BOOK REVIEWS

Jodhka, S. Surinder (2012), *Caste, Oxford India Short Introductions*, **Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India, pp. xvii+201, Rs. 195.**

Caste as Tradition

The term 'caste' comes from the Spanish word *casta*, which means race. Hence, ironically the concept of caste is not of Indian origin—the Portuguese seafarers arrived in the fifteenth century for trade used the term 'caste' in the Indian context. The author argues that in ancient times, the caste system was very rigid in terms of allocating and ascribing social roles and positions to different communities on the lines of purity and pollution. However, with the advent of British rule and thereby the introduction of 'modern education' in India, the rigidity of caste has gradually reduced. The author admits that due to various sectarian political influences and interventions the political leaders have always used the caste factor for narrow political gains which in turn has kept the caste system alive.

Western View of Caste

The Western view of caste developed over time with the writings of Orientalists, missionaries, and colonial administrators contributing in different ways. The author here brings into context works done by Max Weber (1958), Celestin Bougle (1958), and Louis Dumont (1998) on caste system in India in an argumentative fashion. Weber defines caste as 'status group' present in all societies where market and capitalist relations had not yet evolved (p. 12). These status groups, Weber puts forth, enjoys some social estimation of honour. For Bougles, a caste-based society is divided into a large number of mutually opposed groups which are hereditary specialised and hierarchically arranged (p. 15). Louis Dumont viewed caste as Hindu practices, and is concerned with 'totality' and 'holism'. Traditional caste society valued 'totality', 'holism', inequality and social differences while modern society valued individualism and equality. He further argues that the caste system presents a particular type of inequality that is hierarchically naturalised inequality inherently legitimised by the Hindu religious belief (p. 16). The social hierarchy is maintained through conception and practices of 'purity' and 'pollution' thereby exercise of power and status in the society.

Indian Understanding

Sociologists and social anthropologists found that though the village as a social organisation was hierarchical, its underlying spirit was that of 'interdependence' and 'reciprocity' among different caste groups. M.N. Srinivas (1976) through the concept of Sankritisation described the concept of social mobility in which he argued that mobility is possible in caste against the Varna system (p. 28). He described that caste

mobility happens through land-holding, engagement in education, wealth position, in government and village organisation, age and distinctive personality trait. The author argues that the national leaders, social anthropologists and academicians today hold the view of caste as tradition as understood by Colonialists and Orientalists—an Indian village ritual and religious practice.

Caste as Power

The traditional institutions like the village and caste begun to change initially with the influence of colonial rule and later with the process of development and democratisation introduced after independence. Subsequently, the process of transformation challenged the classical argument and questioned how social status and religious ideology in caste society could work independent of socio-economic and political power and dominance. In other words, as the author argues, 'hierarchy' and 'status' are also dimensions or forms of 'power' (p. 35). The reproduction of 'status' in everyday life would have been possible only through operation of 'power'—coercive or logistic including religious ideology. For example, terms like 'dominant castes' or 'depressed castes' represents power relations and increasingly caste communities have come to determine the fate of electoral and democratic politics and governance system. Author argues that, when the ritual dominance existed by itself, unaccompanied by the other forms of dominance, it had to be supported by material prosperity. For instance, untouchability is about control over the lives of untouchables, a relationship of power reinforced with coercion. Author further argues that the use of coercive violence to discipline the untouchables was common practice of hierarchical power—which kept the dominant and deprived castes tied to each other. Hence, Dumont's concept of caste as distinct entity and superior to political and economic sphere is challenged by Social Anthropologists like Nicholas Dirks (1987, 2001) and Gloria G. Raheja (1989) and others.

Caste as Humiliation

Caste system lies in the concept of 'purity' and 'pollution' which presupposes humiliation, violence and torture. According to the author, viewed from 'below' the most critical feature of caste is the experience of untouchability—in which the 'line of pollution' has been an important category in the official discourse on caste. In most of the cases, the idea of untouchability is an obvious extension of the idea of pollution, or of the notion of purity and impurity. The author cautions that, however untouchability is also much more than what the notion of pollution suggests (p. 71). The colonial literature remained preoccupied with the *varna* system of hierarchy and the challenge was to place the untouchable into the model. The author argues that though the concept of 'untouchability' originated in the writings of the local reformers, who were mostly from the upper strata, they approached the question of caste from their nascent democratic imagination (p. 73).

The author then examines the process of legal and Constitutional changes from untouchables to the concept of Scheduled Castes as its official recognition in the Government of India Act of 1935. The humiliation and offences associated with