

The Peculiar Tenacity of Caste

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It was not until the 1950s that academics in India began to acknowledge the role of caste in Indian life. Within two decades caste had come to stay in public discourse. The Emergency of 1975-77 and its aftermath were turning points in the public acknowledgement of the continuing significance of caste. It began to be argued that far from being antithetical to democracy, caste had an essential part to play in the advancement of democracy in India. In course of time the media took up the argument for the salience of caste in Indian society and this has now become almost a part of the conventional wisdom. However, there is evidence to show that caste is in fact losing its strength in India, though not uniformly or dramatically. With the media giving a sensational turn to caste in its daily coverage, the long-term changes in caste are being ignored.

Perceptions about the nature and significance of caste have changed in the last 60 years. When M N Srinivas drew attention in 1957 to the continuing hold of caste, *Times of India* commented editorially that he was “exaggerating the role of caste in Indian public life and politics” (Srinivas 1962: 2). That would have been the general response of most English language newspapers at least outside peninsular India. Today, on the other hand, television channels vie with each other in bringing to light the importance of the “caste factor” in social and political life.

I can say from personal recollection that the reception of Srinivas’ address when it was delivered was at best lukewarm. I was present on the occasion, in my last year of studies in the department of anthropology at the University of Calcutta where the paper by Srinivas was presented as the presidential address to the section on archaeology and anthropology of the Indian Science Congress. Several of those present wondered if Srinivas had chosen the right subject for the occasion. The focus among anthropologists at that time was on tribe rather than caste, and those who had a wider interest in public affairs were interested not in caste but in class. In all likelihood the address would have evoked a different response had it been presented in Madras or Mysore, but this is not the place to speculate on that.

Recognition of Caste

Srinivas had thrown a stone into the placid waters of anthropology and that stone was to create ripples in the course of time. Srinivas’ argument began to find favour with anthropologists engaged in the study of India, starting with those who came from overseas. Indian anthropologists gradually turned their attention from tribal studies to village studies. Intensive fieldwork in the Indian village led them to recognise the continuing presence of caste. These new field studies turned the attention of Indian anthropologists from varna to jati and to the active and dynamic relations between caste and politics.

Political scientists like Rajni Kothari began to take a closer look at the part played by caste in the operation of politics at the local and the regional levels. Kothari put together a collection of papers, mainly by political scientists on the interface between caste and politics (Kothari 1975). Some political scientists went so far as to suggest that the effective operation of democracy in India required the use of caste in the political process for, in their view, caste brought democracy to the doorsteps of the ordinary Indian (Kothari 1975; Rudolph and Rudolph 1967).

The preoccupation with caste received a boost with the arrival in the country shortly after Independence of a large number of anthropologists from overseas, particularly the us, to undertake

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studies of society and politics in India. They focused on the study of caste for obvious reasons. First, caste was undoubtedly both an important and a conspicuous feature of Indian society. But to anthropologists from overseas, it had the added attraction of novelty. Had they wished to study class they could have done so in their own society. While focusing on caste on account of its peculiarity, they were also inclined to exaggerate its tenacity. Anthropologists working in distant places tend to yield to the temptation of what the Swedish author Stefan Molund (1991: 43) has called “the maximisation of differences”.

Not everyone was prepared to concede as much to caste at that time. The economists, who dominated the social science profession till the mid-1970s, took a very different view of the matter. They were convinced that caste belonged to India’s past and not its future. Their main focus of attention was the economic development of India, and they were convinced that caste was an obstacle to economic development and, moreover, an obstacle which could be removed through the formulation and application of intelligent policy. They believed that the attention given to caste by the anthropologists and sociologists contributed neither to better understanding nor to better policy. They certainly did not believe that caste had anything to contribute to the advance of democracy.

The development economists had their own views about the roots of inequality and conflict in Indian society. They believed that those roots lay in class as defined by the distribution of material resources and that the preoccupation with caste diverted attention away from the real problems facing the nation. K N Raj told me repeatedly that I should stop paying so much attention to caste and focus instead on class. Much as I admired Raj then, I now realise that his understanding of class lacked the richness and depth of Srinivas’ understanding of caste.

By the end of the 1970s, three decades after the attainment of Independence the view that caste was here to stay came to be widely acknowledged. The Emergency of 1975-77 and its aftermath were turning points in the public acknowledgement of the continuing significance of caste. It began to be argued that far from being antithetical to democracy, caste had an essential part to play in its advancement in India. In the course of time the media took up the argument for the salience of caste in Indian society and this has now become almost a part of the conventional wisdom. I have to note that although Srinivas was the first Indian social scientist since Independence to draw attention to the continuing hold of caste, he did not go so far as to argue that the revival of caste would be good for democracy.

I would now like to return to the argument commonly heard in discussions among economists, historians and others in the decades immediately following Independence that caste was becoming weaker and not stronger in India. That was the prevalent view in the University of Delhi outside the department of sociology. It was also the view in the University of Calcutta where I had been a student and in the Indian Statistical Institute where I worked briefly before moving to Delhi in 1959.

Social scientists in Calcutta showed little interest in caste and were preoccupied to a much greater extent with class.

N K Bose, who was a close observer of Indian society, had a view of caste that differed from that of Srinivas as well as of the Marxists. He believed that caste had been the organising principle of Indian society in the past and, as such, still deserved serious attention. He was certainly not the person to dismiss studies of the caste system, or even of individual castes, as retrograde or reactionary. But he also believed that the time when caste provided the basic framework of Indian society was over and that society would come to be organised differently in the future (Bose 1975). He thought that Srinivas exaggerated the continuing hold of caste but at the same time he had little sympathy for the Marxian theory of class and class conflict.

The educated Indians among whom I moved in Calcutta and Delhi made their judgments about caste on the basis of their own experiences and aspirations rather than on any systematic field investigation or any careful study of the ethnographic literature. Not many of them were sociologists of whom there were only a few at that time. Change was in the air, and they were naturally more inclined to pick out such evidence as indicated that the old order was being replaced by a new one. It is true that they did not sift all the available evidence carefully and systematically, but it would be wrong to say that there was no evidence at all for the judgments they made. If one looked carefully and dispassionately, one would find a great deal of evidence for change.

Three Areas

There were three major areas of social life in which the evidence suggested that caste was declining and not advancing. First, the observance of the rules relating to purity and pollution were becoming weaker. Second, the regulation of marriage according to the rules of caste was becoming less stringent. And third, the relation between caste and occupation was becoming more flexible. If one kept one’s eyes on these three aspects of caste, one would have reason to believe that caste was on the whole becoming weaker. N K Bose, who knew the Indian countryside as well as any other anthropologist, and much better than most economists used precisely this kind of evidence in making his assessment of the future prospects of caste.

My views of the subject have been influenced by those of N K Bose and M N Srinivas, both of whom I knew closely and well. They were close and acute observers of Indian society, but their perspectives were different, partly because their experiences of Indian society were different. Srinivas was a south Indian brahmin who had been exposed early in his life to the non-brahmin movement of peninsular India, and his main fieldwork was in Karnataka. N K Bose lived for the better part in the city of Calcutta which he knew closely and well. Although he travelled throughout the country, he always came back to Calcutta.

Bose acknowledged that Srinivas had made a good point, but thought that his claims about the durability of caste were exaggerated. Srinivas, in his turn, thought that Bose was carried away by his hope that India would become a casteless society. As for myself, I still find it difficult to make a clear choice between their somewhat different perspectives.

There are several reasons why the evidence about caste is so diverse and so difficult to interpret. There is, first of all, the large size of the country and the great diversity of its population. Apart from the regional differences already referred to, there are rural-urban differences and differences due to religion, caste and community. No less important are the differences based on wealth, occupation and education. Some of these differences and their long-term implications will be discussed later.

Also important is the fact that India has changed substantially in the last 60 years, and this change has not all flowed in the same direction. We cannot ignore the impact on the social order of the demographic, technological and economic changes that have taken place in the period since Independence. For several decades after Independence the rate of economic growth remained low. But things took a different course in the closing decade of the last century, and it is difficult to believe that sustained economic growth will leave the social order unaltered. There have also been important changes in the working of the political order. We have moved from a form of democracy which I have called “constitutional democracy” to one which is better described as “populist democracy” (Béteille 2008). The demands of populist democracy often act at cross purposes with the demands of economic growth and development.

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I will begin by considering the rules of purity and pollution. To the majority of Indians who were moving into the new economic order based on the office and the factory, the decline in the force of ritual seemed not only obvious but also inevitable. Many of them had witnessed the operation of those rules in their homes, among their parents and elders. Some continued to observe them out of inertia while others derided their excesses openly. The inertia of custom has ensured the survival of many old ritual practices, particularly on ceremonial occasions, but they no longer permeate everyday life to the extent they did in the past.

The attenuation of ritual observances in everyday life has been attributed to what has been broadly described as “secularisation”. After describing the various factors contributing to secularisation, Srinivas observed, “...the concepts of pollution and purity which are central as well as pervasive in Hinduism were greatly weakened as a result of the operation of a variety of factors already mentioned” (Srinivas 1995: 126). While drawing attention to the course of secularisation, he was careful to point out that it might be accompanied by a strengthening and not a weakening of what he called Sanskritisation. Sanskritisation enlarged the scope of ritual in ceremonial life even while the force of purity and pollution was being reduced in everyday life, in the school, the office and the marketplace.

Rules of Commensality

The ethnography of the pre-Independence period is replete with discussions of the rules of purity and pollution and their use in maintaining social distance between castes. Most conspicuous among these rules were the rules of commensality.

J H Hutton (1961: 71) wrote, “Now the taboo on food and water as between caste and caste is subject to many gradations and variations. It is often stated that the test of a ‘clean caste’, that is to say, a caste of respectable and non-polluting status, lies in whether or not a Brahman can accept drinking water at its hands”. In Bengal, the distinction between castes from which water was acceptable and those from which it was not provided a rough-and-ready marker of the hierarchy of caste. But there were great regional variations in the lengths to which those distinctions were carried. In the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu, orthodox Shri Vaishnava brahmins did not accept water from the hands of their Smartha counterparts as recently as 40 or 50 years ago.

Not all the rules of commensality had a direct bearing on the relations between castes, but many of them did. The use of food transactions as a basis for the social ranking of castes was examined in some detail by the American anthropologist McKim Marriott (1968). His evidence was somewhat mixed, and it did not lead to any clear conclusion. He favoured an “interactional” as against an “attributional” approach to caste ranking based on observations of the actual interaction between members of different castes. His observations seemed to indicate that food transactions had become more flexible.

Srinivas was no doubt right in pointing out that in modern India secularisation and Sanskritisation were advancing together. Sanskritisation enlarged the scope of ritual, particularly on ceremonial occasions which began to be organised on a larger scale than before and with enormous expenditure. But the scope of ritual might increase on ceremonial occasions while at the same time declining on everyday occasions. The huge expenditure on ritual in the public sphere might in fact be a compensation for its attenuation in domestic life.

Even where ritual observances are given a new lease of life by the enlargement of ceremonial, the rules of ritual do not perform the same function as before. Their role in maintaining and reinforcing social exclusion has been weakened. The link between caste and ritual has weakened precisely in matters relating to commensality. When food is served on festive occasions, members of different castes are no longer served food according to the rules of caste. To require people to sit for a meal according to their caste on a public occasion would cause a scandal today.

When I say that social exclusion based on the ritual attributes of caste is in decline, I do not mean that all forms of discrimination and exclusion have disappeared or are about to disappear. Distinctions of status are observed in every society and old rules of exclusion are often replaced by more subtle and flexible codes whose social effects are similar.

Nowhere in the world do people freely inter-dine with each other without any consideration of rank or status. The criteria of rank and status are changing in ways which affect commensal practices as well as the operation of caste. The old ritual criteria have not disappeared, but they have to compete increasingly with new secular criteria. Salient among the latter are education and occupation. Wealth always mattered, but education and occupation have gained

ground increasingly as markers of status in contemporary India and they determine to some extent who eats with whom on social occasions.

The compulsions of secular education and professional employment make inter-dining among members of different castes almost inevitable. In the college canteen or the office lunch room, segregation according to caste is now almost impossible. No matter what one's private sentiments may be, to insist on segregation at meals in such a context would invite ridicule today although it might have seemed the most obvious thing to do a 100 years ago. Yet, separation, if not segregation during meals has not ceased to exist. An officer will not sit and eat with his peon even if the two are of the same caste whereas he might eat in the company of another officer of similar rank but of a different caste.

Higher education and professional employment have not done all that the proponents of development and modernisation expected them to do. Perhaps they were too sanguine in their expectations. Old practices, habits and attitudes have shown greater resilience than was expected. India is a very large country where few things disappear altogether. But it will be a travesty to argue that nothing changes in India.

The winds of change have not left even rural India untouched. Ethnographic studies of villages from all parts of the country indicate a general relaxation of the restrictions on inter-dining. One of the best among these is the study of a village in central India by Adrian C Mayer which he kept under observation through repeated visits between 1954 and 1992. Mayer noted that while the old rules of commensality still remained, their observance by men as well as women had become more relaxed. He assigned some significance to increased travel outside the village and to the emergence of eating places along the roadside outside the village (Mayer 1996).

Mayer found that there was both continuity and change, and explained why it was so difficult to strike an exact balance between the two. But even though there might be disagreement over the pace and extent of change, few would disagree about its general direction. No ethnographer to my knowledge has argued that the ritual rules governing inter-caste relations are becoming more stringent whether in the cities or in the villages.

Not all those who wrote about caste in the period before Independence assigned primacy to its ritual basis. H H Risley (1915) who had preceded Hutton as the commissioner of census, would give primacy to the rules for the regulation of marriage. There is, in any case a close relationship between inter-dining and intermarriage within the caste system. It is undeniable that there is something distinctive if not unique about the rules of marriage whose importance has been underlined in the classical texts as well as the modern ethnographic literature (Dumont 1983).

There are rules for the regulation of marriage in all societies: it is said that the difference between animals and humans is that animals have mating and we have marriage. Nowhere have the rules of marriage been as elaborate, as intricate and as stringent as in India. In India there are rules of endogamy,

exogamy, hypergamy and preferential kin marriage of various kinds. In the past all those rules were upheld by the force of law. The law was changed soon after Independence, but custom did not change to the same extent. The law no longer prohibits inter-caste marriage, but custom still stands in the way of such marriage to a large extent. The question is not whether custom has changed to the extent permitted by the law, but whether it has changed at all.

My view is that custom has been changing though not very rapidly or very extensively and not to the same extent in all classes and communities. The interesting point is that the upper castes, which were the most stringent about safeguarding the traditional rules of marriage have now become the most lenient towards departures from those rules. This change has come about in a matter of three or four generations, not a very long span in the life of an ancient society.

Rule of Endogamy

The rule of marriage that is linked most directly and obviously to the perpetuation of caste is the rule of endogamy. It is that rule which confines the ties of kinship and marriage within a small and defined group and thereby enables it to maintain clear social boundaries with other groups of the same kind. If the boundaries between social classes are more vague and fluid than those between castes, it is largely because marriage rules in societies divided by class are less well-defined and more flexible than those in societies based on caste. In the kind of local communities in which the majority of the population lived in the past, marriage within the caste or the sub-caste was as much the responsibility of the local kin group as of the parties directly concerned. With the increased movement of population, local groups have become more dispersed and less close-knit.

In the past, the weight of local opinion ensured that the marriage partners were properly matched not only according to caste but also according to subcaste or even sub-subcaste. A marriage between a Smartha and a Shri Vaishnava brahmin, or between a Rarhi and a Barendra brahmin would be viewed as an inter-caste marriage. That might no longer be the perception today. Redefining the boundaries of caste expands the range of choices available even in arranged marriages and it helps to accommodate factors other than caste in the choice of marriage partners.

One important indicator of the kind of change I am speaking about is the obsolescence of the rule of hypergamy or *anuloma*. That rule was extensively discussed in the classical literature on marriage and widely acknowledged in the past although not universally observed. It was practised in Bengal among brahmins of both the Rarhi and the Barendra segments where it was associated with the ill-fated *Kulin* system (Bhattacharya 1896). According to the *anuloma* system men of a superior caste or sub-caste might marry women of inferior sub-castes but not the other way around. The opposite kind of match, between a man of inferior caste and a woman of a superior one, known as *pratiloma* was not only disallowed but severely condemned. The custom of *anuloma* allowed *Kulin*

brahmin men to accumulate many wives since other brahmins were eager to marry their daughters to Kulins.

It may be argued that the rule of hypergamy provides a better insight into the nature of caste than the rule of endogamy. The rule of endogamy tells us only about the separation between castes whereas the rule of hypergamy tells us about both separation and hierarchy. It expresses the principle that bride-takers are superior to bride-givers. A family which gives its daughters to another family without expecting to receive any daughters in return tacitly acknowledges its own inferior status.

In my experience the rule of hypergamy has become obsolete among the upper castes in Bengal. Even the terms *anuloma* and *pratiloma* are not always recognised by educated Bengalis of the younger generation including the brahmins among whom it was prevalent in the past. It is true that inter-caste marriages are still somewhat infrequent, but when such a marriage does take place, the principle of hypergamy is hardly a consideration.

The obsolescence of hypergamy indicates a weakening not only of the separation between castes but also of their hierarchy. This of course does not mean that considerations of rank and status are no longer present in the arrangement of marriages. But now, education and occupation are increasingly taken into account in addition to caste. Today where a good match is available in terms of education and occupation, a marriage may be arranged even when the castes do not match perfectly.

Traditional marriage practices were based on the joint operation of the hierarchy of castes and the subordination of women. Among the upper castes in particular, girls were married very young, ideally before they attained puberty. There was hardly any scope for the exercise of choice by the girl being offered in marriage. This is changing, though not very rapidly or to the same extent in all sections of society. There is now greater scope for individual choice although how far that choice is actually exercised in order to marry in a different caste is difficult to determine.

Significant changes are taking place in the position of women in Indian society. They are now joining the ranks of the middle class in their own right, as doctors, lawyers, professors, bankers, and consultants, and not just as daughters or wives of members of that class. As young adults, they are better able to exercise or at least indicate their marriage preferences than adolescents or children which is what most brides were when they were married off in the past. It does not follow from this that many women do in fact exercise their choice in favour of marriage outside the caste. At the same time, the marriage of adults, no matter how compliant, is more difficult to regulate according to the rules of caste than child marriage.

Rise in Age at Marriage

The secular trend of increase in the age at marriage for women is one of the most significant features of contemporary Indian society. It is important in itself and has far-reaching consequences for the structure of society. It will be reasonable to

maintain that there is no going back to the days of child marriage. This does not mean that there will be no more arranged marriages, but even in such marriages the distinctions of sub-caste and sometimes also the distinctions of caste might be ignored.

The developments I have been speaking of began in the educated urban middle class and are even now most conspicuous in that class. This is inevitable given the significance in it of education and employment, particularly for women. For good or for ill, the middle class has played a crucial part in the making of modern India and its open and secular institutions. It has grown enormously in size in the 60 odd years since Independence. It is now significant not only culturally and politically but also demographically. Although still a minority in the population of the country, its numbers already run into a couple of hundred million, and the number is increasing by the year. It will impose its values and aspirations on the rest of society by the sheer weight of its numbers.

It is true that the middle class has had to make many compromises with caste. But caste too has had to adjust itself to the demands of an expanding middle class. The middle class has grown not only in size but also in diversity. It has become increasingly diverse, not only in terms of caste and community but also in terms of education, occupation and income. It includes clerks and schoolteachers at one end and surgeons, solicitors and senior managers at the other. These distinctions count increasingly in the selection of marriage partners and not simply the differences of caste. There is no reason to expect a perfect correspondence between the layers in the middle class and the gradations of caste.

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My comments on the middle class lead directly to a discussion of the association between caste and occupation. For centuries in the past, caste had provided the social basis for the division of labour in an economy of land and grain. There were two distinctive, if not unique, features of the traditional division of labour. The first was the extreme specialisation of crafts and services that grew within it; and the second was the close association between each specialised occupation and a designated community in which membership was by birth.

Every village boasted a number of crafts and services, each associated with a particular caste. In principle each village was expected to be self-sufficient and hence to have the full complement of crafts and services required by its members, although there might be many gaps in practice. The division and subdivision of crafts and services in terms of the techniques used and the corresponding division of a caste into sub-castes was explained by Bose with the example of the oil pressers in eastern India: "We have to note how, among oilpressers, differences of technology and craft practices on the one hand and of social and commensal practices on the other have led to the emergence of subcastes" (Bose 1975: 80).

This extreme specialisation and the transmission of techniques from generation to generation within an extended kin group had its own advantages. But what was an advantage

when technology changed very slowly, if at all, became a disadvantage under conditions of rapid technological change. British rule created the conditions for such change, and the inevitable outcome was the loosening of the association between caste and occupation. The pace of technological change increased after Independence, and Nehru's vision of advancing through technological innovation prevailed over Gandhi's vision of a nation based on the village community sustained by its traditional crafts.

However, the association between caste and occupation only loosened; it did not break down altogether. Even in the past it was not as rigid as some were led to believe. No handicraft could sustain the entire population of the caste which was associated with it, particularly when the population was rising and where opportunities for migration were limited. The surplus population from a particular caste or sub-caste could always move into agriculture or some other gainful activity not associated with any particular caste. What was not easy was the movement from one to another specialised craft or service already assigned to an existing caste or sub-caste.

Apart from the decline of traditional crafts and services, a significant development was the emergence of a new kind of occupational system based in the office and the factory. As I have already indicated, the new occupational system introduced its own social gradations which began to cut across the gradations of caste. This development started in the second half of the 19th century, and it began to gain ground after Independence, and especially after the economic reforms of the 1990s. In the early decades of Independence it was the public sector that took the lead in it, but now the private sector has become the driving force behind technological innovation and change.

These developments are creating a churning process in which old occupations based on caste are being displaced by new "caste-free" occupations. Where the choice of occupation is strictly regulated by caste, the scope for individual mobility is restricted. Everywhere in the world the middle class is animated by the desire for individual mobility. The inability of individuals to move freely across the occupational space acts as a drag on economic development. The growing pressure for individual mobility is bound to weaken the association between caste and occupation.

Individual Mobility

The extent and rate of individual mobility vary greatly from one society to another. Economic development does not create the same opportunities everywhere, and it leads not only to upward but also to downward mobility. Those who have already secured a foothold in the middle class now have better opportunities for upward mobility. But we must not lose sight of the vast unorganised sector within which individuals have low wages and little security of employment and have to live from hand to mouth. Members of the lowest castes are highly concentrated here just as members of the higher castes are conspicuous at the upper levels of the middle class.

It is obvious that there are many constraints on the movement of individuals into the middle class and from one to another level of it. What is not obvious and very difficult to establish is the extent to which those constraints are due to caste alone and to what extent they are due to material factors that operate independently of caste. Such factors as poverty, hunger, malnutrition, ill health and illiteracy act as constraints against upward mobility in all societies, including advanced industrial societies that have little to do with caste.

It is in any case not my argument that the association between caste and occupation has disappeared or is about to disappear. That association is there for everyone to see. My argument is simply that it has not become stronger. The evidence shows that the association has become increasingly more complex and in that process has, if anything, grown a little weaker. The disproportionate attention paid to caste has diverted attention away from other major sources of inequality and conflict, most notably those of class.

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I have in the preceding sections examined evidence to determine if caste has been getting stronger since Independence. The evidence I have brought to light indicates that caste is in fact losing its strength, though not uniformly or dramatically. At the same time, it will be rash to conclude that all those from M N Srinivas onwards who have argued for the continuing if not increasing strength of caste have been deluded. We will have to turn to a different sphere of activity to understand the peculiar tenacity of caste, and that is the sphere of politics.

Caste had entered the political arena before the independence of India. The British had encouraged the use of caste and community in the formation of political groups as a way of keeping the movement for national unity under control. They found it more convenient to deal with such groups than with a political party such as the Indian National Congress. The non-Brahmin movement of peninsular India became a kind of counterpart to the assertion of political identity among religious minorities in the north. The leaders of the Congress Party who made their case against the British on the platform of national unity sought to play down these movements and hoped that they would lose their momentum once national independence had been secured. Strange as it may sound today, many of the leaders of the nationalist movement believed that democracy would put an end to caste. It is this belief that Srinivas attacked as being unfounded and naïve.

As N K Bose had pointed out in a book first published in Bengali at the time of India's Independence, associations had begun to be formed among various castes from the end of the 19th century. They were formed with various objectives, the most important among them initially being social reform. He examined in some detail the association formed by the lowly Jogi or weaver caste in Bengal.

A newspaper called *Jogisakha* was started in 1905. "The purpose of *Jogisakha* was to establish unity among the Jogis by dissolving the distinctions of subcaste among them, to raise the social status of the caste, and to help in the spread of

education, agriculture, trade and scientific training” (Bose 1975: 154). Similar associations were started among various castes in various parts of the country, such as the Izhavas in Kerala and the Nadars in Tamil Nadu (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967; Hardgrave 1968).

Attention soon shifted from matrimonial and dietary practices to opportunities for education and employment. This may be viewed as modernisation of a sort, but that is not how things were viewed by those who had focused their minds on the economic development of a nation long mired by poverty and stagnation.

As the focus of attention shifted from matters of esteem and prestige to matters of political advantage, or from status to power, several consequences followed. Rivalries between castes became more open; the sense of deprivation became more widespread among socially disadvantaged castes; and the colonial government began to be approached for redressing the balance in favour of the disadvantaged. The lower castes did not expect fair treatment at the hands of the upper, and felt that only the British could give them what they most needed. The upper castes whose members dominated the Congress Party naturally felt resentful. Resentment between the upper and the lower castes became built into the politics of backwardness.

After Independence the political conflicts among castes became more widespread and more intense. New rivalries and new alliances between castes, sub-castes and groups of castes began to arise. There were enormous regional differences at the time of Independence, the most notable being the difference, already noted at more than one point, between peninsular India and the rest of the country. These differences have become ironed out to some extent as a result of the greater involvement of caste in the political process in most if not all parts of the country.

I have already referred to the address given by Srinivas in 1957 on caste in modern India as some kind of turning point. What in the long run had even greater influence on viewing caste as a matter mainly of politics rather than religion was the concept of dominant caste first formulated by Srinivas in 1955 and later elaborated by him in a paper devoted specifically to the subject (Srinivas 1987: 96-115). Louis Dumont whose view of caste gave primacy to religion and kinship treated the concept sceptically if not dismissively (Dumont and Pocock 1957). In the end it was Srinivas' view that prevailed over Dumont's.

The concept of dominant caste has acquired wide currency to the extent that it has become a part of the common sense of public intellectuals in India. It is unlikely that Srinivas himself foresaw all the uses to which his concept would be put in later years. One may wonder if he ever turned his back fully on the perception of caste articulated by his mentor at Oxford A R Radcliffe-Brown who wrote in his foreword to Srinivas' seminal work on the Coorgs: “A caste is in its essence a religious group membership of which entails certain ritual observances. The rules of caste behaviour are rules of religion” (Srinivas 2003: x). The difficulty of deciding once and for all whether caste is in its essence a religious or a political group contributes something to its peculiar tenacity.

The adoption of adult franchise after Independence altered the scope of caste politics and created new openings for its operation. Going to the colonial authorities for redressing the imbalances between castes is one thing, and going to the people for that purpose is another. The colonial authorities acted with caution and moderation, and they were inclined to treat the demands made by castes and communities as matters of policy rather than of right. With the adoption of adult franchise the countryside began to experience the pulls and pressures, and also the thrills of electioneering on an unprecedented scale. Loyalty to caste provided an easy basis for mobilising electoral support. Where caste consciousness was dying down, it was brought back to life by the massive campaigns that became a part of every election.

Once again, the difference between peninsular India and the rest of the country stands out. In the old Madras Presidency and in the old Mysore state the non-brahmin movement had kept caste in the public consciousness ever since the formation of the Justice Party. After Independence, it did not take much effort there to adapt the consciousness of caste, lying just beneath the surface, to the new kind of electoral politics. In the north, in states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, it took a little more time to reach the same outcome.

At first the use of caste for mobilising electoral support was defended on pragmatic grounds. Now it has come to be defended on grounds of social justice. The reason given by each political party in the early years of Independence was that in a world where every political party was using caste, it would be imprudent to risk the loss of electoral support by ignoring caste. The Left parties and their intellectual advocates were particularly censorious about fostering caste sentiments through the electoral process. Their attitude to caste politics then was radically different from their attitude to class politics.

Watershed of 1975-77 Emergency

Things began to change in the aftermath of the Emergency of 1975-77. The report of the Mandal Commission of 1980 and the agitation for the implementation of its recommendations in 1990 turned the tide in favour of caste politics. Increasingly, social justice came to be seen as a matter of caste rather than class. The Left parties acquiesced in this change of orientation and even sought to justify it in the name of Marxism; the author of the three volumes of *Das Kapital* must have turned in his grave.

In a democracy, political programmes that are advocated on ideological grounds often have purely pragmatic grounds for their adoption. What are the pragmatic considerations that favour caste over class as a basis for mobilising electoral support? To put it in a nutshell, the identities of caste are much more clear-cut and fixed than those of class. Everybody, or almost everybody can say what his caste is, and he will give the same answer from one election to the next. Very few can tell what their class is, and the answer could change over time.

The founders of the theory of class and class conflict believed in the 19th century that the principal classes in capitalist society

would come to be defined more and more clearly and sharply and that each class would become progressively more aware of its own identity and its own material interests. That did not happen in the advanced industrial societies, and is not likely to happen either there or in India. Increased opportunities for individual mobility have weakened the identities of class but have done little to affect the identities of caste. If I were a politician intent only on mobilising support for the next election, I would much rather bet on caste than on class.

The consciousness of caste is heightened periodically by campaigns for electoral office which have become more spectacular, more extravagant and more costly from one campaign to another. In the intervals between elections the same consciousness is kept alive by the interest displayed by the media in caste and its role in public life. In most parts of the country outside peninsular India caste was largely ignored by the media. I do not remember much interest being shown in caste by the newspapers in Calcutta or Delhi until 1977. Madras and Mysore may have been different, but in most metropolitan cities the attitude was similar to the one adopted by the *Times of India* in 1957 that M N Srinivas had greatly exaggerated the role of caste in public life.

There has been a sea-change in the approach of the media to caste matters. Newspapers in India's capital city now give much more space to caste than they did before. Newspapers all over the world report on day-to-day events rather than long-term trends of change, and they tend to give precedence to the political over other matters. There may be nothing to report on inter-dining or intermarriage for one full year, but there is always something to report on politics every day. However, the main responsibility for giving a sensational turn to caste lies with the electronic media. Private television channels organise discussions for which they secure the assistance of experts of various kinds who speak endlessly and tirelessly about the "caste factor" or the "caste equation" at work behind every kind of electoral alliance and rivalry. They have found this to be an easy and effective way of maintaining viewer interest. In this process the long-term changes in other aspects of caste get easily lost to sight. The social and political scientists who are lured by these television channels come to believe in their own formulas, and propagate them through scholarly and semi-scholarly publications. It has now become a part of the conventional wisdom that caste is here to stay just as it was a part of the conventional wisdom among the makers of modern India that caste was bound to disappear.

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