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csi.sagepub.com**Surinder S Jodhka**

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Abstract

Social science literature on caste tends to view it as a peculiar institution of the Hindus, emanating from their past tradition and religious beliefs/scriptures. This view also presumes that the processes of urbanization and industrialization, unleashing the process of modernization, will end caste, eventually producing a shift from a closed system of social hierarchy to an open system of social stratification based on individual achievement, merit and hard work. Drawing from a large volume of recent writings the author argues in this article that this approach to the understanding of caste is based on an assumption of Indian exceptionalism. Such an orientalist view of caste also denies the possibility of deploying the framework of caste for understanding caste-like ascriptive hierarchies that exist in many other (if not all) societies. Some of the recent theorizations of caste could perhaps provide useful conceptual tools for developing a comparative understanding of social inequalities.

Keywords

Caste, discrimination, hierarchy, India, inequality

Introduction

The popular textbook view of caste tends to approach it almost purely in cultural terms, a uniquely Indian practice that distinguished the traditional way of life of the region from the modern West and its cultural moorings. In this popular view, as an ancient institution, caste was embedded in the religious ideology of the Hindus. It drew its operational legitimacy from ideas like *varna*, *karma* and *dharma* pronounced in a book called the *Manusmriti* and some other ancient texts. These ideas were socially translated into a hierarchical order, structured around the notions of purity and pollution. The *varna*

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system thus divided the Hindus into four or five mutually exclusive categories with the Brahmins (ritual experts and priests) at the top, followed by the Kshatriyas (warriors), the Vaishyas (traders) and the Shudras (cultivators/workers). Beyond the four *varnas* were the *achhoots*, the untouchables, who carried out various polluting jobs for the rest of Hindu society and occupied a position at the very bottom.

Mainstream social science scholars and their conceptual frames, the structural-functionalists and the Marxists, anticipated that as an aspect of traditional culture and ideology, caste would inevitably decline and eventually disappear on its own. The processes of urbanization and industrialization, development of capitalist economy, modernization of mental frames and social institutions and democratization of its political system would make the caste system redundant and meaningless for India. With economic development and social progress, quite like the modern Western world, Indian society too would see a shift away from a closed system of hierarchy to an open system of social stratification based on individual achievement to be acquired through merit and hard work.

This has indeed not happened. Over the past century or so, India has seen quite a rapid change in its economy, social structure and political system. Though demographically India is still predominantly rural, its social and economic life is no longer reproduced in isolated 'village communities' (if it ever was!). Even India's rural/agrarian economy has seen many radical changes over the past five decades and more. The traditional caste-based occupations have disintegrated almost everywhere. In most of India the production cycles of agrarian economy are closely linked to the local, national and global markets. Agriculture as a sphere of economic activity in the national life has also declined quite significantly. Even though two-thirds of India is rural, the share of agriculture in national income in the second decade of 21st century is already down to around 13 or 14%. India's progress toward political modernization is evident from the successful institutionalization of a flourishing political democracy with a Western-style liberal Constitution.

However, notwithstanding these fundamental changes in India's economic and political life, caste has persisted. Many would say that its presence in popular and political discourses in contemporary times is much more pronounced today than was the case a century back, when the institutional hold of caste was perhaps much stronger. One may explain this persistence of caste by attributing it to a flawed or still incomplete process of modernization that India has pursued or to its institutionalization by the state system in the form of quotas for certain caste groups in the name of social justice and affirmative action, as many do. Popular media often tend to attribute the survival of caste to its politicization by the 'entrepreneurs' of India's electoral democracy. However, the reality of caste in contemporary India matters beyond the politics of votes and quotas. Caste continues to matter in many different ways, and most importantly as an important aspect of social and economic inequality, as a reality that shapes opportunity structures, status differences and cultural values in contemporary India.

Its persistence raises many questions, empirical, theoretical and political/moral. This article¹ tries to engage with some of these questions by providing (1) a critical overview of the popular theorizations of caste and their flaws; (2) a broad view of the changing dimension of caste; and (3) alternative ways of approaching caste that could help us understand the present-day realities of caste and modes and manners in which it reproduces itself in everyday life, beyond its traditional sphere, the village.

The starting point of my argument is a complete rejection of the formulations that look at caste from the perspectives of Indian exceptionalism and locate its explanation solely in the Hindu religious tradition. Instead, I approach caste as a system of ascriptive hierarchies, quite like Weber's notion of status as a dimension of power and inequality (Weber, 1946), and as a system of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1984), a regime of discrimination, which makes it possible for us to compare it to similar realities and structures elsewhere, such as race and other forms of vertical ethnic formations. Perhaps the most obvious point of comparison for such a discussion on caste would be to begin with revisiting the history of the caste–race relationship.

Caste and race

For the students of caste in contemporary India, the starting point of the race–caste relation has come to be the 2001 United Nations Conference against Racism in Durban where some activists from India had argued for recognition of caste-based discrimination on a par with racial discrimination by the relevant UN body. However, the history of comparative scholarship on the two institutions within the discipline of sociology is much longer. This relationship has been debated in different ways for more than a century now.

Starting with Charles Sumner, scholars like William Thomas and WL Warner had extensively argued that 'race' in the United States was a kind of caste system where relations between Whites and Blacks were systematically ordered and maintained like the hierarchical structure of caste. Quite like the caste system, the status of individuals in a racial group was further determined by a system of hierarchy within each colour-caste (see Thomas, 1904; Warner, 1936). However, this 'caste school of race studies' declined rather rapidly after the well-known American sociologist Oliver C Cox (1948), developed a very influential critique of the position in his celebrated book *Caste, Class and Race*, published in the middle of 20th century.

Disagreeing with the proponents of the caste school of race studies, Cox had argued that caste could not and should not be used as a framework for describing 'racial' differences or inequalities in American society because the nature and the origin of the two realities were fundamentally different. While caste was an ancient Indian cultural invention of the Hindus, 'race' was a more recent social construct that was reproduced through racial 'prejudice' and 'discrimination' as a dynamic of the capitalist market economy. So effective and influential was his criticism of the 'caste school of race studies' that it rapidly declined soon after the publication of his book and has largely remained so until now.

Interestingly however, his critique was based on an understanding of caste that was derived directly from the then dominant orientalist common sense about India, which viewed it as being a peculiarly Hindu social system. Its existence elsewhere, according to this view, made no sense. Invoking the classical orientalist notion of caste, Cox had argued:

Where in the world outside of Brahmanic India do caste systems exist? And the answer must be briefly: Practically nowhere. The caste system is an Indian *cultural* invention. (Cox, 1948: 538, emphasis in original)

His objection to the use of the term ‘caste’ to describe race relations in the United States also had political reasons. The system of caste hierarchy, he thought, produced legitimacy for itself, and worked almost on its own. However, in his understanding race was not such a ‘natural form of social organization’ or a type of society, like the caste system was:

The idea of a ‘type of society’ obscures the actual pathological racial antagonism, leaving some diffused impression that it is socially right, even as the caste system in India is right. (Cox, 1948: 544)

In the following chapter of his book he discusses this ‘pathological racial antagonism’, and provides a fascinating account of the phenomenon of racial lynching of the Blacks in Southern USA. Interestingly, however, his account of such racial violence sounds strikingly similar to what we know today in India as ‘caste atrocities’.² Quite like the caste atrocities in today’s India, the function of the targeted lynching of the Blacks, as he argues, was reassertion of White domination. It is worth quoting some text from his discussion of the phenomenon. Lynching, he argues:

... is a special form of mobbing – mobbing directed against a whole people or political class.

... lynching is not a spontaneous act. ... There seems to be a recognizable lynching cycle. ... A growing belief among whites in the community that Negroes are getting out of hand – in wealth, in racial independence, in attitudes of self-assertion ...

... lynchings function to maintain white dominance ... the socio-psychological matrix of the power relationship between the races. (Cox, 1948: 549–551)

Had Oliver Cox been a student of caste in the late 20th century, his conclusions about caste and its comparability with race would have been very different.

Conceptual trajectories of caste

Oliver Cox is not the only one who approached caste from the perspective of Indian exceptionalism. The dominant view of caste has been to look at it as a unique cultural reality, a part and parcel of the Indian/Hindu tradition. The enduring influence of Dumont’s work on the subject (Dumont, 1998 [1971]), despite its very powerful critiques (Berreman, 1991; Béteille, 1986; Dirks, 2001; Gupta, 1981; Raheja, 1989), is a case in point, and a subject that needs a separate treatment.³ Even when they critiqued Dumont’s ‘book-view’ of caste, those who carried out empirical studies of the village society from the 1950s through the 1970s also did not approach caste from a critical perspective (see Jodhka, 1998). Even though there were exceptions and some scholars did talk about caste in the framework of power and domination, it was the orientalist view of caste that largely prevailed. Caste was primarily viewed in the framework of tradition and the cultural specificity of India, almost until the 1990s (for a detailed discussion of this see Jodhka, 2012b).

One of the obvious implications of this identification of caste with culture and tradition was that considerations of caste could not become part of the hard questions of

economic redistribution, privilege and poverty, or the mainstream development discourse. The discussions and diagnoses of the questions of economic inequality during the early decades after independence were deliberated almost exclusively through purely economic categories such as incomes, assets and productivity. Even when empirical studies of village society showed a close link between caste and the prevailing agrarian social structure, caste was rarely represented or conceptualized as a material reality, shaping the economics of inequality and exploitation in the countryside.

This had larger developmental effects and implications. One good example of this 'caste-blindness' is the Indian discourse of the Land Reforms during the 1950s and 1960s, when caste was rarely included as an aspect of the prevailing economic disparities that needed to be reformed through direct legal action.

This selective view of caste was not accidental. As mentioned above, the dominant mode of thinking about caste has almost always looked at it from an evolutionary frame, the underlying assumption being that caste would disappear 'automatically' with the dawn of modernity. The near universal acceptance of this view is evident from the fact that notwithstanding their ideological and political positions, theories of social change that acquired prominence in the late 19th- and early 20th-century Western Europe and their translations and applications to the Indian context, the 'left' and the 'right' in India have amazingly common attitudes toward the subject of caste. Caste has no future. The process of modernization would weaken caste and eventually replace it with 'modern' structures based on individual achievement. Social inequality, or stratification, would be structured around the 'open' category of class that modern societies of the West have.

For modernization theory, that had its origin in the structural-functional frameworks of conceptualizing human society and acquired prominence in the social sciences during the post-Second World War period, caste was a textbook case of a traditional institution. As a structure of social relations, its functional utility was confined to pre-modern times. The evolutionary process of structural differentiation that accompanied the growth of urban and industrial societies in the West, transformed the traditional community (*Gemeinschaft*) into an associational society (*Gesellschaft*).⁴ The new *social order* was based on relationships entered into out of individual choice. The same should/would happen in India.

As the proponents of such theories of human society would argue, the idea of individual identity is of very little relevance in the traditional communitarian mode of social organization. It is the collective identity of the group that matters. Personal identities in such contexts do not develop into individuals, thinking for themselves or their self-interest. Collective identity of the group over-determines the personal selves of its members. The idea of individual identity, or individualism, emerges only in modern times, with the growth and complexities of urban life organized around industrial and developed market economies. Individual autonomy grows because it becomes a functional prerequisite for modern societies, if they are to work well. As Durkheim would argue, modern societies, based on the idea of organic solidarity, encourage and promote the ideas of individual choice because they require individual specializations and division of labour (Durkheim, 1997 [1893]). Individuals are encouraged to focus on cultivation of what is unique about them. Rewards, thus, get distributed on the basis of individual merit. Consequently, unlike the 'closed' systems of social organization that characterize traditional societies, modern societies are open. They allow individual mobility based on ideas of merit and the propensity to do hard work.

Interestingly, the Marxist notion of social change, seen from the perspective of caste, is also not very different from the above-discussed functionalist mode of thinking about human societies. Given that caste is often identified with Hindu religion and is popularly believed to have emerged out of the ritual order of Hinduism, as a value system or ideological system, it belongs to (a) the superstructure of the social formation, and (b) the pre-capitalist mode of production. Thus, in the Marxist common sense, caste-based divisions flourished in pre-capitalist agrarian social formations, in the 'idyllic village communities of India'. Even though caste was based on the idea of inequality, it helped in the reproduction of the social equilibrium of such 'communities'. However, caste was not the foundational feature of pre-modern Indian society, or the determining factor, but an effect of historically produced economic and social order, the agrarian social structure.

At another level, Marx himself viewed caste as a part of the conservative social and cultural framework within which the 'village communities' were circumscribed. Caste played a role in keeping India static and self-contained. As he wrote:

... these idyllic village-communities ... were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny. (Marx, 1853)

However, the traditional social organization of India, Marx thought, was fast disintegrating under the influence of the British colonial rule because of (a) its growing integration with the British capitalist market and (b) through the introduction of new technology into Indian society, particularly after the introduction of railways:

Modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labor, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power.⁵

What is true about Marxism is perhaps doubly true about the so-called modernization theory. More interestingly perhaps, despite its wide-ranging criticisms and near complete debunking by social science academics during the 1970s, the idea of evolutionary modernization continues to be influential in many different ways even today. It has become a part of the common-sense view on social change among the Indian middle-classes and elsewhere. Similarly, even though the old theories of social evolutionism are no longer accepted uncritically, their hold over the popular notions of history continues to be significant.

Changing caste

The institution of caste has seen many radical changes over the past four or five decades. These changes have come about thanks to a variety of efforts: (1) from 'below', through the social movements of those who have been at the receiving end of the 'traditional hierarchies'; (2) from 'above', thanks to the Constitutional provisions and other state policies for empowerment and development of those on the margins of the traditional social order of caste hierarchy; and (3) from the 'side', as a consequence of the general

processes of social and economic change, such as the agrarian transformation or the development of industry and urbanization.

Some of these changes in the traditional system of social hierarchies structured around caste have indeed been quite significant or even 'radical'. For example, the textbook view of the traditional caste system that described it primarily in terms ritual and occupational hierarchies, a closed system of stratification, no longer exists in most parts of rural India (Charsley and Karanth, 1998; Jodhka, 2002; Manor, 2012; Sahay, 2004). Those located at the lower end of caste hierarchy have, to an extent, successfully worked out strategies to reduce their dependence on the locally dominant and powerful caste groups.

Independence from the colonial rule was an important turning point for the economy and its social organization. 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 sometime in the early 1970s (see Béteille, 1996 [1971]; Breman, 1974; Thorner, 1982). This process of change also had its impact on the local-level caste relations. By the early 1980s these changes became quite visible and started to be reflected even in democratic or electoral political processes.

On the basis of his fieldwork in Rajasthan villages in the 1980s, Oliver Mendelsohn (1993) reported that the idea of the 'dominant caste', as proposed by MN Srinivas in the 1950s after his fieldwork in a South India village (Srinivas, 1959), no longer made sense in rural Rajasthan. 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 described as '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; Charsley and Karanth, 1998; Gupta, 2000; Kapoor et al., 2010; Karanth, 1996; Krishna, 2001; Vaddiraju, 1999).

Declining hierarchy, persisting inequality and the reproduction of caste today

Perhaps the most surprising and interesting thing that the reality of caste presents in contemporary India is the fact that precisely at a time when all sociological evidence points to its decline, it is becoming more visible and complex. Not only has the academic and popular interest in the subject of caste seen manifold increase, but the caste question also presents itself in newer and more complicated forms. My own fieldwork clearly shows that the processes of capitalist development and rapid mechanization in the northwest region have made the traditional framework of social organization of agricultural production completely redundant. However, there is absolutely no evidence to show that this process of change in any way enables dissolution of caste-based differences and identities in rural areas. On the contrary, as I have shown through my work (Jodhka, 2015), economic inequalities across caste groups in some sense witness a further escalation.

Socially and politically also the experience of caste differences becomes more intense as those at the lower end begin to experience a change in their self-image. As the decline of their dependence on an agrarian economy and the dominant castes enables them to formally participate in the democratic political process as equal citizens, their entitlements over local resources remain circumscribed by caste and the 'position' they have occupied in the old system of hierarchy, as the dominant groups view it. Those at the lower end do not accept it any longer and they make claims over 'common' resources of the village, which have 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 social boycotts of the Dalits by the dominant castes and occasionally also in violence (Jodhka, 2004).

This is not simply a matter of perception. Resistance and caste-related atrocities manifest a clear trend. A broad range of scholars concede the fact that while the traditional ideological facade of caste or even its institutional hold has weakened, including the decline of untouchability, violence toward Dalits appears to be increasing, particularly over the past two or three decades (Béteille, 2000b; Gorringer, 2005, 2012; Mohanty, 2007; Shah, 2000; Teltumbde, 2010).

At another level, these growing strains in caste relations, even when they manifest themselves in bloody violence, also result in renegotiations of power relations (see Pandian, 2013). The language of citizenship is no longer alien to the rural hinterlands of India. Regular participation in electoral democracy has provided the Dalits with a new language of bargaining, and they are quickly learning to use this language to their advantage, even when power relations do not change radically.

The experience of mobility of those located at the lower end of the traditional caste hierarchy, i.e. their moving out of the village and agrarian economy, is also not an easy process. Those who move out of the rural/agrarian economy, into urban entrepreneurship, find it very hard to make headway beyond the margins of the emerging urban economy. Caste matters in 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 (sometimes, religion-based) communities actively try to preserve their 'monopolies' in a given trade. Even when it becomes virtually impossible to do so, kinship networks play a very critical role in urban business economy. Apart from working as gatekeepers, the kinship networks also matter in mobilizing capital, through banks and otherwise, the most critical requirement for businesses anywhere in the world. Those from the historically deprived communities also do not own collateral, 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, reinforcing a sense of being different and unequal (Hoff and Pandey, 2004; Iyer et al., 2013; Jodhka, 2010).

We see this script repeated in the available evidence on corporate hiring. Based on interviews with hiring managers in big private companies in Delhi, Jodhka and Newman (2007) have, for example, shown that even when they actively deny any consideration of caste and community in the process of recruitment, the respondents clearly show

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 their 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, was important to assess the suitability of the candidate to 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 was 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 question about family background may appear to be an innocuous one for those candidates whose social background is similar to those who are interviewing them. However, for the first generation of educated candidates from a less privileged background, such questions serve to make them feel uncomfortable and awkward. The findings of another study, also part of the same research programme, by Deshpande and Newman, reported that it was only the students from ex-untouchable communities who were made to carry the burden of their caste background even when they were well-educated and looking for jobs in the urban sector (Deshpande and Newman, 2007).

Jodhka and Newman show that almost every hiring manager admitted to the fact that the response to the question about family background also gave them an idea about candidates' 'social origin'. The caste background of the candidates was not difficult to guess, most of them admitted. Some of these respondents told in a matter of fact manner that when they visited the educational institutes for 'campus recruitments' some of the colleges even provided them two separate lists, one listing all the graduating candidates from the 'general' category and the second listing those from the 'reserved' categories.

A recent study based on a sample of 1000 companies reported that as many as 92.6% of Indian corporate board members are from two broad clusters of the 'upper castes' (44.6% Brahmins and 46.0% from various Vaishya castes – the two caste categories together would perhaps make for less than 15% of the Indian population). In contrast, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) together accounted for only 3.5% of these highly valued positions. Even the proportion of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), who make for more than half of India's total population, was quite negligible (3.8%) (Daljit et al., 2012).

... it is a small and closed world. In the corporate world, 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). (2012: 42)

Caste matters even more 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)

The limited volume of empirical literature currently available on social mobility in India reinforces the point that caste indeed works to block those located at the lower end of caste hierarchy (Kumar, et al., 2002; Thorat and Attewell, 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: 4096).

Caste continues to shape urban residential patterns and tends to reflect segregation on caste lines. The macro-level data on population distribution in urban India suggests that Scheduled Castes tend to be concentrated in certain parts of the city (Dupont, 2004; Vithayathil and Singh, 2012: 64). Analysing the 2001 Census on residential patterns across caste and socioeconomic categories for the cities of Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, Ahmedabad and Hyderabad, Vithayathil and Singh find a rather depressing scenario:

At the start of the 21st century, we find that caste still remains a real axis of urban residential segregation in India's seven largest metro cities. In each of these cities, our analysis finds residential segregation by caste to be sizably larger than the level of segregation by socio-economic status. Caste has historically shaped the organisation of residential space, especially at the village level, and it appears to continue to do so in contemporary urban India. (Vithayathil and Singh, 2012: 64)

Social change and reproduction of caste

How do we reconcile these two sets of realities: change and persistence? What could explain the persistence of caste-related violence where the victims are almost always from the caste communities who have historically been at the receiving end of the social order of caste? How do we account for the experiences of urban Dalits who insist on articulating their everyday experience as an one of humiliation, denial and discrimination and not simply a matter of cultural difference or social diversity?

Wide-ranging empirical studies clearly show that caste continues to be a critical source of qualitative inequality. In other words, the caste question today is not exhausted either by economics and the Gini-coefficient or by analysis of electoral politics.

There is indeed plenty of evidence to show that the 'old' structure of caste-based hierarchies and economies of dependency has significantly weakened over the years. As a part and parcel of this process, the ideological hold of caste has also loosened. Whatever might have been the case in the past, there would be very few among the ex-untouchables today who would regard themselves as impure or justify their low status on grounds of their misconduct in some past life, a fact of nature (Charsley and Karanth, 1998). Like anyone else, they too aspire to material comforts and dignity (Deliège, 1999).

However, despite this 'secularization' of caste or its desacralization (Sheth, 1999), it continues to structure social inequality. The available evidence on poverty and productive assets indeed shows significant correlation between caste and economic privileges/deprivations. Those located at the lower end of the traditional caste hierarchy tend to be significantly over-represented among the poor and the marginal and the positive correlation at the other end is equally strong. Those at the upper end of the caste hierarchy are far less likely to be present among the economically depressed categories. However, the category of class, as conceptualized in the Marxian or Weberian tradition, still does not capture the emerging realities of caste today.

The hypothesis or assumption that economic development would inevitably convert caste-based inequalities across groups or communities into class-based differences among individuals, was fundamentally wrong. To view caste as a religious and purely ideological institution of the Hindus (Dumont, 1998 [1971]) is even more erroneous. The ideological or even institutional decline of caste did not produce any kind of levelling effect by itself. Even as the old ideologies and traditional structures disintegrate, the social and cultural prejudice associated with caste-based inequalities survives. The material disparities inherited from the past aid in the reproduction of inequalities through widespread social prejudice and other social mechanisms, such as the differentials of social and cultural capital.

Differences produce prejudice and stereotypes more actively when social interaction intensifies and competition in the economic and political fields becomes possible. With growing participation of Dalits and OBC communities, competition in the domain of democratic politics has indeed become a reality for the erstwhile dominant groups. They had taken their power for granted and feel extremely resentful about the change and democratization. With support of the state policy of reservation, the SCs and OBCs have also entered the administrative systems and are aspiring to increased participation in the urban economy.

We ought to move toward a perspective that would open up the caste question and reframe it in a language that does not reduce it to a religious phenomenon or a peculiar fact of the Hindu mind and ideas derived from the classic religious texts. Even though the idea of *varna* draws its sanction from the *Manusmriti*, the reality of caste is far more complex and widespread, across different religious communities of the subcontinent and beyond. As Max Weber would argue, caste is a good example an ideal type of social inequality, *status*, an aspect of power found across societies and histories. Caste is thus comparable to a wide range of similar structures of social inequality.

As in the Weberian frame, status is an aspect of social inequality, but it is different from class. But at the same time it does not reduce status to an evolutionary phenomenon or belong to past tradition, or is uniquely specific to any religion or region of the world.

While caste as a conceptual category is indeed different from class, its reproduction does not imply a 'hangover' of a past tradition. It articulates and reproduces itself in many complex ways in the bourgeois capitalist markets and in the emerging economies and cultures of neoliberal globalization.

Conclusions

As is apparent from the brief discussion of some available literature, quite like race at the time when Oliver Cox wrote his book, caste too reproduces itself in contemporary India through active processes of 'prejudice' and 'discrimination'. Even the phenomenon of caste atrocities today is hardly any different from Black lynching that was common until around the middle of the last century in the United States in terms of its function, namely, to produce the sociopsychological matrix of power relations. It is in this context that I propose to initiate a conceptualization of caste within the framework of prejudice and discrimination as a sociological process, which enables and sustains reproduction of caste in contemporary times. Such a framework of discrimination has to be comparative in nature that approaches caste as a category of 'status' and 'power', quite like 'race', or in some other contexts, ethnicity. A comparative understanding of caste in the framework of status, power and discrimination would thus enable us to comprehend the complex processes of the reproduction of caste and not be trapped in, what is sometimes described as, the Indian exceptionalism.

At a more practical level, such a perspective on caste would underline the critical need for interventions, if we wish to create a level playing field in India and to deal with the question of social inequality by finding ways of blocking its reproduction. These interventions could be from above, in the form of state policies of affirmative action, some of which are already in place in India. They could also be from below, as social movements for change. To assume and expect that caste inequalities will disappear on their own with the decline of traditional social orders, such as the idea of ritual hierarchy or the Hindu *jajmani* system, under the pressure of capitalist development and neoliberal economic reforms would be quite misleading. Individualization of labour markets only makes structures like caste 'invisible' (Rehbein, 2013). It does not make it irrelevant, particularly where it matters, namely, the distribution of the valued goods in society.

This, however, is in no way to suggest that the social and economic change experienced in India over the last century or so has only been superficial. On the contrary, as I have tried to argue, the change has been quite significant, and in some cases even radical. However, despite the success and spread of democracy and the disintegration of old hierarchies, opportunity structures and social values have not become significantly 'open'. Caste continues to be an important, even critical, variable in the manner in which inequalities are structured and reproduced. The pervasive and persistent inequalities have also not become individualized or purely economic in nature. They continue to be social and cultural.

The old local-level systems of hierarchy have indeed disintegrated but a new hierarchy of networks based on the institutions of caste and kinship appears to be thriving. These hierarchies work through 'monopolies' over social and cultural capital and enable the reproduction of caste. Prejudice and discrimination become significant and more active when old hierarchies disintegrate and social groups begin to compete for scarce

resources in domains of economy, politics and culture/social- status. Neoliberal capitalism thus does not destroy caste. On the contrary, it indirectly helps reproduce it by encouraging network-based economic formations. Even as the old ideology of hierarchy gives way to the idea of citizenship and the latter becomes a part of the aspiration of all those on the margins of Indian society and caste, the process of its institutionalization has yet a long way to go, both as a value and as a practice.

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Notes

1. This article draws substantially from some of my earlier work on the subject (see Jodhka, 2012b, 2015).
2. For caste atrocities see Teltumbde (2007, 2010), Mohanty (2007) and Jaoul (2008).
3. As I have pointed out elsewhere, one the main reason for the lasting influence of Dumont's thesis is its appropriation by the dominant historiography of Indian nationalism that aspires to construct India as a land of the Hindus and without any difference of social structure across regions. The orientalist view of caste helps in making such a point (Jodhka, 2004).
4. Although these terms were popularized by Ferdinand Tönnies (see Tönnies, 1957 [1887]), they have been reproduced by several other sociologists, such as Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and many others through a variety of categories to explain the structural process of social transformations experienced by the modern world, particularly the Western world.
5. At: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm (accessed 12 February 2013).

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Résumé

En Science Sociale, la littérature sur le concept de caste a tendance à définir cette dernière comme une institution singulière des Hindous d'où émane du passé, traditions, croyances et écritures religieuses. Cette définition suppose également que les processus d'urbanisation et d'industrialisation, d'où émane le processus de modernisation, mettront un terme au concept de caste ; ce qui finalement produira le passage d'un système de hiérarchie sociale fermé à un système de stratification sociale ouvert et basé sur la réussite de l'individu, son mérite et son rapport au travail.

En m'appuyant sur une quantité importante d'articles récents, cet article me permettra d'argumenter que cette approche cherchant à comprendre le concept de caste est basée sur une supposition d'un exceptionnalisme indien. Cette vision de la caste plutôt orientaliste rejette également la possibilité d'utiliser le cadre de la caste pour comprendre des hiérarchies attributives ressemblant à la caste, et qui existent dans beaucoup d'autres (si pas toutes) sociétés. Quelques-unes des récentes théorisations sur la caste pourraient peut-être apporter de précieux outils conceptuels pour développer une compréhension comparative des inégalités sociales.

Mots-clés

Caste, hiérarchie, inégalité, l'Inde, discrimination

Resumen

Los textos de las ciencias sociales sobre las castas tienden a presentarlas como una institución particular de los hindúes que emana de sus pasadas tradiciones y de sus creencias y escritos religiosos. Esta visión presupone que los procesos de urbanización e industrialización que desatan el proceso de modernización serán el fin de la casta, y que eventualmente producirán un cambio de un sistema cerrado de jerarquía social a un sistema abierto de estratificación social fundamentado en los logros individuales, los méritos y el trabajo arduo.

A partir de un gran volumen de escritos recientes, en este trabajo se intentará demostrar que este intento de comprender la casta está basado en el supuesto del excepcionalismo indio. Esta visión orientalista de la casta también descarta la posibilidad de revelar su estructura para comprender las jerarquías adscriptivas de castas que existen en muchas otras — si no en todas —, las sociedades. Algunas de las más recientes teorizaciones sobre la casta podrían, quizás, proveer herramientas conceptuales que sean útiles para desarrollar un estudio comparativo de las desigualdades sociales.

Palabras clave

Casta, jerarquía, desigualdad, India, discriminación