CASTE: WHY DOES IT STILL MATTER?

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Introduction

Caste has come to be seen as a peculiar social institution of the traditional Indian/Hindu society. In this popular view, caste worked as a ‘closed system’ of social hierarchy where groups, often divided on the basis of their occupation, strictly followed codes of social interaction prescribed by tradition. According to this view, caste drew its ideological moorings from classical Hinduism. Caste groups were unequal, and were all ranked hierarchically based on their position in the Hindu religious ritual system, structured around notions of purity and pollution. The ritual ‘status’ of a group determined who they could interact with and who they could not. Thus, the ideas of untouchability, avoidance and discrimination in everyday social life were integral to caste. The typical social universe of its operation and reproduction was the Indian village.

Interestingly, despite its popular imagination as a uniquely Indian or South Asian reality, the term caste is not of native origin. Furthermore, there is no single local term to which it translates fully. It has its origin in the Portuguese word *casta*, meaning race, and was popularized to describe the social realities of India by the Portuguese seafarers, who arrived on the west coast of India for trade in the fifteenth century. There are a variety of terms that have been used locally to describe the ritual and social hierarchies of caste. The common Indian terms that have come to be popularly used to describe caste at a pan-Indian level are *jatis* and *varna*. However, they refer to different aspects of the system. While *varna* is invoked to describe the broad framework of hierarchy, a textual model, *jatis* corresponds to empirical groupings, the kinship communities. They are endogamous groups. *Jatis* are further divided into subgroups, with localized names and systems of classifications. *Jatis* and their sub-units are large in numbers and most of them have a regional concentration. Every region of India is believed to have more than 300 *jatis*. The nature and practice of caste divisions also varies across regions (Jodhka 2012).

The idea of *varna* is best articulated in *Manusmriti*, a classical Hindu text, presumably written by Manu. The text divides the Hindus into four mutually exclusive categories, the Brahman (priest), the Kshatriya (warrior), the Vaishya (trader) and the Shudra (peasant/artisan/labourer). Beyond the four *varnas* is the *achhut* (the untouchable). These four or five categories occupied different positions in the status hierarchy, with the Brahmins at the top,
followed by the other three *varnas* in the same order as mentioned above, with the *achhuts* occupying a position at the very bottom.

Over the years, scholars have tried to identify the precise features of the caste system. For example, a well-known Indian sociologist G.S. Ghurye, identified six core features of the system: segmental division of society; hierarchy; restrictions on feeding and social intercourse; civil and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections; lack of unrestricted choice of occupation; and restrictions on marriage (Ghurye 1932). Similarly Declan Quigley points to the popular view of caste that identifies three core features of the system. First, ‘the Hindu world is made up of a number of castes. Second, castes are closed social groups; and third, castes are hierarchically ranked on a purity–pollution scale according to their traditional occupations’ (Quigley 1993: 1). However, Quigley also points out, and rightly so, that the empirical research on caste has repeatedly demonstrated that such generalized descriptive accounts are ‘at best inadequate, at worst wholly misleading’ (Quigley 1993: 2). In this chapter, I will try to show how even though the classical model remains influential and is invoked by a variety of actors for legitimacy or oppositional politics; the practice of caste on the ground has always been diverse and very different from this popular ‘book-view’ of caste. The chapter begins with an overview of the conceptual history of caste, followed by a brief discussion of the dynamics of its reproduction in contemporary times. I also discuss the nature and patterns of change being experienced in the institution in India today.

**Conceptualizing caste**

The origin of present day social science conceptualizations of caste could be traced to early writings on India by the Western travellers and colonizers. Though the source of their interest varied, they all tended to look at social and cultural life of the region as being very different from that of Europe. Over the years, India and rest of the ‘eastern’ world came to be viewed in the dominant Western discourses as the ‘other’ to the West European societies. Scholars like Edward Said (Said 1985) and Ronald Inden (1990) have described this orientalism, a discourse that tries to present oriental culture as being inferior to the West. Caste appeared as a good example of an institution of the ‘peculiar orient’.

Given that these writings also became a source of knowing about India among the early social science scholarship in Western Europe, they tended to produce similar kinds of imaginations and arguments about the social and cultural life in the region. Examples of this could be found in writings of scholars like Marx and Weber. Marx, for example, wrote on the positive effects of colonial rule in India because it could break the traditional village community structured around caste (Marx 1853). The orientalist imagination had also presented caste as a rigid and static institution of Hindu religion, which had been around without any significant internal change in Indian society for centuries. Even though his theoretical orientation was very different from that of Marx and the orientalists, Max Weber too produced a static view of Hinduism, describing it as an otherworldly religious system based on the ideas of *karma* and re-birth. Caste, for Weber, was also a good example of what he described as ‘status groups’. They were like ethnic communities, completely closed to outsiders. Recruitment to a caste group, like an ethnic group, was based exclusively on birth. However, unlike other ethnic communities, castes were also hierarchical and the order of hierarchy was acceptable to those lower down in the hierarchy (Weber 1946). While Weber accepted the ‘orientalist’ view about rigidity and unchanging nature of caste, he did not think that the presence of caste-like status groups was peculiar to India or the Hindus.
Looking more closely on the subject in the same mould, Louis Dumont, a French scholar, reworked the orientalist view on caste in his well-known book *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (first published in French 1966; the English edition appeared in 1970). Drawn mostly from the classical Hindu scriptures, he constructed a well-integrated theory of the caste system. As was the case with much of the classical orientalist writings, Dumont conceptualized caste as emanating from the Hindu religious system. According to him the structural logic of caste lay in the ‘Hindu mind’, as an ideological construct, which divided and hierarchized social groups on the basis of ritual purity or impurity of their occupations. Dumont’s thesis on caste was, in many ways, an extension of the argument put forward by another French scholar, Celestin Bougle.

In an essay first published in 1908, Bougle had argued against those who looked at caste merely as a system of occupational specialization. He defined caste as a system consisting of hierarchically arranged hereditary groups, separated from each other in certain respects (caste endogamy, restrictions on eating together and on physical contact), but interdependent in other (traditional division of labour). The word ‘caste’, he emphasized, not only involved hereditary specialization of occupational groups but also differential rights. Different occupations were arranged in a hierarchical order that made their members socially unequal. Inequality was an essential feature of the caste system. Along with inequality, he also underlined the element of pollution as an important feature of caste. Different groups, in a caste society, tended to ‘repel each other rather than attract, each retired within itself, isolated itself, and made every effort to prevent its members from contracting alliances or even from entering into relation with neighbouring groups’ (Bougle 1971: 65). Thus Bougle identified three core features of the caste system, namely, hereditary occupation, hierarchy and mutual repulsion.

While Dumont agreed with Bougle’s identification of core features of the system, he, however, argued that for a proper theoretical explanation of caste, it was important to identify one common element, ‘a single true principle’ to which the three features of the caste system suggested by Bougle could be reduced. Such a principle, Dumont argued, was ‘the opposition of the pure and the impure’.

This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept separate. The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites.

Dumont 1998: 43

Another important and extremely contentious aspect of his theory was his assertion about the superiority of Brahman over the king. India was different from the West because in India status was not determined by the logic of political economy, as was the case with the West. In caste society, status as a principle of social organization was superior to power. Status encompassed power.

While Dumont’s theory of caste has been very influential, it has also been widely criticized. He has been accused of presenting an ideologically biased view, an account that looked at it from upside down, as the Brahmans would wish to present it. Given that his sources were mostly textual, and that these texts were all written and retained by the upper-caste Brahmans, he constructed a theory that presented a Brahmanical perspective on the subject, an uncritical celebration of tradition. He has also been accused of ignoring the available empirical accounts of its functioning on ground, produced by professional social
some anthropologists in the form of village studies and monographs (Gupta 1991: 114). Some have accused him of also being selective in choice of textual sources (Das and Uberoi 1971).

In his defence Dumont would argue that he only tried to construct an ideal type of caste that theorized the underlying structure of the system and not the way caste was practised in everyday life. However, as Berreman pointed out, caste did not exist except empirically, in the lives of people as they interacted with each other. The lived experience of caste was very different from what Dumont seems to suggest. ‘The human meaning of caste for those who lived it was power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety. As an anthropological document, a description of caste, which failed to convey this was a travesty in the world today’ (Berreman 1971: 87–88; also see Gupta 1984). Similarly, Joan Mencher who conducted her fieldwork among the lower castes in a South India village reported that ‘from the point of view of people at the lowest end of the scale, caste had functioned and continued to function as a very effective system of economic exploitation’ (Mencher 1978). Fuller makes a related point in his criticism of Dumont’s theory. It is not only the relations of power that his theory undervalues; such a notion of caste also undermines the obvious facts about the inequalities in material life and the role caste played in their reproduction. In his study of the redistributive system prevailing in the pre-colonial India Fuller shows how village level system of caste relations was integrated into a larger political authority, beyond the village (Fuller 1977).

Another point of contention in Dumont’s theory has been his argument that constructs Indian and the Western societies as binaries where India is presented through categories of holism and hierarchy and the West with individualism and equality (Béteille 1986). Such a construct also tends to ignore the internal differences within societies and regions. The actually existing realities have never been so simple, in the West or in India. We can also find echoes of this argument in the historical scholarship on caste. As Bernard Cohn argues, the textual view of caste constructed through orientalist categories is fundamentally flawed because it constructs a picture of Indian society as

being static, timeless and space-less. Statements about customs, which derived from third century A.D. texts and observations from the late eighteenth century, were equally good evidence for determining the nature of society and culture in India. In this view of Indian society there was no regional variation and no questioning of the relationship between prescriptive normative statement derived from the texts and the actual behavior of individuals and groups. Indian society was seen as a set of rules, which every Hindu followed.

Cohn 1968:7–8

Following the works of Bernard Cohn, some other historians of modern India have also done important work on the subject. Perhaps the most important and influential of this scholarship has been the work of Nicholas Dirks. In his well-known book, *Castes of Mind*, Dirks convincingly shows how the colonial rulers through a process of enumeration and ethnographic surveys raised the consciousness about caste. They also produced social and intellectual conditions where ‘caste became the single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all “synthesizing” India’s diverse forms of social identity, community and organization’ (Dirks 2001: 5). Dumont’s theory of caste is a restatement of the same colonial and orientalist formulation.
Fallacy of this orientalist view of caste is also evident from the fieldwork-based writings on the Indian village. The field studies of the Indian village tend to present a much more diverse picture of caste. Many of these studies question the superiority of Brahmans and place the landowning caste at the centre of village social life. While some emphasized reciprocity and interdependence (Wiser 1936; Dube 1955; Srinivas 1955), some others point to the coercive nature of power in caste society. F.G. Bailey, for example, questioned even the idea of interdependence in caste society:

The system works the way it does because the coercive sanctions are all in the hands of a dominant caste. There is a tie of reciprocity, but it is not a sanction of which the dependent castes can make easy use.

_Bailey, 1960: 258_

Similarly Beidelman pointed to the exploitative nature of the relationship between the landowning and politically dominant _jajmans_, and those who provided them services of various kinds, those belonging to landless caste groups called _kamins_ (Beidelman 1959). Some of these writings also raised wider theoretical questions regarding the relationship between status and power and validity of the claims made by Dumont on the encompassment of power by status. Gloria Goodwin Raheja, for example, argues that:

The relationship between a hierarchical order of castes, with its focus on the superior position of the Brahman, on the one hand, and a conception of sovereignty focused on the Hindu king or the royal functions of the dominant caste at the level of the village, on the other, has been a central reverberating issue in the anthropological and historical study of South Asian society … Virtually all of the major contributions to the anthropological, indological and historical study of Hindu South Asia have been concerned in some fashion with this relationship, and have seen it to be constitutive of the fundamental aspects of social life, polity, and religion.

_Raheja 1988: 497_

Based on her study of a village in northern India, Raheja offered an alternative theory of caste and ritual practices, a theory that places ‘dominant caste’ at the centre of the caste system. She also questions the dominant ‘Western view of Hindu society’, which sees hierarchy as ‘the sole ideology defining relations among castes’ and reduces the role of the king and the dominant caste to a residual level. Instead, she argues that

there are several contextually shifting ideologies of inter-caste relationships apparent in everyday village social life. Meanings and values are foregrounded differently from context to context, and they implicate varying configurations of castes … data on presentation patterns and language use from … north Indian village … indicate that aspects of inter-caste relations that … I call ‘centrality’ and ‘mutuality’, are distinguishable from the ranked aspect that is usually called ‘hierarchy’ … Among these configurations of caste, both the ritual centrality of the dominant caste … and the mutuality among the castes of the village prove to be of more significance in social intercourse than the hierarchical pre-eminence of priestly Brahmans.

_Raheja 1989: 81_
These wide-ranging contestations of the popular Western view of caste point to the diversities that have been part of social and cultural life in the subcontinent. They also represent the diverse ways in which an institution like caste can be approached. The available theoretical formulations on the subject tend to vary depending upon whose experience of caste is being considered as the primary empirical reference point. A view from below is likely to be very different from the one from above or the middle. This diversity of perspectives and approaches to the subject continues to be an important aspect of the present discourse on caste in contemporary India, within social sciences and beyond (Jodhka 2012, 2015).

**Modern times and the changing realities of caste**

The British colonial rulers not only produced theories about Indian society and its social order of caste but also operationalized those categories in their administrative discourses. Perhaps the most important of these was the process of classification of caste communities into an all India schema. For example, they clubbed together the so-called untouchable communities into an administrative category, initially as ‘depressed classes’, and later listed them as Scheduled Caste (SC) in the Government of India Act of 1935. The post-independence Indian state continued with the same category but has over the years expanded the list of communities and scope of state action for their welfare and development. Though SC communities are identified at the state level, they are listed in the Constitution of the Indian Union with authorization of the President of India. This classification became an important medium for the post-colonial Indian state in its administrative strategies of transforming the institutionalized hierarchies of caste into an open social and economic order with a level-playing field.

The post-colonial state also legally abolished the practice of untouchability and initiated several other administrative measures for development and inclusion of the historically marginalized caste communities. First and the most important of these measures was the quota system, reservations of seats in government run educational institutions and for employment in government or state sector jobs. Second, the central and state governments also introduced various development schemes/programmes enabling the SCs to actively participate in the emerging economy and new avenues of employment. Third, the Indian Constitution also made provisions for reservations of seats for Scheduled Castes (along with Scheduled Tribes) in legislative bodies and other representational institutions as per their proportions in the total population.

Notwithstanding these proactive measures initiated by the Indian state, the middle-class that inherited power from the British colonial rulers shared the view that caste was essentially a mode of traditional life and would gradually decline and eventually disappear as India moves on the path of development and modernization. The engine of progress was to be the process of economic growth: industrialization, modern technology and urbanization.

**Changing caste**

As any other aspect of social life, the institution of caste would have always been undergoing change with changes in the larger social structure, economic life and political regimes. However, the nature and extent of change has perhaps been much more rapid over the past four or five decades. The changes in the traditional order of caste appear to be so significant that some scholars have even predicted its complete demise in the near future. The changes
Caste: why does it still matter?

in the social order of caste have come about due to a variety of efforts and processes from ‘below’, from ‘above’ and from the ‘side’.

Persistent mobilizations and organized movements of the traditionally marginalized who were at the receiving end in the ‘traditional hierarchies’ have been an important source of change in the caste system. It was during the colonial period that certain ‘disadvantaged’ communities, such as the non-Brahmans in South India and untouchables in western India mobilized against the prevailing structures of caste-based domination and exclusions (Pandian 2013; Omvedt 1976; O’Hanlon 1985). Since the early 1980s such mobilizations from the margins of Indian society have only grown and some have described them as a source of a ‘silent revolution’ (Jaffrelot 2003). Notwithstanding diversities and divergences, growing politicization of the ‘backwards’ and increasing Dalit assertions have fundamentally altered the grammar of Indian social and political life.

State policies and other initiatives from ‘above’ have also changed caste. The constitutional provisions in form of reservation policy have not only enabled a process of social and economic mobility among the ex-untouchable castes but have also been instrumental in producing a modern leadership from within these communities.

Caste has also changed with the social, economic and political transformations taking place on the ‘side’. For example, the agrarian transformation ushered in by the success of the green revolution technology in some parts of the country and the development of industry in urban centres have made many of the traditional caste occupations redundant. At the same time, they have also provided new opportunities for employment outside the older economic order (Jodhka 2002).

James Manor, who has closely observed Indian politics and society for nearly five decades, has recently argued that among the most important changes to occur in India since Independence, two things stand out: the emergence of a democracy with deep roots in society; and the decline in the power of caste hierarchies across most of rural India. The latter change is not as widely recognized as it should be, but abundant evidence from diverse regions plainly indicates that it has been occurring – unevenly, but widely enough to be a national trend (Manor 2012: 14). Manor is only echoing what many other scholars doing field studies have been reporting from their regions for some time now. Historically, the process of disintegration of jajmani ties in some regions had begun during the colonial period.

Independence from colonial rule was an important turning point for the local agrarian economy and, its social organization, the institution of caste. State investments in rural development and agricultural growth provided positive impetus to the process of change on the ground. Social anthropologists studying rural social and economic life began to report about declining traditional hierarchies and old structures of dependency, including the traditional structures of caste hierarchy, sometime in the early 1970s (see Breman 1974; Béteille 1971; Thorner 1982). By the early 1980s and 1990s these changes became quite visible and started to reflect even in the democratic or electoral political processes.

For example, on the basis of his fieldwork in Rajasthan villages in the 1980s, Oliver Mendelsohn reported that the idea of the ‘dominant caste’, as proposed by M.N. Srinivas in the 1950s after his fieldwork in a South India village (Srinivas 1959), no longer made sense in rural Rajasthan. The ‘low caste and even untouchable villagers were now less beholden to their economic and ritual superiors than was suggested in older accounts’ (Mendelsohn 1993: 808). Interestingly, he also argued that ‘land and authority had been de-linked in village India and this amounted to an historic, if non-revolutionary transformation’ (Mendelsohn 1993: 807). By the turn of the century Srinivas himself argued in a paper, which he titled ‘An Obituary on Caste as a System’, that the ‘systemic’ features of caste were soon disappearing
from the rural society in different parts of the country (Srinivas 2003). We can notice similar claims emerging from the writings of many other scholars who have been closely observing the dynamics of caste in contemporary India (Béteille 1997; Gupta 2000, 2004; Jodhka 2002; Karanth 1996; Charsley and Karanth 1998; Krishna 2001; Kapoor et al. 2010).

**Declining hierarchy, persisting inequality**

Perhaps the most surprising thing about caste in contemporary India is that when all social science evidence points towards a rapid decline of the old *jajmani* relations and erosion of its ideological hold over the minds of those located lower down in the traditional hierarchies, caste seems to be becoming politically more visible and socially more complex. The caste question today presents itself in newer and more complicated forms. Understandably, thus, the academic and popular interest in caste continues to grow.

**What makes caste persist?**

Social science scholarship has only just begun to engage with this question. One possible factor that makes the reality of caste continue to matter is the fact that even when socially and ideologically the traditional forms of relationships begin to disintegrate, material realities do not change much. For example, the economic inequalities across caste groups continue to persist or, in some cases, even witness a further escalation.

With its ideological decline, the social and political experience of caste becomes more intense for those at the lower end of traditional hierarchies. As the decline of their dependence on the agrarian economy and the locally dominant caste groups enables them to formally participate in the democratic political process as equal citizens, their entitlements over the local resources remain circumscribed by caste and the ‘position’ they have occupied in the old system of hierarchy, as the dominant groups view it. However, they no longer accept it as an inevitable reality or a part of their fate. They make claims over ‘common’ resources of the village, which had hitherto been under the exclusive control of the dominant caste communities. These assertions are not easily entertained by the dominant groups, and often result in different forms of violence against Dalits.

This is not simply a matter of perception. Resistance and caste related atrocities manifest a clear trend. A broad range of scholars concede to the fact that while the traditional ideological façade of caste or even its institutional hold has weakened, including the decline of untouchability, the violence committed on Dalits appears to be increasing, particularly over the past two or three decades (Béteille 2000; Shah 2000; Teltumbde 2010; Gorringe 2012; Mohanty 2007). However, some recent studies also point to the fact that these growing strains in caste relations, even when they manifest themselves in bloody violence, result in renegotiations of power relations across caste communities (see Pandian 2013).

The experience of mobility for those located at the lower end of the traditional caste hierarchy, namely their moving out of village and agrarian economy, is also not an easy process. Even those who are able to acquire technical and higher education (generally because of the quotas) find it hard to get into the higher echelons of power in the private sector.

Growing redundancy of old caste-based occupations and their dislike for traditional arrangements makes those from the ex-untouchable caste communities (the Dalits) try to move to urban areas for alternative sources of livelihood. However, they find it very hard to make headway beyond the margins of the emerging urban economy. Caste matters in the urban markets in many different ways for the Dalits trying to establish themselves in
business. Urban markets have never been as open as they are made out to be in the textbooks of economics and sociology. In the Indian context, caste and kinship-based (and sometimes, religion-based) communities actively try to preserve their ‘monopolies’ in a given trade. Kinship networks play a very critical role in the urban business economy. Apart from working as gatekeepers, they matter in mobilizing capital, through banks and otherwise, the most critical requirement for businesses anywhere in the world. Given their past economic background, those from the historically deprived communities also do not own collaterals, such as agricultural lands or urban properties. The lack of ‘social capital’ and economic resources is further compounded by the presence of active ‘prejudice’ that manifests itself in many different ways in their everyday business life and aids in the reproduction of both, social/economic inequalities and caste identity among the Dalits, a sense of being different and unequal (see Jodhka 2010; Iyer et al. 2013; Hoff and Pandey 2004).

It is thus a widely recognized fact that caste matters in India’s vast informal economy. Based on her study of a South Indian town Barbara Harriss-White concludes:

Caste … provides networks necessary for contracts, for subcontracting and for labour recruitment within the informal economy … liberalisation makes these caste-based relationships more important because it places a new premium on the advancement of interests … caste is ultimately connected with all the other organizations of civil society that comprehensively regulate economic and social life.

2003: 178–179

We see this script repeating itself even in the more advanced corporate sector and its hiring practices. My interviews (Jodhka and Newman 2007) with hiring managers in big private companies in Delhi clearly showed that even when they actively deny any consideration of caste and community in the process of recruitment, they openly showed preference for candidates with specific social and cultural skills. Given that the candidates they interview for these relatively high-end jobs are mostly screened, internally or by the hiring agencies, and they are all educated and qualified to be called for the interview, the interviews are meant to judge more than their technical skills and the quality of formal education. They look for ‘suitability’ of the candidate, the social and cultural aspects of their personality. Who is a suitable candidate and how do they judge the merit of those who are selected for the upper-end jobs in the private sector?

Almost every respondent hiring manager interviewed agreed that one of the most important questions they ask the prospective candidates during the interviews is about their ‘family background’. Family background, for them, is an important factor in determining the suitability of a candidate for the culture of the company. An equally important factor for hiring at the senior level is the linguistic skills of the candidate, their ability to speak and communicate in English fluently. In other words, the critical qualification for higher-end corporate jobs are as much the ‘soft skills’, the nature and quality of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1986) acquired through one’s caste and class habitus which, even according to the hiring managers, was largely a determinant of one’s social background and place of residence (rural-urban). The hiring manager we interviewed admitted to the fact that the response to the question about the family background also gave them an idea about their ‘social origins’. Caste background of the candidates was not difficult to guess, most of them admitted. This knowledge of ‘social background’ of the candidate directly impacted their decisions on hiring.

When we followed them up with questions on ‘quotas’ and their opinions on reservations for the Scheduled Castes in the government jobs and educational institutions, nearly every
one of them had a negative view on the subject. They all wanted ‘merit’ to be the sole criteria of judging candidates for recruitment, even when they all admitted that qualities other than merit tended to matter more in the selection process. This attitude also emanated from the fact that corporate houses in India are almost exclusively owned and managed by those from upper-caste backgrounds. A recent study based on a sample of 1,000 companies reported that as many as 92.6 per cent of the board members of Indian corporate houses were from the upper castes (44.6 per cent Brahmans and 46.0 per cent from various Vaishya castes; their proportion in the total population of India is around 10 to 15 per cent). In contrast, those belonging to the traditionally marginal communities (SCs, STs and OBCs) who make for more than 70 per cent of India’s population were only 7.3 per cent of the sample (Daljit et al. 2012). It will be hard to view it as an outcome of a random process working on the basis of merit. The authors rightly conclude that the upper end of the Indian corporate sector ‘is a small and closed world’ where social networking plays an important role.

Still Indian corporate boards belong to the ‘old boys club’ based on caste affiliation rather than on other considerations (like merit or experience). It is difficult to fathom the argument that lack of merit is the cause for under representation. Caste is an important factor in networking. The small world of corporate India has interaction only within their caste kinship.

Several other studies looking at social mobility in India reinforce the point that caste indeed works to block those located at the lower end of caste hierarchy (Kumar et al. 2002; Thorat and Attewai 2007; Thorat and Newman 2010; Vaid and Heath 2010). Even when the cultural or ideological hold of caste disappears; the real possibility of vertical social and economic mobility remains rather limited. Much of the mobility appears to be merely horizontal, from traditional caste occupations or agricultural labour in the village to insecure jobs at the lower end of India’s vast informal economy. In the dynamic of change, ‘the upper castes’ are no longer ‘cushioned from the forces of downward mobility’, but more importantly, it is hard for those located at the lower end of ‘traditional’ hierarchy to move up (Vaid 2012: 420). In other words, the social mobility scenario in India presents a case of ‘continuity rather than change’ (Kumar et al. 2002: 2984).

Concluding comments

Notwithstanding its wide-ranging critiques, the orientalist view of caste, and its academic incarnations in a variety of modernization theories, has continued to be influential. We can see this not only in social science textbooks but also in popular middle-class discourses on the subject, and even in its articulations by popular social movements. However, the lived reality of caste has always been very diverse and complex. Caste persists even when it changes. It persists beyond the domain of religion, in economic life, in democratic politics and in media and other contemporary modes of cultural articulation. It has also had life beyond Hindu religion and beyond the boundaries of India. Caste and caste-like differences have been a common reality among a variety of religious groups in the subcontinent, the Muslims, the Christians or the Sikhs, even when they have had no Hindu ancestry.

As mentioned above, the classical view on caste also classified it as a kind of traditional institution, which was to gradually decline and eventually disappear with the evolutionary process of modernization. Indian society has indeed been undergoing a process of ‘modernization’ for
more than a century now. Modern cities like Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, and many others, have been growing both in size and influence. Even though the proportion of urban population in India today is only around 30 per cent, the influence of modern urban life goes far beyond. The decline of the old agrarian economy is clearly evident from the fact that its contribution to the national income has come down from more than half in the early 1950s to merely 14 per cent now. A majority of Indians today are educated and mobile. The influence of urban middle classes and their styles of living have been growing across regions and communities of the subcontinent, particularly during the past two decades of neo-liberal growth.

Many in middle-class urban India would emphatically argue that indeed caste would and should have disappeared from public life by now had it not been kept alive by the wily actors in India’s electoral politics. Its institutionalization through the reservation policy, quotas for Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes, is also cited as the other reason for its continued survival in India today. Even when its presence is recognized as a substantive reality in mainstream academic circles, it is generally viewed as a typical case of ‘change and continuity’. The underlying assumption being that its continued presence is a result of incomplete modernization of India’s economy and its cultural values. As the process of development matures under the neo-liberal market regime, caste is bound to disappear on its own, provided it is allowed to be forgotten by political entrepreneurs of Indian democracy.

However, as is evident from the discussion above and the large volume of empirical literature, caste continues to overlap and articulate with the newer forms of inequalities. While the older modes of social and economic life have changed, the change has not brought about an end to caste. Even when ritual order is de-sacralized, it survives as a system of social inequality and as a value that ranks people on a scale of honour and humiliation. Viewed from this perspective, caste may not appear to be a uniquely Indian or a Hindu social institution, and that is worth considering.

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References


