Flexibility and Persistence of Caste Relations in India: An Overview

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Abstract

Caste is defined as “a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific style of life that may or may not include the pursuit of a specific occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system” (Beteille 1964, 46). Berreman (1967, 70) has defined the caste system as a “system of birth assigned stratification, of socio-cultural heterogeneity, and of hierarchical interaction”. Although the caste system is rigid and closed if we talk in Indian context. It has shown some trends of dynamic reality and great degree of flexibility in terms of internal structure and functions. There have been perceived changes in the norms of caste hierarchy from time to time. If we talk in context of modernity, there are some institutionalised and continuing processes existing within the boundaries of the caste system to facilitate upward mobility by emulating the lifestyle of upper caste Hindu However in Indian context there have been simultaneously trends of downward caste mobility and it is not only the upward caste mobility that is peculiar to caste system in India. During the last few decades, caste has become less pervasive in individuals everyday life as a result of forces of modernization, industrialization, urbanization. However, in recent years, inter-caste and inter-religious marriages have taken place. The term “caste” is used by sociologists and social anthropologists in two different ways. As a result, locating the genesis of caste flexibility and persistence in Indian society becomes important. Hence the paper seeks to analyse the various claims put forth by different scholars on the debate of caste system in Indian context. It seeks to do this by bringing in the theoretical framework of writers like Marx, Weber, Hutton G.S. Gurye, M.N Srinivas, Andre Beteille, Surinder Jodhka, on caste relations in India.

Keywords: Caste, Social Change, relations, Stratification, social mobility

Introduction

Defining the term “Caste” itself is harder than thought to be. The term “caste” is used by sociologists and social anthropologists in two different ways. On the one hand, it is used without regard to geography to describe a class system in which the hierarchy is well established and the boundaries between the various strata of the hierarchy are firmly delineated (Leach 1967, p. 9). As a result, locating an individual in his or her stratum is usually simple, and once done, one understands how to interact with him or her even if one does not know him or her directly. The caste system, its distinctive qualities, subtle and more obvious alterations, as well as its durability and pervasiveness, have all been fundamental to Indian society studies. These topics have drawn interest from a variety of disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, political science, literature, and economics. This perspective on caste and its modifications stresses the socioeconomic or labour market dimension, which is of
particular relevance, and the inheritance of vocations, which is a specific element of caste. Sociologists have long debated whether caste is best viewed as a cultural or structural phenomenon (Leach 1960). The description of caste identified by Risley, 1908 describe it as “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name, claiming a common descent from mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community” (cited in Hutton, 1963). It can also be defined as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit that holds a higher or lower social status than other subdivisions of the same ethnic unit (Velassery, 2005). The term “caste” is derived from the Portuguese word “casta,” which means “breed, lineage, or race” (Rajashkhar, 2002). In the Jajmani system, it is a term that is used to classify the various social groupings according on their vocation or occupation. Hutton (1946) presents a functional picture of the caste system in terms of individual members, community roles, and state and society functions. Ghurye (1950) provides a thorough concept of caste. Segmental division of society, hierarchy of groups, restriction of feeding and social intercourse, allied and religious disabilities and privileges of different sections, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and restriction on marriage, according to him, are the six main features of the caste system. A caste system's stable feature is endogamy. Inter-caste and inter-religious marriages have, nonetheless, become more common in recent years. The term “caste” is used by sociologists and social anthropologists in two different ways. On the one hand, it is used without regard to geography to describe a class system in which the hierarchy is well established and the boundaries between the various strata of the hierarchy are firmly delineated (Leach 1967, 9). According to Ambedkar, it is primarily the practise of endogamy that has kept castes separate and prevented them from merging. In India, caste is a social stratification system based on the society’s institutional sanction, which assigns distinct castes different social statuses based on their position in the social hierarchy. The working of the caste system is outlined by the network of economic, political, and ritual relationships between castes.

Caste and its Representations in India

The Indian caste system has long been one of the most important social divisions in India, alongside class, religion, geography, gender, and language. Although this and other types of differences occur in all human cultures, it becomes an issue when one or more of these aspects overlap and serve as the primary basis for systematic ranking and uneven access to valued resources such as wealth, income power, and reputation (Sekon, 2000). The caste system in India is considered a closed system of stratification, meaning that an individual’s social rank is determined by the caste into which he or she was born. Interaction and social interchange between people of various social rank has its restrictions. Based on an underlying sense of purity, societal division is based on ranking groups (Castes) determined by descent and occupation. Srinivas (1962) defined caste as “a hereditary, endogamous group which is usually localised, It has a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relation between different castes is governed among other things by the concept of purity and pollution and generally maximum commensality, i.e., inter-dining occurs between castes”. This definition described the ideal form of caste system.

Marx and Weber both made observations about changes in India’s caste structure. Change in Indian castes, according to Marx, is primarily brought about by changes in production relations. He believed that industrialization would dismantle the “Asian mode of production” based on the hereditary division of labour upon which Indian castes are founded (Marx, 1973:142). Weber saw a significant source of change in new values, which were carried by India’s westernised intelligentsia (Weber, 1958: 30). However, unlike the pure Marxist or Weberian position, the most critical source of change in India’s caste system came to be centred in its power structure, through its entry into the modern Indian political system. However, in the Indian context, economic, political, and socio-cultural aspects of change are discovered to be so intertwined that they have established a spiral of mutual reinforcement through time. Weber defined caste as a social status group with a distinct way of life (Weber, 1958: 39-40). Betelle’s conception of caste as a social group defined by endogamy, hereditary membership, occupation, ceremonial status, and a certain way of life is similar to Weber’s. Betelle finds a significant development in the differentiation in methods of living not only between non-Brahmins and Brahmins.
but also among the sub-castes of Brahmins themselves, in a study of developing patterns of stratification in Sripuram (a Tanjor village in South India) (Betelie, 1956).

In the village, class, rank, and power were traditionally entwined and expressed through the caste system. Change has, of course, become a permanent element of the community. Since India’s independence, land has begun to become available for purchase. This means that old status-based economic ties are losing way to contract-based relationships, and new governmental regulations impacting and, in reality, reconstructing agrarian relations have been established, pulling the village into the nation’s larger economic system. Similarly, the political institutions of independent India, which arose in response to unique historical circumstances, altered the power balance. Power appears to have shifted much more decisively from the village’s established elite to the new popular leaders. The status dimension of caste is detached from that power once it is freed from the shackles of tradition.

The findings of Betelie appear to be further supported by the research of Bhatt (Bhatt 1975, 199). He finds statistically significant differences between higher, middle, and lower castes along the dimensions of education, socioeconomic status, political orientation, political interest, knowledge, influence, and political participation, based on data collected in rural and urban areas of Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. He believes that the profile of social stratification in modern India is one of increasing status incongruence, relative openness, mobility between and rivalry among strata, and relative equality, because all four areas show varied degrees of disparities in these dimensions. The socioeconomic and political aspects of social stratification are gradually distinguishing themselves from the ascriptive caste components. Both studies show out that India’s long-standing stratification is now succumbing to pressures exerted by changes in the caste system’s sphere of authority. Kothari has spent more than a decade researching India’s political institutions and scrutinising the country’s polity and modern society. Many of their works are directly focused on the investigation of change processes in the stratification system.

Politics of Caste

The relationship between caste and politics is mutual give and take. While castes help the political parties in winning seats in the election, the political power helps caste in achieving higher social, economic, educational and occupational position in the society. “What form is caste taking under the impact of modern politics, and what form is politics taking in a caste-oriented society?” Kothari (1970: 4-5) considers a more helpful point of start for his (Betelie and Bhat) studies. He cleverly observes that purported “casteism in politics” is no more and no less than “politicisation of caste,” anchoring his arguments in the power dimension of India’s status communities. It’s a process in which both caste and political formations are brought closer to one other, transforming both in the process. With the establishment of the voting system by the British in India in the first part of the twentieth century, caste concern in election matters becomes apparent. As a result, caste sabhas arose as political groups, and caste consciousness grew stronger and more assertive (Chaudhary, 2013). The castes frequently merged their political goals, such as opposing the other caste in order to acquire political power. As a result of the relationship between caste and politics, three trends have emerged. The first relates to the rise of dominating elites from many castes who share a secular perspective and similar ideals. Second, a number of castes arose to give the caste system a secular organisational structure. The third relates to the emergence of different factions, as well as the establishment of political organisations by elite groups. The faction system is set up in such a way that it divides not only political but also social groups. As a result, cross-cutting identification is made easier (Kumar, 2005). The voting system in India, according to Kothari (1985), has given caste identification a fresh lease on life. It’s a process in which both caste and political formations are brought closer to one other, transforming both in the process. By judiciously utilising the caste vote bank, even the castes that are socially and educationally backward have been able to move upwards in a very short period of time. Ghurye (1930) investigated the political changes that occurred as a result of the caste system’s influence.

Ghurye (1969: 406) thinks that castes or sub-castes that band together for political reasons develop a militant attitude against other castes, and that the creation of caste associations for political or non-political reasons is
nothing more than a reaffirmation of caste power. Srinivas makes a nearly same argument (1964:6). Although he admits that some “non-caste” factors may play a role in state politics, he maintains that there is a significant difference between caste as an endogamous and ritual unit and the caste-like groupings that are so prevalent in modern India’s politics and administration. However, there is not only communication but also connection between these things. Srinivas is acutely aware of shifts in the power dimension of caste. He does not, however, agree that such “separation” leads to a “closed” status community becoming more “open.”

Other sociologists, however, have a different viewpoint, and Leach and Bailey are among the most prominent proponents of this viewpoint. According to Leach (1960, 6-7), “If a whole caste group plays the role of a political faction by competing with other such factions for some common economic or political goal, it thereby acts in defiance of caste tradition.” Similarly, Bailey (1963: 107-24) argues that castes belong to the caste system when they behave “segmentally” and according to a system of hierarchy and “closed stratification,” but they do not belong to the caste system when they operate as political entities or as parts of a political entity. However, according to Kothari (1970: 4-5), debating whether caste uses politics or politics uses caste is futile. Kothari (1970:14) appears to believe that the actual interaction between caste and contemporary institutions was forced to be selective, affecting certain characteristics of caste more than others.

**Economic Dimension of Caste and Change**

However, the most usual step in determining the direction of change in India’s economic dimension of social stratification is to conceptualise or think in terms of shift from caste to class. If we concentrate on the economic dimension of caste, there is no doubt that the new economic opportunities in India connected with the development of a market economy have weakened the traditional structure of economic interdependence between castes i.e the jajmani-or the patron-client system. Bost (1951) is a leading proponent of the theory that the economic dimension of the caste system in India is profoundly affected and altered as a result of industrialization. He claims in his study that once the traditional caste system’s heredity occupational base is sufficiently broken down by processes of industrialization and urban migration, the traditional caste system will lose its vitality. Similarly, A. R. Desai (1966:250) claims that the economic foundations of caste were shattered by the new economic forces and forms introduced into India as a result of the British conquest, using the historical materialism method to analyse Indian history. He further argues that the vocational basis of the castes and exclusive habits of their members have been undermined by the creation of private property, the impact of new property relations, modern cities new legal system, modern education, political movements and above all, the class struggle.

Many overlapping characteristics can be found in discussions about caste flexibility, including flexibility in the social, economic, ritual, and political spheres. This widely accepted understanding of caste as closed and unchanging, across diverse regions and locations, is native and problematic. This is especially relevant in the context of discussions on the caste system’s potential for social mobility. While some researchers say that castes are more or less closed, with little or no mobility, others argue that while mobility is always possible, it is primarily limited to the numerically and physically dominating castes (Dumont 1970, 1998). To put it another way, those with money and political clout can use their resources to advance in society as a whole. Many others, on the other hand, have long believed that the caste system allows for some degree of flexibility for most people (Béteille 1965, 1969; Jodhka 1997; Srinivas 1966, 1987). The flexibility of the caste system is highlighted by these discussions on caste, as well as the growing factual evidence against a universal or essentializing perspective of caste. As a result, these fundamental arguments on the caste system may be premature, given caste’s evolution and inexorable endurance, particularly in the socio-economic sector. Silverberg’s (1968) book, for example, collects information on occupational mobility within the caste system. These debates on what comprises caste, along with the mounting empirical evidence against a universal or essentializing view of caste, highlight the flexibility of the caste system.
Caste mobility can be viewed from two perspectives. First, group-level mobility can be achieved through lifestyle imitation, which necessitates acceptance of the shift in status by others. Second, at a more personal level, is the prospect of intergenerational social mobility; that is, can individuals from different castes benefit equally from possibilities for social or economic mobility? Sanskritization is a crucial notion and practise in the context of social mobility in the caste system, as it defies the ostensible rigidity of groups. Srinivas’ (1956) concept of Sanskritization - a term for upward social mobility taken from the root word Sanskrit, the language of the Brahmins and upper castes - arose in response to the movement he observed between different ritual roles. To put it another way, lower castes adopt the ideas, traditions, and practises of higher castes in order to progress economically and socially. This can be accomplished by modifying commensal laws, abstaining from drinking, or adopting a vegetarian diet, all of which are believed to be the domain of the upper castes.

Indological views provide one of the most widely recognised and used perspectives on the origins of caste and untouchability. Dumont (1966:21), citing Bougie’s description, argues that the caste system’s hierarchy is crucial since it ranks groups as relative superiors or inferiors. However, he claims that this ranking is founded on an ideological structure that pits the concept of pure and impure against one another. The former, as superior, has a greater social position, whereas the latter, as inferior, has a lower social status. The social hierarchy that resulted is based on this resistance. The social implication is that impure must be distinguished from pure, and hence the two must be divided in the division of labour. The second explanation took a secular approach to the situation. As a result, it was stressed that the caste system and the practise of untouchability arose primarily as a result of socioeconomic and political imbalances and oppression. The fundamental notion is that the shudra varna’s immobility caused the distinction between the upper three varnas and the shudra varna. In the past, disparities in property holdings were a source of immobility.

According to Gough (1963), the traditional society’s castes defined high and low rank based on ceremonial status. The ritual status, however, was inevitably bolstered by riches and political clout. The brief study of caste’s secular dimension in historical context simply illustrates that the caste system was founded on institutionalised politico-economic inequities rather than sacred ideas underlying Hindu society’s normative order. Untouchability’s third explanation incorporates ritual, socioeconomic, and political factors. Marriot (1961) investigates the caste system’s moorings by (a) analysing specific characteristics of social structure and (b) examining various components of Hindu society’s religious culture (Vaid 2013). Marriot finds that the land tenure system has a distinct impact on the patterning of ecological structure in villages based on these findings. Second, because land is the village’s major method of production and unit, the Headman is invariably the one who has more land and collects revenue from the rest of the village, transforming him into a strong man. As a result, his Kinsmen wield authority over others. The third influence can be seen in the emergence of political oppositions based on land ownership.

Conclusion
In Indian context caste system has been created the infrastructure for the formation of social relations and interactions between different social groups, people and social systems. From the above discussion, it has been concluded that the traditional perspective of caste system is still disseminating in Indian society. Although, some changes have been observed in the caste representation and nature but still caste-based discrimination, exclusion and divisions are persisting in Indian society. It is because, the institutionalised system directed towards the marginalised, downtrodden and oppressed people through restricting all means and resources for enhancing their life chances and upward mobility (Chaudhary, 2013). A brief examination of caste system change and its dimensions is not only beneficial, but also necessary for identifying the region of change. The ‘constitution’ of India is credited with ushering in change of whatever size it may have been. The idea of equality, justice, brotherhood, and fraternity was declared as the guiding values for the organisation of social life in the Preamble. Casteism and untouchability are examples of values that are violated. Not only that, but several legal enactments, such as the Untouchability Offenses Act 1955 (Act No. XXII of 1955), were passed as the first direct step toward outlawing the practise of untouchability and making it a criminal offence punishable by law. If any such conduct is
performed against members of the schedule castes, it is considered that the act was perpetrated on the basis of ‘untouchability’ unless the reverse is proven. Although there are still instances of untouchability, particularly in rural regions, it can be said that it no longer exists as a general norm. Aside from legislative enactments, the increased social, economic, and political actions of the ex-untouchables themselves influenced the transformation in inter-caste relationships.

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