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Caste in India

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Caste has often been viewed as a peculiar social institution that evolved in India, among the Hindus, and survived for centuries because it was supported by the Hindu religious ideology. This popular view of caste presents it as a simple system of hierarchy, structured around the ideas of *varna* and *jati*. The idea of *varna* was a model or a framework of social organization that divided the Hindus into four categories: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras. Beyond the four *varnas* were the *achhoots* (the untouchables). These four categories occupied different statuses in the Hindu society, with the Brahmins at the top, followed by the other three *varnas* in the order of ranking as mentioned above, with the *achhoots* occupying a position at the very bottom. The *jati* was a sub-unit of *varna*, a concrete social grouping, strictly governed by the normative frames of occupational segregation and reproduced itself through the practice of endogamous marriage. Unlike the *varnas*, *jatis* were large in numbers and their constellations varied from region to region. They were often further divided into sub-units, within the larger frame of the *varna* system. According to one estimate in each linguistic region ‘there were about 200 caste groups which were further sub-divided into about 3000 smaller units each of which was endogamous and constituted the area of effective social life for the individual’ (Srinivas 1962: 65).

As this popular/dominant notion of caste goes, these ideas and practices produced an internally coherent and closed system of social inequality, a hierarchical social order structured around the notions of purity and pollution. The hierarchical system of caste best survived within the frame of village life, its social and economic order, and presumably remained unchanged for centuries. As an all-encompassing institution, caste governed everything in the life of a Hindu.

Caste is also presented as a kind of traditional social and cultural system, which was gradually to weaken and eventually disappear with the processes of modernization. The development of modern industrial economy, the growth of urban centres and spread of democratic political institutions were to unleash a new social and cultural logic, which would produce a structural change in the Indian society, or so it was formerly assumed by the dominant theories of social change. The process of modernization was to give way to an open system of stratification based on the idea of individual merit and civic citizenship.

Over the past century and more, India has moved on the path of modernization. This process was pursued with much political zeal after India acquired independence from British colonial
rule. After independence, the nationalist leadership was quite successful in institutionalizing a parliamentary system of democratic politics based on a Western-style liberal Constitution. India’s economy has also undergone significant changes over the past five or six decades. India is no longer a traditional or pre-modern agrarian society. Even though less than one-third of India is demographically urban, the influence of city life is quite widespread. The traditional caste-based occupations have disintegrated almost everywhere. The decline of India’s agrarian economy is most evident from the fact that by the first decade of the twenty-first century it contributed less than 15 per cent to the total national income of the country.

Notwithstanding these fundamental changes in India’s political and economic life, caste has persisted. Many would say that its presence in the popular and political discourses in contemporary times is much more pronounced than it was during the 1950s or 1960s, when the institutional hold of caste was perhaps much stronger. One may explain this persistence of caste by attributing it to a flawed process of modernization that India has pursued. However, the persistence of caste in contemporary times also raises questions about the validity of the popular Hindu religion-centric view of caste. Further, the assumption of it being a Hindu religious institution is also questioned by the fact that caste-like hierarchies have also existed among the non-Hindu communities of India and beyond India, in the subcontinent, and not in the Hindu frame of varna system (see Jodhka 2012; Jodhka and Shah 2010).

How then do we make sense of the persistence of caste in today’s India? This chapter tries to engage with this question by providing (i) a critical overview of the popular theorizations of caste and their flaws; (ii) a broad view of the changing dimension of caste; and (iii) alternative ways of approaching caste that could help us understand the present day realities of caste.

**Conceptualizing caste**

The history of the modern-day theorization of caste begins with Western and colonial engagements with Indian civilization (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001). However, this is not to suggest that divisions that came to be described as the caste system did not exist earlier or that they were a creation of colonial rule. Categories such as varna, jati or zat, and the corresponding social divisions and hierarchies of status, have indeed been present in different parts (though not everywhere) of the South Asian region for a very long time. They have also been the source of contestations. For example, several social and religious movements during the ‘medieval’ times questioned the legitimacy of such divisions and offered alternative ways of imagining the human universe based on egalitarian ideals (see Omvedt 2008).

The Western idea of ‘caste’ simplified the diverse, and often contested, realities of the ‘native’ social order into a neatly marked out division of groups. Drawn mostly from the ancient ‘Hindu’ texts, these ‘orientalist’ writings theorized caste as a hierarchical system through the idea of varna as a substantive category where Brahmans were always placed at the top of the hierarchical order, followed by Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The untouchable communities were outside the formal hierarchy but their status also followed this neat hierarchical order derived from the logic of purity and impurity.

For the colonial rulers, such theorization of Indian social order was not merely an academic exercise. This helped them make sense of what seemed like an incomprehensible reality. They also deployed their notion of caste hierarchy in their administrative system for classifying the native communities and determining their qualities and traits. As Sharma points out:

[T]he British took the existence of caste very seriously. Successive censuses of India attempted to classify the entire population by caste, on the assumption that everyone must
belong to some caste or other and that castes were real identifiable groups. As a result, this
objectification of caste actually made it more real and liable to rigidification.

(Sharma 2002: 8)

This ‘book-view’ of caste also constructed India as the ‘other’ of the Western society, which was based
on the idea of equality among individuals. The system of caste divisions was a peculiar
feature of the subcontinent, where social order had been static for ages and had no possibility of
change emanating from internal contradictions. Such a view presented colonial rule as being
good for India. The colonized people were so completely governed by the normative order of
caste that they had no agency of their own (Inden 1990: 65). Even radical thinkers like Marx and
Engels were influenced by such views about the Indian social order and they affirmed in their
writings the need for a colonial intervention which alone could break the equilibrium that had
kept the Indian village community static for centuries.

The influence of Colonialism and its forms of knowledge, to use Bernard Cohn’s (1996) expres-
sion, was also quite significant to the way professional sociology and social anthropology develop-
ed in India. Even when the post-colonial ‘native’ sociologists and social anthropologists
advocated a shift away from the ‘book-view’ towards a ‘field-view’ of India, the categories
through which a majority of them imagined India invariably remained the same. For example,
the village typically became a convenient entry point for anthropologists interested in under-
standing the dynamics of Indian society (Jodhka 1998). Similarly, sociologists and social anthro-
pologists universally assumed that the caste system was fundamental to Indian social structure,
which in turn also synonymized Hindu religion with Indian culture.

More recent historical research on the subject has seriously undermined this ‘common sense’
about the caste system. Not only did the colonial rulers, through a process of enumeration and
ethnographic surveys, raise consciousness about caste, but also they produced the conditions
where ‘caste became the single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all “synthesiz-
ing” India’s diverse forms of social identity, community and organization’ (Dirks 2001: 5).

The dominant textbook-view of caste that emerged has continued to be based largely on the
classical colonial understanding of ‘Hindu India’. Putting it in a language of social science text-
books, Ghurye (1993) identified six different features of the Hindu caste system: segmental divi-
sion of society; hierarchy; restrictions on feeding and social intercourse; civil and religious
disabilities and privileges of different sections; lack of unrestricted choice of occupation; restric-
tions on marriage.

Though seemingly simple and obvious, this list represented caste as a total and unitary system.
Thus, it was possible to define caste and to identify its core features which were presumably
present everywhere in the subcontinent. Similarly, caste was also not merely about occupational
specialization or division of labour. It encapsulated within it the features of a social structure,
normative religious behaviour and even provided a fairly comprehensive idea about the personal
lives of individuals living in the Hindu caste society.

Perhaps the most influential theoretical work on caste has been that of Louis Dumont. He
approached the Hindu caste system from a structuralist perspective that focused on the underly-
ing structure of ideas of a given system, the ‘essential principles’, which may not be apparent or
visible in its everyday practice. Caste, according to Dumont, was above all an ideology, and the
core element in the ideology of caste for Dumont was hierarchy. Hierarchy was not merely
another name for inequality or an extreme form of social stratification, but a totally different
principle of social organization. Such a principle, Dumont suggests, was ‘the opposition of the
pure and the impure’. Hierarchy, defined as the superiority of the pure over the impure, was the
keystone in Dumont’s model of the caste system (Dumont 1998 [1970]: 43). An important aspect
of his theory was the specific relationship that existed between status and power in Hindu society. Unlike in the West, where power and status normally went together, in the caste system there was a divergence between the two. In caste society, status as a principle of social organization was superior to power: ‘status encompassed power’.

Even social anthropologists who did not agree with Dumont’s formulation subscribed to the assumption that caste was widely accepted as a frame of social organization across groups in the hierarchical system in Hindu/Indian society. For example, although the Indian social anthropologist Srinivas rejected Dumont’s method of studying caste through textual sources and advocated for a field-view of caste, he appears to be underlining the ideological unity and cultural consensus in Indian society through his concept of *sanskritization*, which was a process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, ‘twice-born’ caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community.

(Srinivas 1972: 6)

There are, however, many who completely disagree with the Dumontian view of caste. Dumont’s theory was criticized for its ideological bias in favour of the Brahmins and its weak empirical groundings (Gupta 1984).

### Caste and/as power and domination

As already discussed, the dominant view of caste that presented it as an integrated and harmonious system of hierarchy evolved out of the colonial and orientalist engagement with Indian society. Interestingly, the origin of an alternative view of caste can also be located in the administrative history of British colonial rule. Colonial census made the state-system a critical agent in the life of all castes. Institutionalization of the colonial census and enumeration of caste and religious communities made ‘numbers’ a crucial variable in the colonial administration. Along with the ritual status, the numerical strength of a group began to acquire significance, particularly when it came to the question of recognition and representation in the evolving state-system.

It was in this context that, at some time in the early decades of the twenty-first century, the caste groups located at the bottom of caste hierarchy were recognized as a separate category for their lack of basic human rights and material resources. Supported by local reformers, the colonial state clubbed together several of these caste groups into an administrative category, the ‘depressed classes’ (Charsley 1996; Jodhka 2012). They were so depressed that their touch was polluting for upper caste Hindus. Thus the ideas of the ‘line of pollution’ and ‘untouchability’ acquired administrative legitimacy.

In the context of the growing demand by the emergent leaders of the ‘untouchable’ communities for equal status and citizenship rights, the post-colonial Indian state found this classification useful and institutionalized the distinction through the introduction of a separate Schedule in the Indian Constitution that listed all the depressed caste communities. The independent Indian state also introduced an extensive programme of affirmative action in the form of quotas or ‘reservations’ for the Scheduled Castes in representative bodies, jobs and education. The practice of untouchability was made illegal by the new constitution (see also Viswanath, this volume).

The reservation policy became a source of social, economic and political mobility for those located at the bottom of the traditional caste hierarchy. Over the years, a new middle-class
emerged from within these communities that began to speak for the common interests and experiences of the ‘untouchable’ caste communities and to represent them through a new political category, the Dalits (Zelliot 2001).

The process of horizontal political consolidation has not been confined to the Dalits. Even those above them have actively mobilized caste identity for political representation and consolidation. Caste proved to be a flexible institution that could easily adapt to the world of competitive electoral politics (see Kothari 1970; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). However, while different caste groups began to use it as an easily available resource for political mobilizations, its growing participation in democratic politics also had far reaching implications for the internal logic of caste, with its political grammar woven around the idea of hierarchy and repulsion. For example, the well-known Indian political scientist Rajni Kothari argued against the popular notion that democratic politics was helping traditional institutions like caste to ‘resuscitate and re-establish their legitimacy’. On the contrary, he insisted that in reality

the consequences of caste-politics interactions are just the reverse of what is usually stated. It is not politics that gets caste-ridden; it is caste that gets politicised. Dialectical as might sound, it is precisely because the operation of competitive politics has drawn caste out of its apolitical context and given it a new status that the ‘caste system’ as hitherto known has eroded and has begun to disintegrate.

(Kothari 1970: 20f.)

The gradual processes of the deepening of democratic politics, economic modernization and the policies of affirmative action have changed many aspects of caste. Empirical studies by sociologists and social anthropologists from different regions of the country have reported a loosening of the traditional structures of power/domination and disintegration of rural hierarchies (Jodhka 2002; Karanth 1996; Manor 2012; Mendelsohn 1993).

Even though the nature and extent of economic change during the post-independence period varies significantly across regions of India, rural social structures have changed everywhere. In some parts of the country the old structure of patron–client relations that bound different caste together, the jajmani system, has completely disintegrated. On the basis on an extensive survey of 51 villages of the northwestern state of Punjab carried out in 1999 to 2000, I proposed that the changes occurring in rural caste hierarchies could be conceptualized through the categories of dissociation, distancing and autonomy (Jodhka 2002).

Due to their social and economic mobility and the loosening of the traditional social order, a large majority of Dalits were consciously dissociating themselves from traditional ‘polluting’ occupations that they had been tied into for generations. Many of these occupations were no longer identified with any specific caste group in rural Punjab. For example, picking up of dead cattle became a completely commercialized enterprise. The local community now gave the work on contract to an individual contractor, who could even be from another village or nearby town. Though most of those involved in this business belonged to ‘low’ castes, they were poor and often lived in towns. Similarly, some degree of commercialization had taken place in the case of other low caste jajmani occupations. Barbers, carpenters and blacksmiths all had shops, and they came from a diversity of caste groups. Some of the barbers, for example, were the erstwhile scavengers. Relations of these shopkeepers with their clients were purely instrumental. The only ‘unclean occupations’, where a degree of continuity existed, was that of scavenging. But in this occupation too the traditional structure of jajmani relations had almost been completely changed. The cleaning of drains and toilets or sweeping of the houses was mostly done on a commercial basis.
Almost everywhere in rural India caste was closely intertwined with the local agrarian economy. The customary norms prohibited the untouchable castes from owning and cultivating agricultural lands. However, their services were needed for various agricultural operations. Many of them were tied to the landed families of the dominant and upper castes, often like bonded slaves. This was perhaps more true in agriculturally dynamic regions like Punjab. With the growing use of tractors and other modern inputs, the agrarian relations have largely been formalized. Labour in-migrations from other regions of India also played an important role in changing the local agrarian relations. One of the obvious consequences of this change was the decline of old systems of tied labour. Dalits obviously did not like getting into such arrangements and tried to withdraw from employment in agriculture wherever they could. Their attempt to distance themselves from the local agrarian economy largely depended on the availability of alternative sources of employment in the neighbouring towns or on nearby construction sites.

Political mobilizations among the ex-untouchable communities have also created a new political consciousness among them, and they have been working towards autonomizing their communities from the dominant caste controlled village institutions. Wherever they could, they constructed separate community halls, temples and gurudwaras of their own, sometimes with a free grant from the state, sometimes using their own resources.

While the intensity of these processes varies across regions and sub-regions of India, similar processes have also been underway in other parts of the country. The rise of autonomous politics of the Dalits in different parts of the country is an obvious evidence of this fact (see Pai 2013).

Caste today: decline and persistence

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the reality of caste in contemporary India is that even when the traditional hierarchies are waning, caste-based inequalities in the material and political domain continue. Notwithstanding the success of Indian democracy, the increasing participation of the historically marginalized groups/communities in the electoral process and more than six decades of development and quotas for Scheduled Castes, caste-based disparities have not disappeared. In other words, caste continues to be an important indicator of deprivation and marginality, both at the macro-level reflected in the national-level data (see Thorat 2009) and at the micro-level (see Jodhka 2002; Shah et al. 2006). Caste also plays an important role in the modern urban economy. For example, ownership of industry in India has historically been concentrated in the hands of a few social/cultural groups and the top jobs were always kept within the family (Munshi 2007; Rutten 2003). Recruitments to other jobs were opened to outsiders only when the required personnel were not available within the community or the wider kin-group. Caste is almost always a negative social identity for the Dalits when they wish to enter the modern/urban labour market (Jodhka and Newman 2007) or business (Jodhka 2010).

In the emerging social and economic contexts, caste appears to matter more to those who have historically been on the margins of the traditional system of hierarchy. Their position on the margin implies their lack of economic resources and social capital, which makes it harder for them to participate in the emerging neo-liberal economic system. This is happening at a time when their increased participation in democratic political process through identity-based political formations has raised their aspirations for citizenship rights and opportunities for economic mobility.

These emerging, often contradictory, trends have completely altered the discourse of caste. Since the early 1990s caste has increasingly been talked about by those who have historically been on the margins at the receiving end of the hierarchical system.
Viewed from the margins, caste needed to be talked about not because of any love for a dying tradition or as an important marker of ‘cultural difference’, but because it continued to be a source of deprivation and discrimination. Caste influenced development outcomes and reproduced older forms of exclusions in the emerging economic order. The continued presence of caste as a reality of the Indian society, and as a system of power and domination, thus needs to be recognized. This articulation of caste has also opened up spaces for engagements with the state for policy intervention on caste-lines.

Viewed from the margins, the caste system has three core defining features. Above all, caste is about domination. Caste has been an institutionalized form of domination, supported by a set of values, norms and institutions, some of which continue to be present even today while others have weakened or disintegrated. However, there has not been a radical break with the caste system. In the absence of a comprehensive structural change, caste asserts itself as coercive power, perhaps more often than before, because of the weakening of its ideological hold. Increase in the incidence of caste-based atrocities is an evidence of this.

The second related dimension of caste is that it refers to disparities. Caste does not simply imply power in the cultural sense of the term. It is also a structural reality where inequality is institutionalized in terms of unequal distribution of resources. Inequality, seen in terms of disparities, refers to a very different set of attributes when compared with the Dumontian notion of inequality, which refers to a cultural notion of hierarchy, something which exists only as an ideological category, derived from the dialectical opposition between pure and impure as it exists in the Hindu mind. Disparities, on the other hand, refer to inequalities in terms of entitlements and ownership of resources, closer to the Marxian notion of ‘means of production’. However, the nature of disparities and inequalities in the caste society is different. They are ‘graded inequalities’, to use Ambedkar’s (1936) expression.

The third related dimension of caste is that it is an institutionalized system of discrimination and denial. Discrimination and denial has been socially and culturally institutionalized in India and it has been group specific. It produced a pattern of disadvantages, which in turn produced deprivations and poverty among certain groups. Denial was culturally institutionalized in the sense that it had legitimacy and long term implications for the social and economic status of caste groups/communities. For example, the ex-untouchable communities were not allowed to own and cultivate land and become peasants. Such customary practices could not be explained away by referring simply to the dialectics of pure and impure. They defined and limited rights of different groups of people. More importantly perhaps, the effects of such past tradition are felt even today by a large majority of Dalits. The absence of assets, such as agricultural land, makes them much more vulnerable, economically as well as socially.

**Concluding comments**

Caste has for a long time been a subject of inquiry for sociologists, social anthropologists and political scientists. However, it has been invariably looked at as a traditional system of social hierarchy and culture, which would inevitably weaken and eventually disappear with the process of development or modernization. Mostly, social anthropologists and sociologists researched caste in relation to rural social order, kinship networks, religious life or traditional occupations. The economists who worked on the ‘hard’ questions of development rarely treated caste as a relevant area of inquiry. In the mainstream understanding of textbook economics, development or markets were essentially secular and anonymous processes. Poverty and deprivation were attributes of individuals or households, and those possessing such attributes could be classified and clubbed together using purely secular and economic categories. Using caste and community
in policy discourse, the ‘secular economists’ argued, was akin to giving them legitimacy and strengthening hierarchical social order and traditional cultural practices.

Over the years, however, scholars have come to recognize the crucial importance of ‘non-economic’ factors such as caste, race, ethnicity or gender in structuring the market and determining economic outcomes. Following this realization, mainstream development studies have also undergone a complete paradigm shift over the last two decades or so with ‘human’ rather than ‘economic’ development becoming the focus and index of growth and progress.

In addition to these changes from above, the paradigm shift in the approaches to caste has also been pushed by the pressures from ‘below’, the social and political churning being experienced on the ground with expanding democratic political process. The autonomous Dalit movements during the late 1980s did not simply request recognition and state power, they also raised questions about the meanings of caste and how it continued to be experienced even in secular/modern spaces in contemporary life. These movements also stood (and continue to stand) for active engagement with the state system on its policies for development and its laws against discrimination.

Over the last two decades, the academic understanding of caste has also been undergoing change. There is an increasing recognition of the fact that caste is not simply a question of past tradition and Indian/Hindu culture, or that it would disappear on its own once modern forces of industrial development and democratic politics appeared on the scene. The popular understanding of caste is beginning to recognize that talking about caste means talking also about power and powerlessness, about disparities, discrimination and the denial of access to resources and entitlements. The rise of the autonomous Dalit voice also articulated a new vision of citizenship whereby recognition of community identities became essential in addressing the question of denial.

References


