land or opportunity for better employment or education. With the exception of a minority who have benefited from India's policy of quotas in education and government jobs, Dalit children make up the majority of children sold into bondage to pay off debts to upper-caste creditors. According to government statistics, an estimated one million Dalits in India are 'manual scavengers' (majority of them are women) who clear faeces from public and private latrines and dispose of dead animals (Bishwakarma, 2001). Unofficial estimates are much higher. Handling of human wastes is a caste-based occupation, deemed too "polluting" and filthy" for anyone but Dalits.

Significantly, economic and educational disparities persist between lower and higher-caste communities in India. (National Commission, 1999) reiterates that Lower caste communities like the Dalits are often plagued by low literacy and lack access to health care and education. A lack of formal education or training, as well as discrimination that effectively bars them from many forms of employment, and none enforcement of protective legislation, perpetuates caste-based employment and keeps its hereditary nature alive. According to (Vishwakarma, 1997), there were only two Dalit medical doctors and fifteen Dalit engineers in Nepal, one of the popular districts in India as at 1977. The life expectancy rate of Nepal's Dalit is five years of the national average of 55/80 children face a higher incident of malnutrition and the general population lacks access to clean drinking water or proper health service (Bishwakarma, 2001:28). Most Dalits in India, according to (Human Rights Watch), are landless agricultural labourers who form the backbone of the nation's agrarian economy. Despite decades of land reform legislation over 86 per cent of Dalit households today are landless. Those who own land

often own very little land is the prime asset in rural areas that determines an individual standard of living and social status. As with many other lower caste populations, lack of access to land makes Dalits economically vulnerable; their dependency is exploited by upper and middle-caste landlords and allows for many abuses to go unpunished.

Contrast between Igbo Caste System of Nigeria and Dalit of India

A panoramic assessment of caste system among the Igbo stock of Nigeria and Dalit of India shows appreciable similarities and differences. In both cases, the societies are segregated on the basis of their birth. In the caste of the Igbo, the free born i.e. the Diala are seen as the legitimate owner of the land while the group designated as Osu are seen as outcasts and untouchable.[42] In the India societies the Brahmins (priest and teachers); the Ksyatriyas (rulers and soldiers), the Varisyas (merchants and traders), and the Shudras (labourers and artisans) are seen as legitimate people. On the other hand, the Dalits or those they generally referred to as untouchable are seen as fake citizens and as such subjected to ridicules, torture and other forms of humiliation like the Osu in Igbo land.[43] In both two groups i.e. the Osu as well as the Dalit suffered the problems of discrimination in both societies. This feature is highly manifested in intermarriage, social organization and political structures. It is more or less a matter of impossibility for the Dialas to accept or make marriage proposal with the Osu in Igbo land. Ditto for the India societies, it is more or less a taboo for the Brahmins, the Ksystriyas, the Vaisyas and the schudras to accept or make marriage proposals with the Dalit, who are designated as the untouchable in the societies (Okeke, 1986). In plural societies like Nigeria and India, intermarriage between the various groups and peoples are encouraged in order to foster unity and peace among the multi-ethnic groups both cases of the Osus in Nigeria and the Dalits of India seem to have defied this universal truth.

The Osu before the era of modernism are not allowed to live together with the general populace of the societies. They live separately especially in the secluded shrines. This justified the reason they are referred to as 'gods'. In the case of the Dalit of India, they are also confined to separate communities. The other groups of the societies see this as a weapon in sustaining the low status of Dalit in India's social and economic strata. They are physically abused and threatened with economic and social ostracism from the community for refusing to carry out caste-based tasks like menial jobs (Sivapragasam, 2001). Any attempts to alter village customs, defy the social order, or to demand land, increased wages, or political rights leads to violence on the part of those most threatened by changes in the status quo. Dalit communities as a whole are summarily punished for the transgressions which in all intends and purposes are not their own making.

Moreover, both groups treat their caste politically as second class citizens (Sarchet-Waller). The Osu for example, would never be voted for by the Diala into power should any of them desire any political office. Aside being voted for, the Osu hardly even allow political association with the Diala in Igbo land (Agbaegbu, 2000). The same also goes for the Dalit in India. In Nepal for example, study reveals that in the political bodies, even though the Dalit comprises about eight percent of the population, they are hardly represented in government (Bishwakama). Since 1958, only fourteen Dalits in Nepal have become members of parliament (upper house) through a system of nomination, all

of them men. Only one Dalit has been elected to the House of Representative. Studies have revealed that there has been a dearth of Dalits in Nepal's administrative and judicial system as well as in army. According to an (NGO Report, 2001), the discrimination against Dalits in Nepal is frightening. The Brahmins constitute only sixteen percent of the population; and they represent fifty-seven per cent of parliaments and a staggering eighty-nine percent of the judiciary.

Economically, the Osu people have been much discriminated against in Igbo traditional societies. One of the crucial means by which this is done is by trade boycott. The major occupation of the Igbo group in Nigeria is trade and commerce. The Dialas boycott the shops of those designated as Osu by refusing to buy their goods and patronize their services. This system leads to economic suffocation of the Osu. The only alternative means of survival many a time for the Osu is by embarking on forced migrating out to other parts of the country where their identity may not be known (Ilo, 1992). Comparatively, even though the Dalits of India are not traders, economic weapon has remained one of the strong weapons of discriminating and humiliating the segregated and relegated groups. Obviously, significant economic disparities persist between the lower and higher-caste communities in India (Ali, 2014: 87-91). Lower-caste communities are often plagued by low literacy level and lack of access to health care. This major lack of quality former education or training hinders them from many form of employment. There was also none of major law enforcement protective legislative measures to reverse this trend. This has however kept the gap between the Brahmins and the Dalit in India wide. As at 1997, (Bisbwakarma, 1972) noted that there were reportedly only two Dalit medical doctors and about fifteen Dalit engineers in Nepal, one of the popular districts in India.

Evaluating the effects of caste practices among the two groups under study here, we can easily infer that caste system often leads to violent among both groups. As (Soyinka, 1972) rightly noted, the man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny. The status quo remains up till 1950s when the wind of modernism began to blow globally. The down-trodden elements in this study began to make their voice heard and calling upon the respective governments to intervene (Keay, 2014: 160). Attempt to stand on their rights triggered off different type of violence. It was rather the pandemonium that caught the attention of the colonial government into the problem. Much earlier in India, efforts were made to correct the perceived wrong but the privileged groups who were mostly favored by the practice stood vehemently against the efforts. From September 1932, for example, Mahatma Gandhi fought against the evil of caste system until he was assassinated in 1948. He led the struggle when he saw the weakness efforts of the colonial government in India in bringing peace and Justice to the people of India. He began the struggle to bring about a silent revolution in the structure of Indian society. Buttressing the above, (Murthy, 1999) remarks on the lamentation and outcry of Gandhi on how the untouchability was crushing the very soul of Indian religion and society. He promised the poorest and most downtrodden of the India's poor and the untouchables that democracy would free them from their misery. He continued the fight until he led Indians to attain self Independence in 1947. His aim was to fight to eradicate caste practice he found so abhorrent until his death. The strongest and the most formidable frontal attack on the caste system in India after Gandhi's death was the constitution of India adopted on

November 26, 1949 (Murthy, ibid). The constitution guarantees the right of all its citizenry to justice, liberty, equality and dignity.

Similarly, the Osu group of Nigeria suffered serious discrimination during the pre- colonial period of Nigeria. The origin of Osu is woven around tradition as well sustained by tradition. Thus, no effort was made traditionally to help salvage the problem during the period. However, the Osu despite their continued social marginalization have been able to prove themselves. Ajayi, (1995: 36-40) opined that, the Osu people were the first people to accept Christianity as well as their western education. They perhaps, saw the coming of the missionaries as a blessing while the Dialas perceived them as pollutants of tradition and failed to embrace their religion. The consequence of this is that there was an alteration in the pre-colonial distribution of wealth as those referred to as Osu began to emerge as elite, prominent and wealth class in Igbo land. This does not however eradicate the system especially in the rural areas and villages (Ajayi, ibid).

The problem of caste practice assumed new dimension from 1950s. This is because caste system and other related practice assumed international status and concern. The crusade guaranteeing human rights and fundamental freedom of people have been on for centuries. Thomas Jefferson's assertion in the declaration of independence (United States) is a good example. He remarked according to (Tomonaga, 2000) that:

> We hold these truth to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The above went along way to pave the way for the formation of different International Human Rights e.g. the International Covenant on Civil and Political Right (1966); The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965) (Encyclopedia Americana, 1999). However, the Universal Declaration of Human Right by the UN stands as the cornerstone. Clearly, the international and religion right documents show that human rights and freedom are to be enjoyed by all without discrimination. Nobody should be denied the rights based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions and national or social origin, property or birth (United Nation Declaration, 1990: 22-28).

Despite the efforts of the United Nations in conjunction with the constitution of both countries India and Nigeria, the problem of caste system still remain a subtle venom in the spine of the Osu group of Igbo stock of Nigeria and Dalit of India.

Conclusion

Indeed, as it has been examined, there is more to the relationships between the caste system among the Igbo people of Nigeria and the Dalit of India. The practice among the two groups has been a social stigmatization. The groups in question have been relegated and segregated by tradition. They are seen as almost second class citizens in their homelands. Even though various measures have been taken to eradicate the phenomenon, the situation seems to have defiled social orders. In spite the tireless efforts of the United Nations to bring equality and equalitarian societies, the situation of caste system among

the groups in this study have proved to be antithetical to the order. In a plural societies, intermarriage between and among groups are encouraged to foster unity but the caste system among the groups here defile this universal truth and order. However, according to Tamil Nadu, caste system is as hypocritical practice. In his view he noted that in both groups nobody practice caste system when it comes to sex as yet secret interrelationships exist in their clandestine life while in real life another theory exists. Be that as it may, efforts must be made to correct this global social disorder among the groups under consideration. It would be against nature for the offsprings of these groups to continue to suffer the problems, which are not of their making to the magnitude as examined here while the world look on without effort to eradicate it.

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