

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Caste Inequalities in India Today*

Seen from the vantage point of the Nehruvian era, the 1980s and 1990s have witnessed what psychoanalysts call 'the return of the repressed'—the reappearance in pathological form of a trauma forced from conscious memory. One such trauma was discussed in the last chapter: the spatial strategies of *varna*, caste is another. In this chapter, specifically, the visibility of the lower castes has been much more of a shock to the largely caste-blind classes than the revival of hinduism.

During the Nehruvian era, national consensus on caste seemed much more comprehensible than the one on secularism. Caste—unlike religion or few ‘traditional’ institutions that were present in England, as ‘secular’ and ‘modern’, without any redeeming features. It was only civilized in the 1950s and ‘60s it seems, though everyone no one argued otherwise. Nehruvian India, and specially to those who (had) were brought up in additionally upper-caste but ‘newly converted’ and newly national middle-class environment, caste was an anachronistic concept. True, it would be brought out of figurative mothballs to preside over traditional rites of passage, especially marriage, but it seemed to have

no active role in urban everyday life.

It is only now—after Mandal, so to speak—that we are beginning to understand why caste was almost invisible in urban middle-class contexts. The most important reason, of course, is that these contexts were overwhelmingly dominated by the upper castes. This homogeneity made caste drop below the threshold of social visibility. If almost everyone around is upper-caste, caste identity is unlikely to be an issue, just as our identity as ‘Indians’ may be relevant abroad but goes unnoticed in India. Moreover, it was precisely the upper castes who had least problems in supporting the official and sometimes oral ban on discussion of caste in the decades after Independence. Whatever personal views on the subject, it is remarkable to suppose that a social group that benefitted from the system, the upper castes would have been averse to the debate on caste.

Despite its status as a discipline mostly associated with the subject, Indian sociology seems to have been ‘immune’ to the ‘partial’—that is, the tendency for caste to vanish from view in contexts where it had been most effectively pinned down a strong yet odd partiality—the *partial*—that is to say, people’s understanding of caste in an sociological sense.

I first recognized the uneasiness for caste in a crowded upper-middle-class Chinese restaurant in Hyderabad. The restaurant was ‘upper’ enough to play reggae music, but not to require that diners be seated, but also ‘middle’ enough to be save-faced and save-faced ahead of the bill. Furious because he felt others had snatched his seat, the manager in authoritative Indian English. Although he was yelling, I would not have noticed his voice in the general din but for the incongruous northern accent. ‘Are we *scheduled castes* or what?’ he shouted.

The phrase ‘Scheduled Castes’ sounds appropriately quaint in Anglo-American English, specially if one recounts its colonial origins

in the Government of India Act of 1935, which required the preparation of Schedules listing the castes and tribes forming the 'Depressed Classes'. But as is well known, the phrase is used as a single word in Indian English, a common noun without capitals, and that is how the man used it. And everyone understood him perfectly well—the hapless manager, the rival group that he suspected of usurping his table, his own companions, even bystanders like myself.

What made me uneasy was my gut feeling that being a sociologist had placed me at a *disadvantage* vis-à-vis the other bystanders in interpreting this incident. My discipline did not offer much help in figuring out what caste means in places like a big-city Chinese restaurant, or for people who wear safari suits. Instead, it pointed me to villages, religious beliefs about purity and pollution, ritual customs about food and marriage. It did not mean to suggest that these are the wrong directions to look in it. But these are not the directions I took, perhaps even the most unthinking, unmindful of its legal abolition half a century ago.

A popular saying in India asks us to think of a particular paint company when we think of caste. Whenever we think of caste, Indian sociology seems to 'see' villages, rituals, rites and so on. This is a true but rather narrow view of caste. It is also a risk that risks becoming untrue because it is unaware (or in denial) of its partiality. It is of this risk that the safari-suit manager in the restaurant, and us by demonstrating that the caste is alive and well, are guilty. It is of this risk that the manager in the restaurant, he may never have set foot in a village. But Mr. Muni quite knows who 'castes' are, how they are to be treated, and people like him are infinitely superior—in short, he knows more about caste than us to know about caste.

#### *Caste as seen from sociology: what is missing?*

Today, a decade after the bitter controversy over the Mandal

Commission report, we may be better placed to appreciate the irony in the fact that this controversy offered us—albeit by accident—a rare window of insight into Indian sociology. Given the centrality of caste, an undeniably 'sociological' subject, one would normally have expected the discipline to shed light on the controversy rather than the other way around. Of course, such expectations were not entirely belied. But while some sociologists did gain rare public attention for their comments, the discipline itself gained little in prestige and authority.

This was not because sociologists adopted unpopular stances. In fact, the most prominent among them were vocal in their support for the anti-Mandal position which dominated urban middle-class perceptions of this issue and received wide and strongly sympathetic coverage in the metropolitan media. But, by and large, sociologists were unable to say anything that went beyond popular commonsense. In this respect they were no different from the journalists, politicians, administrators, other academics or legions of self-proclaimed pundits commenting on the subject. Like everyone else, sociologists too concentrated on the possible consequences of implementing the *Mandal Report*. Forgotten were the questions that ought to have come first, at least for a discipline claiming specialized knowledge of caste as a social institution: *Is caste discrimination still practised in contemporary India? Does it continue to breed inequality? What is the nature and extent of such inequality today? How has it been changing since independence?*

It may seem painfully obvious that problems must be discussed before solutions are debated, but exactly the opposite seems to have happened during the Mandal controversy. What is most remarkable, however, is that sociologists should have shared in and helped accentuate such a perverse response. By addressing crucial questions which the overnight experts were unable to answer, sociologists could have demonstrated that their discipline provides insights that commonsense cannot. But it seems in retrospect that the sociologists' silence on questions of caste inequality was not so much perverse as

prudent. As a matter of fact, despite all its claims to an *aspects-on-caste*, Indian sociology did not have the answers never having shown much interest in macro-analyses of caste inequality. The important point, though, is that this lack of interest was itself invisible because it was so much a part of business as usual in Indian sociology.<sup>2</sup> It took a national crisis as big as Mandal to alert us to this blind spot, and to drag us into recognizing it as a problem. But let me backtrack a bit more precisely what the Mandal controversy revealed about caste inequalities.

#### UNEQUALITIES

In its inequality hierarchy, the idea of inequality is hardly absent from the society, since it is at the heart of the classic models of the caste system. Caste inequality is rather different from the social hierarchy that is at issue in the Mandal controversy. In fact, they are incommensurable.

To begin with, the notion of inequality in the caste system tends to relativize hierarchy with respect to merit, spirituality, sanctity, etc. In other words of this model, the caste system is not everyone in the system is not above some one else, being unequal, they are in a certain sense equalized by this factor of ascendance, in the manner of Durmont's theoretical model of the caste system. Thus, the king to the (Brahmin) priest. This means that the king has secular power (the king) requires religious sanction from the Brahmins, and even the caste with the highest ritual rank (Brahmin), subject to the secular power of a caste of lower rank. Thus, the anthropological understanding of caste as hierarchy blunts the sharp edge that inequality often acquires in other contexts.

This is reinforced by the fact that caste in anthropology is defined

as essentially a *consensual system based on complementarity*—this is what differentiates castes from ethnic groups, for example. All castes in a caste system recognize the same basic hierarchy and accept (or at least tacitly acknowledge) their own position within it, though there may be variations and disputes. On the other hand, every ethnic group can have its own version of a social hierarchy in which it usually places itself at the top. Moreover, one ethnic group is conceptually and functionally the same as any other group, whereas castes are differentiated and complement each other, the former being the well-known occupation-of-labour version of caste. Occupational specialization thus describes the caste system and not the contemporary understanding of caste in the traditional mode.

More generally, in the schools of anthropology, caste and its political conflicts by locating it in the belief systems. Such a conceptual consequence of an excessive emphasis on the caste in terms of interests. Thus, much of anthropological theory, notably religious texts, ritual standards, norms of endogamy and pollution, and rules and customs, is both cause and turn, is both cause and effect to the exclusion of other social factors such as economic development, food-sharing (commensality). That was a far cry from the situation in the independent India in the Mandal era.

If we look at Dumont's 'book' view of Indian society, the picture is severely skewed and the political dimensions of caste inequality are severely marginalized. M.N. Srinivas' 'field' view is less culpable in this regard, but it is a frequently mentioned matter of pride for the discipline. Sociologist, M.N. Srinivas, invented terms such as 'sanskritisation', 'dominant caste' and 'vote bank' which have come to dominate popular perceptions of the politics of caste in modern India. There can be no denying the fact that the Srinivas-inspired framework of the 1960s and '70s has greatly improved our understanding of the

concrete content of caste relations and their dynamics vis-à-vis class and power in specific regional contexts. But even this school has had its shortcomings.

One major problem has been the almost exclusive reliance on the standard anthropological method of intensive fieldwork by a single scholar in a very small area (usually a single village). While this has certainly yielded valuable insights, it has precluded any significant attempts at developing a macro-perspective based on a more broad-based coverage of the field. Survey methods in particular have remained underdeveloped.<sup>3</sup>

But most important, perhaps, is the fact that influential sociologists have tended to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds on this issue. They have been the first to criticize the methods used and the macro-data produced to track caste inequality, and their criticisms have often been quite legitimate. However, they have also been in the forefront of opposition to initiatives for the systematic collection of macro-level data on caste, even though they have not, by and large, shown any eagerness to suggest alternative methodologies for data collection.

In the early 1990s, for example, mauling the Mandal Commission's report for its weak database and questionable methodology had become something of a professional pastime for sociologists. But rarely were critics willing to specify what available datasets the Commission had failed to utilize, precisely how it could have improved upon its methodology, and, more generally, how it could have done a better job within the given constraints.<sup>4</sup> And yet a few years later, when the collection of caste data in the 2001 census was being mooted, the same voices were heard denouncing this proposal as not just impractical but pernicious.<sup>5</sup> Once again there was little concern for suggesting alternatives.

Such persistently contradictory behaviour suggests that the real problem with researching caste inequality is not the pragmatic one of data availability, but something deeper. Perhaps the relevant place to look is the prevailing commonsense on caste, which shapes sociologists

and is also shaped by them.

#### COMMONSENSE ON CASTE INEQUALITY

It would be misleading to suggest that there is any one homogeneous commonsense view of caste inequality. Nevertheless, most urban, educated middle-class (and therefore largely upper-caste) Indians would tend to think of caste inequality in ways that would include the following elements:

1. Caste inequality is a social evil, in fact a rather terrible thing, and we have to admit that it used to be very bad in the past. However, after independence, things have been changing rapidly, even if not as swiftly or comprehensively as might be desired. The condition of the lowest castes and tribes is improving steadily; the link between caste and occupation is weakening, and members of every caste are now engaged in a much wider variety of occupations than before. Reservation has provided very real benefits to the SC/SI group, but this is being monopolized by a minority within the group. Reservation policies and the like have now become involved in the electoral arithmetic of vote banks and so are extended and continued in all sorts of contexts where they are not warranted.
2. Caste has been given a new lease of life by its encashability in politics. Backward status is now something advantageous and is sought for by all sorts of castes. Since politics is dominated by the numerically stronger lower and middle castes, the upper castes are now facing a very real reverse discrimination.
3. There is a great variation in the economic and social status of members of every caste group. This variation makes it misleading to use caste per se as a criterion to decide backwardness or forwardness. More objective criteria sensitive to individual contexts are needed. The time may have come when caste is no longer particularly useful as a criterion, economic and other criteria being more relevant. Particularly with regard to job reservations, the principle of

compensatory preferences has been overextended, and this has resulted in the 'murder of merit'.

4. Socially and culturally, the main aspect of caste discrimination, namely untouchability, has already been outlawed, and legislatively there is not much more to be done in this area. Whatever prejudices remain are due to the stubborn attitudes of a few diehards. Such attitudes should be condemned and people should be educated to transcend them, but laws cannot really change the way people think. By and large, the upper castes have given up their prejudices, and moved beyond/out of caste. Ironically, today it is the lower and middle castes who are the main props for the continuance of this pernicious system.

There is much that is true in this commonsense story but there is also much that is not: most important, perhaps, are the questions that remain unasked. For example, it is perfectly true that, by and large, when compared to the situation prevailing at independence, the condition of all social groups, including the lowest castes and tribes, has improved today. But by how much has it improved? How have the lowest castes/tribes fared in comparison to the rest of the population?

Again, it is almost a truism to say that, today, the variety of occupations and professions among all caste groups is much wider than it was fifty years ago. However, this does not change the massive social reality that the overwhelming majority of those in the 'highest' or most preferred occupations are from the upper castes, while the vast majority of those in the most menial and despised occupations belong to the lowest castes. In short, while it is indeed significant that some members of the lowest castes are now able to occupy very high positions, or that many members of high castes are being forced into menial occupations today, this does not by itself demonstrate that caste and occupational status have been delinked. We must also ask if particular occupations continue to be dominated by particular caste

clusters, and whether this makes for a recognizable pattern systematically linking privilege and dis-privilege to caste. In other words, the caste-composition of the privileged groups in society is a critical yardstick: as long as this continues to reflect the dominance of the upper castes, it does not matter even if the majority of the members of these castes are themselves poor or disprivileged. This would only demonstrate that while caste remains a necessary precondition for making it into the privileged group, it is not in itself a sufficient condition to ensure entry. One could go on in this vein, but it may be more productive to take up the question of evidence.

### *Caste as a determinant of life-chances in independent India*

First and most important point to be noted when considering the issue of caste inequality is that there have been no attempts to collect such evidence. Indeed, the opportunity to do so prompted scholars and administrators to face the reality of caste society with a cast-iron constitution to ignore all differences between castes. The explicit constitutionalized, religion and sect-based caste system followed in the British Raj and continued by the Constitutionally sanctioned Schedule Caste and Other Backward Classes. Despite the fact that official statistics have been collected on caste, both language and specialized occupation, and despite the fact that such data were collected on caste, the Census did not collect information on caste. Thus, even the Census has resolved to ask questions about caste, on the ground that the new statistical system attempts to collect such data without the imperial 'divide and rule' strategy. So the only reliable data on caste is restricted to the classification of 'Scheduled Caste', 'Scheduled Tribe' and 'Other Backward Classes'. About the caste of one-fourth of the population, the

remaining three-fourths being lumped together in the residual term 'Other', which includes non-Hindus and persons with no caste.

The active antipathy towards caste after independence was the joint product of, first, the nationalist movement and its campaign against caste distinctions, and, second, a reaction against what were deliberate colonial policies to create and sharpen divisions between Indian people. As recent scholarship has shown,<sup>7</sup> the situation is simple or straightforward. First of all, it is impossible simply to speak of 'the' nationalist movement's singular and uncompromising position on caste. The angularity of the exception of the 'untouchables' from the larger caste nationalist leaf'—Gandhi: easily visible and effacing—was something else. There was something also believed in the white society into a hierarchy of segments. The second point is that the colonial power would foster 'untouchability' among the subject population, it is to be said for the 'various' reasons of racial hierarchy, the motives and intentions of the institutions that produced it. It is quite difficult to discern 'inheritance' in the caste system. However, the motives and intentions of the institutions that produced it were by no means never enough to ensure the subject population overcame so widespread a phenomenon.

What are the merits of the antecedents of the post-independence backlash against caste was strong and well founded. It is one of the paradoxical lessons of modern Indian history that caste must measure whatever it wishes to eradicate. As a result, the data that we have on caste inequality is only meagre but also *reluctant*, so to speak, needing to be coaxed into existence, and dependent on the accidents of scholarly interest and statistical convenience. What needs to be emphasized is that unlike other comparable situations, the paucity and poor quality of these data is the result of wilful if well-intentioned neglect: we refused to collect such data because we thought we should not collect them and did not need them. However, the irony is that the end result is not

very different from what might have been the case had there been a giant conspiracy to suppress evidence of caste inequality.

It is against this background that we must evaluate the many shortcomings and silences of the available data on caste inequality.

#### **AVAILABLE EVIDENCE ON CASTE INEQUALITY**

The National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) offers the most broad-based data sets that can provide relatively direct evidence on economic inequality across caste groups. However, for the reasons already mentioned, until the year 2000, the NSSO has always restricted itself to the constitutionally sanctioned categories of the Scheduled Tribes and Castes, with everyone else being thrown together into the vast and immensely diverse residual group of 'Other'. Because it is unable to distinguish between the very different sorts of people included in it (such as the Other Backward Classes, the 'forward' castes, and non-Hindus who may or may not have a caste identity), this category is an analytical nightmare. Nevertheless, flawed as they are, the NSSO data have demonstrated that caste continues to be a major fault line of economic inequality in contemporary India.

The last phrase is particularly important. I have taken up the most recent data available precisely in order to emphasize that we are indeed speaking of contemporary times, not of the bad old days: caste is alive and well today, a half-century after its official abolition. In the tables below, I present data from the last quinquennial (five-yearly) 'round' of the NSSO, the 55<sup>th</sup> Round, conducted during 1999–2000. The five-yearly or 'big sample' rounds are mammoth year-long surveys involving a huge, carefully selected sample of about 1,20,000 households from 12,000 villages and urban blocks all over India. Although academics and policy makers have been concerned about the impact of some changes in the methodology of the 55<sup>th</sup> Round, there is no reason to believe that this will affect a single time-point comparison across social groups, which is what I am doing here.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the 55<sup>th</sup> Round is a historic one because it is the first to

provide data separately for the 'Other Backward Classes'. This allows us, for the first time since Independence, to disaggregate the 'Other' category. In conjunction with the data on religious communities published separately by the NSSO, it is also possible to construct rough 'guesstimates' of the most elusive social group in modern India in statistical terms, namely upper-caste Hindus.<sup>9</sup>

Details of Monthly Per capita Consumption Expenditure (MPCE) are the most basic and widely used data collected by the NSSO surveys. Since consumption expenditure is considered to be a reliable proxy for income (which is notoriously difficult to measure directly), this is the main database used to estimate poverty levels in the country. The NSSO reports typically divide the range of monthly per capita consumption expenditure (henceforth MPCE) into twelve different size-classes, and tell us what proportion of the rural and urban populations of each social group (caste or religion-based) falls in each of these classes. The twelve size-classes are much too detailed for the purposes of this discussion, so I have consolidated them into four classes: below the official Poverty Line (defined as Rs 329 per person per month for Rural India, and Rs 458 per person per month for Urban India); from the Poverty Line to the next three size-classes above—this may be called the 'above the poverty line' class; the next three size-classes above this, which can be called the 'less poor' class; and finally, the top two MPCE classes, which can be called the 'non poor'.

For someone seeking to understand caste inequality, a severe limitation of the NSSO data is that it is heavily tilted towards the poor—though this is understandable given the policy concerns it was designed to address. It is important to understand what this means in concrete terms. For example, a hypothetical family of five members with a monthly expenditure of about Rs 1,650 or less in rural India, and about Rs 2,300 or less in urban India, would be located on or just below the Poverty Line for 1999–2000. However, at the upper end of the scale, the top two MPCE classes would include all families of five with monthly expenditures of Rs 3,875 in rural India, and Rs 7,500 in

urban India—and all families that spent more. To put this more starkly in the following tables, a rural family of five spending Rs 3,875 per month is clubbed together with the richest rural family you can imagine, while an urban family of five spending Rs 7,500 a month is placed in the same statistical class as the Ambanis or the Tatas!

This is the reason why we are forced to use very vague grab-bag categories like 'less poor' or 'non poor' which conceal much more than they reveal. This is in part a technical problem because the rich—or even the middle classes—are such a small proportion of the population that it is difficult to ensure that they are adequately represented by standard sampling techniques designed to cover the entire nation. In fact, the NSSO has been making special efforts to 'oversample' the urban non-poor households to ensure that enough of them are covered.<sup>10</sup> While we cannot blame the NSSO data for doing what they were designed to do, namely, provide a detailed profile of poverty, we can and must do two things: first, remind ourselves that even in its present form the NSSO data offers plenty of evidence pointing to the continued existence of a massive caste divide in India in the twenty-first century; and second, look for more direct evidence that is able to confirm or deny the presence of caste inequality among the privileged sections of the population.

#### 55TH ROUND DATA ON SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Table 1 shows us the division of each social group (i.e., caste or religious community) into MPCE classes for Rural India. There are four such classes as explained earlier: Rs 329 or less, which is Below the Poverty Line (BPL); Rs 329 to Rs 470, which is Above the Poverty Line (APL); Rs 470–775 which includes the next three classes of the 'Non Poor'; and finally the topmost class of 'Non Poor' which is everyone above Rs 775. Thus, the column for Scheduled Tribes shows that almost 51 per cent of the community belongs in the BPL group while less than 3 per cent is in the 'Non Poor' group. We can similarly read down the column for any group to see its class composition—the percentage of

SOCIAL COMPOSITION OF MONTHLY PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION EXPENDITURE CLASSES, RURAL INDIA, 1999-2000										
TABLE 1										
MPC Class	ST	SC	OBC	Muslim	Christian	Sikh	Other	Hindu	Upper Castes?	All Groups
Below Poverty Line	50.9	42.9	33.7	37.5	24.1	6.1	42.6	16.9	16.9*	33.6
Rs 329 to Rs 470	30.8	34.4	35.8	34.9	27.8	20.9	46.1	32.5	33.8	33.6
Rs 470 to Rs 775	15.6	19.2	24.5	22.2	32.5	46.1	22.0	36.6	36.6	25.3
Rs 775 to Rs 775	2.7	3.4	2.4	2.2	5.5	15.6	27.0	72	14.0	7.3
All Classes	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

SOCIAL GROUPS STRATIFIED BY MONTHLY PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION EXPENDITURE CLASSES, RURAL INDIA, 1999-2000										
TABLE 2										
MPC Class	ST	SC	OBC	Muslim	Christian	Sikh	Other	Hindu	Upper Castes?	All Groups
Below Poverty Line	15.3	23.0	37.5	11.8	1.6	0.4	0.8	9.6	9.6	100.0
Rs 329 to Rs 470	9.2	18.4	39.6	10.9	1.8	1.2	0.6	18.4	18.4	100.0
Rs 470 to Rs 775	3.7	13.7	36.2	9.2	2.8	3.6	0.6	27.6	27.6	100.0
All Classes	10.1	18.0	37.4*	10.5	2.2	2.0	1.4	18.4**	18.4**	100.0

SOCIAL GROUPS STRATIFIED BY MONTHLY PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION EXPENDITURE CLASSES, URBAN INDIA, 1999-2000										
TABLE 3										
MPC Class	ST	SC	OBC	Muslim	Christian	Sikh	Other	Hindu	Upper Castes?	All Groups
Below Poverty Line	42.6	43.1	36.0	46.5	16.3	15.0	24.7	4.9	28.5	37.4
Rs 458-Rs 775	32.6	39.7	35.9	31.8	36.4	30.9	34.8	34.8	26.3	57.4
Rs 775-Rs 1,500	19.1	15.9	20.7	15.1	36.0	34.3	31.3	43.2	43.2	26.3
All Classes	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

* = OBC figure from NSSO 55 <sup>th</sup> Round, not Census; ** = HUC? figure obtained as residual.
Note: Rows may not add up to 100 due to rounding errors. Source: Reports Nos. 468 and 469, NSSO, September 2001.

SOCIAL COMPOSITION OF MONTHLY PER CAPITA CONSUMPTION EXPENDITURE CLASSES, URBAN INDIA, 1999-2000										
TABLE 4										
MPC Class	ST	SC	OBC	Muslim	Christian	Sikh	Other	Hindu	Upper Castes?	Total
Below Poverty Line	6.0	22.7	33.9	28.0	1.7	0.9	2.1	4.7	100.0	100.0
Rs 458-Rs 775	3.5	15.7	32.7	16.5	2.5	1.7	2.0	2.5	100.0	100.0
Rs 775-Rs 1,500	2.9	9.1	24.2	9.8	4.0	2.3	2.9	4.4	100.0	100.0
All Classes	2.3	12.0	31.4*	14.6	5.5	6.0	4.0	4.0	59.8	100.0

* = OBC figure from NSSO 55 <sup>th</sup> Round, not Census; ** = HUC? figure obtained as residual.
Note: Rows may not add up to 100 due to rounding errors. Source: Reports Nos. 468 and 469, NSSO, September 2001.

its population that belongs in each of the four MPCE classes. The last column provides the class composition of the population as a whole. However, the class composition of caste groups (i.e., the percentage of each caste's population that is BPL, APL and so on) tells us only half the story. We must also ask about the caste composition of class groups—that is, of all the people who are BPL, APL and so on, what percentage belong to the ST, SC or other caste/community groups? Table 2 provides us this information. It is computed by mapping the percentage distribution of Table 1 to the population totals for each social group. These population totals, in turn, are obtained by taking the 1991 Census data on each social group (the percentage of the total population belonging to the STs, SCs and so on in the 1991 Census) and applying it to the population projection for 2000. Table 2 is organized in terms of the four rows for each MPCE class. Thus, the row for Below the Poverty Line tells us that the BPL population of rural India was composed of 15.3 per cent STs, 23.0 per cent SCs, 37.5 per cent OBCs, and so on across the row. Tables 3 and 4 provide the same data for Urban India and are organized in exactly the same way.

To establish the continued existence of sharp caste inequalities in contemporary India, we need go no further than a comparison of the four caste groups that appear on Tables 1 and 3—ST, SC, OBC and Hindu Upper Castes (HUC). (As already explained, figures for the Hindu Upper Castes are 'guesstimates' and must be treated with caution. Please see note 9 to this chapter.) In Rural India, as Table 1 shows, more than half of the ST population lives below the poverty line. This proportion is only slightly less for the SCs at about 43 per cent, and lesser still for the OBCs at about 34 per cent. However, the HUC are markedly different, with only about 17 per cent BPL. At the other end of the class spectrum, if we look at the Rs 775 and above class, there is a reverse effect: the HUCs at 14 per cent are way ahead of the STs and SCs (both around 3 per cent) and also of the OBCs at 6 per cent. In other words, the 'non poor' are a much smaller proportion of the lower-caste population and a relatively much higher proportion of the upper-caste population. The opposite is the case with the poorest

or BPL class: the lower castes have a huge proportion of their population here, while the upper castes have a relatively much smaller proportion.

In urban India, as Table 3 shows, these inequalities are even more stark. Only about 5 per cent of the HUCs are BPL, while the figures for the lower castes are much higher: 43 per cent for both STs and SCs, and 36 per cent for the OBCs. Conversely, the HUCs have a much larger proportion of their population among the 'non poor' category (or those with MPCE levels of Rs 1,500 or more)—17 per cent—compared to the single digit figures of 6, 2 and 4 for the STs, SCs and OBCs, respectively.

Coming now to the question of the caste composition of the different income or MPCE classes, we see that Tables 2 and 4 confirm the grim picture presented by the previous two Tables. The general pattern is as expected in Rural India, but Table 2 tells us one important fact, namely, that in rural society, the OBCs are the only social group with a remarkably even presence in all economic classes: they constitute 30 per cent or more of each MPCE class from the BPL to the 'non poor'. As against this, the STs and SCs are under-represented among the 'non poor' and over-represented among the BPL. The opposite is the case with the HUCs—they are over-represented among the non poor and under-represented among the BPL. Thus, while arguments about rural OBCs need to be made with care, the case for continuing caste inequalities is very strong.

However, it is in urban India—the seat of genuine privilege—that the inter-caste differences are at their steepest. The most striking feature of Table 4 is the figure in its bottom right-hand corner—the HUCs constitute almost 60 per cent of the 'non poor' urban class. The urban OBCs do not resemble their rural counterparts and are much closer to the STs and SCs in profile. In fact, urban OBCs account for more than one third of the urban BPL population. Tables 2 and 4 provide us with yet another sobering fact: in the year 2000, STs, SCs, OBCs and Muslims together account for 91 per cent of the urban BPL population and 88 per cent of the rural BPL population.

Let me emphasize, in closing this discussion of the NSSO 55<sup>th</sup> Round data, that these are very significant facts. Commonsense may tell us that the lower castes are now ruling the roost, but the facts are otherwise. Despite the major phenomenon of the rural OBCs—*itself* a residual, unexamined category that deserves more detailed attention—caste inequality has been flourishing in rural and specially in urban India. These data are from a very large, national survey; they report proportions averaged across thousands of cases—they cannot be dismissed as being due to inter-individual differences or statistical accidents. The differences between caste groups are too strong and too stable to be artefacts. We have to make the necessary effort to transcend the commonsense view and re-examine the question of caste inequality seriously.

#### **CASTE AND PRIVILEGE**

Among the many inanities that were part of 'ragging' in my long-past days as an undergraduate was the benign one of solving riddles, with the fresher being expected to guess the 'correct' answers to set questions asked by the seniors. One of these 'riddles', asked usually at dinner time in the dining hall, went something like this: Q: Do you see an elephant in your custard? A: No, sir. Q: Why not? A: Because it is very well hidden, sir.

This, in essence, seems to be the commonsense response to the abundant evidence in our everyday lives of the strong link between social privilege and upper-caste status. It is now firmly established in contemporary commonsense that the spirit of the times not only favours the lower castes, but is also actively opposed to the upper castes. This feeling is so entrenched in the minds of the largely upper caste urban middle classes that, when confronted with the incontrovertible evidence that most enclaves of privilege are still dominated by the upper castes, they can only insist that this merely shows how cunningly anti-upper caste biases are being hidden.

Consider, for instance, the social composition of the government

sector. In a country where less than 10 per cent of the workforce is in the 'organized sector'—which includes both public and private sector employment—a government job has been and continues to be among the most coveted. But as Table 5 shows, the 'lower' castes still tend to be significantly under-represented in the government sector, and particularly in its upper echelons. Thus, despite the combined quota of 22.5 per cent for the SCs and STs, only about 6 per cent (or roughly one fourth of the reserved quota) of Class I officers of the Central government are from these groups. The representation of the Other Backward Classes—the non-upper caste, non-SC/ST castes who are considered to be 'socially and educationally backward'—is even lower, at under 5 per cent.

One may quibble with these data because they are based on the Mandal Commission's initial ('ad hoc') definition of the OBCs, which required them to meet *both* the caste criterion (i.e., belonging to the 'Shudra' castes) and the educational backwardness criterion (neither father nor grandfather should have studied beyond primary school).<sup>11</sup> One may argue that the educational criterion is a rather stringent one, and that there may well be other members of the 'Shudra' castes in government employment who do not meet it. This is certainly possible, but it seems unlikely to change the numbers significantly, for other sources also confirm the broad picture conveyed by Table 5. For example, Santosh Goyal's study (Goyal 1992a) of the social composition of the Indian Administrative Service shows that, in 1985, the 'Shudra' castes account for *less than 2 per cent* of this elite cadre, in which Brahmins were 28 per cent and Kayasthas 11 per cent. Goyal's data are based purely on the caste criterion (as identified from the last names of officers in the Consolidated Civil List) and are therefore exempt from the objection that might be raised against the Mandal Commission data. However, the caste of about 21 per cent of the officers cannot be identified by her method; of these, about 10 per cent are likely to belong to the SC/ST categories (being direct recruits above the general cut-off age of twenty-six), which leaves about 11 per cent with ambiguous last names who could belong to any caste

group. Even if we make the rather unrealistic assumption that *all* the unidentified officers belong to the 'Shudra' castes, this still gives a maximum possible percentage share of 12.5 per cent, which is about one-third of their share in the general population. If we make the somewhat more reasonable assumption that the unidentified officers are equally divided among the Forward, Backward and Scheduled Castes, we get a maximum 'Shudra' share of between 5-6 per cent, which is very near the Mandal Commission's estimate for the Class I services in Table 5.

TABLE 5  
Representation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes in Central Government Services, 1979-80  
(percentage shares in class totals)

	CLASS I			CLASS II			CLASS III & IV			ALL CLASSES		
	SC/ST	OBC	SC/ST	OBC	SC/ST	OBC	SC/ST	OBC	SC/ST	OBC	SC/ST	OBC
Ministries and Departments	7.2	2.6	13.7	4.0	31.0	8.4	16.8	4.8				
Autonomous Bodies, Subordinate Offices	6.6	5.1	18.2	11.7	20.8	21.0	18.1	14.4				
Public Sector Undertakings	4.5	4.6	18.7	9.9	31.7	15.8	20.0	10.6				
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>24.4</b>	<b>19.0</b>	<b>18.7</b>	<b>12.6</b>				

Source: Second Backward Classes (Mandal) Commission Report, Appendix VII, Statement 1.

It has to be reiterated that the messiness and uncertainties that plague this data are the product of deliberate decisions. In fact, the government refuses, except under duress from statutory bodies like the SC-ST Commissions, to publish even the data relating to these constitutionally recognized categories. As Santosh Goyal points out, it is impossible to estimate accurately the aggregate numbers of SC-ST officers in the IAS because the Home Ministry does not release

this data, so that there is no authoritative source of information on whether or not the reserved quotas are being filled. All the indications are that there has been a significant carried forward backlog of unfilled reserved posts during the 1970s and 80s, specially for the Scheduled Tribes (Goyal 1992a:426-27). As already seen, the situation with regard to the Other Backward Classes is much worse, with hardly any reliable data available.

TABLE 6  
Caste Composition of Top Corporate Officers, 1979-80

Castes	Chairman, President	Managing Director	General Manager	Director, Ex. Director	TOTAL
Brahmin	135 (36.0)	144 (35.2)	408 (46.2)	171 (41.3)	858 (41.2)
Kāshya 'Shudra'	83 (22.0)	103 (25.1)	122 (13.8)	64 (15.5)	372 (17.9)
Lingayat	6 (1.6)	24 (5.9)	35 (4.0)	22 (5.3)	87 (4.2)
Mallik	1 (0.3)	4 (1.0)	7 (0.8)	1 (0.2)	13 (0.6)
Singh	8 (2.1)	6 (1.5)	1 (0.0)	1 (0.1)	3 (0.1)
Khatri	70 (18.7)	69 (16.8)	12 (2.9)	12 (2.9)	37 (1.8)
Kayasth	26 (6.9)	35 (8.5)	119 (13.5)	81 (19.6)	385 (18.5)
Manavari	45 (12.0)	25 (6.1)	15 (1.7)	47 (11.4)	227 (10.9)
Total Caste Identified	375 (100.0)	410 (100.0)	883 (100.0)	414 (100.0)	2082 (100.0)
Total Caste Unidentified	168	274	380	225	1047
Grand Total of Employees	543	684	1263	639	3129

Source: Santosh Goyal, 1990, p.540. Table IV5 (Figs. in parentheses () are % of Total Caste Identified).

If this is the case with the government itself, one can hardly expect the corporate sector to be different. Santosh Goyal's valiant attempt (Goyal 1992b) to profile the social composition of this sector is reported in Table 6. The data in this table cover 3,129 officers of 1,100 large companies (in both the private and public sectors) that accounted for over 90 per cent of the turnover of the Indian corporate sector as a

whole in 1979-80. The designations considered are the topmost in the corporate hierarchy — Chairman/President, Managing Director, General Manager and Director/Executive Director. The caste of the officers is ascertained by the last name (comparing them to the lists published in the 1931 Census, and also by consulting scholars from different regions around the country). The castes of approximately two-thirds (66.5 per cent) of the employees is ascertainable by this method, while the remaining 33.5 per cent are either non-Hindus or of unidentified castes.

As can be seen from Table 6, Brahmins are once again the dominant caste, accounting for more than 41 per cent of the total identified names, and about 27.4 per cent of all employees (including non-Hindus and Hindus of unidentified caste). They are well ahead of all other castes, the next highest being Khatris (18.5 per cent), Vaishyas (17.9 per cent) and Kayasths (10.9 per cent). In fact, these four castes together comprise almost 89 per cent of the caste-identified names. Shudras are once again very low at 4.2 per cent, while the SCs and STs are totally absent among the caste-identified names.

Apart from such formal if severely handicapped attempts to gather data on large areas of public life such as government service and corporate management, there is also a less formal or micro-level evidence that the lower castes are severely under-represented in all the modern professions. As M.N. Panini has pointed out, 'caste clustering' usually implying the overwhelming dominance of the upper castes continues to be true of professions such as engineering, medicine, banking, journalism, and academics (Panini 1996:32-36). In short, in every field offering a promising career in the contemporary world, the upper castes dominate and the middle and lower castes are more or less severely under-represented. Almost two generations after Independence, it is no longer possible to evade these realities as being the by-product of historical inequities. We have to face up to the uncomfortable truth that caste inequality has been and is being reproduced in independent India.

#### QUESTIONS OF LOCATION: SOCIOLOGY AND CASTE IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA

It may be useful to reiterate the implications of the sort of evidence cited. Drastic and sustained differences in shares and proportions average over very large numbers of individuals from different social groups can only be explained in terms of differences in individual abilities or propensities. As Émile Durkheim demonstrated 100 years ago, although individual suicide is undoubtedly an individual personal event, *the rate of suicide in a society is a social phenomenon*. Explanations for differences in the rates of suicide in different societies or social groups must therefore be sought at the individual level — that is, in the individual's relationship to social factors that seek to impose norms that seeks to turn data on the under-representation of certain castes in the privileged sections of society into nonsense. A caste is not a social category; these castes is sociological nonsense. A caste may do well or not depending but when we speak of rates of suicide, we are referring to the number of members with millions of members averaged out. If genetic explanation is valid, it is because for a long time—the social mechanism of reproduction—was intentionally or accidentally systematic discrimination.

In short, the differences between social groups are not the result of another set of socio-cultural influences. They are subjects who are *privileged*. Why, then, has this subject received so little attention in Indian sociology? Indeed, with some exceptions, it would be fair to say that the evidence discussed in this chapter has been produced without any inputs from Indian sociology. To explain this situation, it is necessary to consider not only the commonsense on caste mentioned in the previous section, but also factors specific to the location of Indian sociology as a discipline, and the location of caste within this disciplinary space.

Two aspects of the disciplinary positioning of Indian sociology that were discussed in the Introduction are also relevant here—namely, the dominance of economics and the tilt towards anthropology and its methods, both of which have dissuaded macro-analyses of caste inequality. However, we also need to consider other factors that may have encouraged attention from caste inequality factors that are more related to this particular institution than to the discipline as a whole.

#### CASTE AS A COLONIAL CONSTRUCT

An influential recent scholarship has argued that the institution of caste is best understood as a modern and specifically colonial invention. According to this view, the categories of the colonial state, particularly things codify or document caste, are attempts to count, solidifying what used to be a localized institution. The colonial power essentialised defined Indians and Indians and document this essence through efforts at control. From being a fluid, contested variable, caste was sought to be reduced to a fixed, immutable entity. The colonial forms of power (like anthropology) thus constructed a new version of colonialism needed to cement its own power. What the considerable work done on this aspect has shown is that the basic point it set out to make, namely that processes and processes influenced the construction and hence ‘positive’ attributes like caste. However, it is unclear what the relevance of all this is in the context of discussing contemporary caste inequality. At best, the substantialization argument relates to the past origins of caste differences in the modern era; it says little about the current dynamics of this problem. As the evidence discussed in the previous section shows, whether or not it was a historical invention,

caste inequality is a matter of contemporary fact. And the institution itself has thrived in post-independence India despite its absence from the Census and its Constitutional abolition. In fact, the caste groups that have had the biggest impact on contemporary politics—the OBCs—are precisely the ones that have never been counted or documented in the last fifty years.

Moreover, we have to remember that the substantialization arguments were intended as counters to the colonialist assertions that caste culture was defined by caste, that it was its essence. In other words, the substantialization scholars (from Behera, Appadurai and Sudipta Kaviraj to Partha Chatterjee, Rashmi Srinivas and others) have done well to establish the deployment that the category of caste is a social construct rather than a biological reality. They have demonstrated that the category of caste is not really help us to understand contemporary caste. (After all, the caste system is a notion borrowed from Europe.) In any case, it is up to those who believe that the category of caste is relevant to our attempts to deal with it to demonstrate how and why this is so.

Broadly speaking, the origins thesis has the effect of strengthening the nonsense that contemporary caste division is still basically an imperial hangover. The institute, given a new lease of life, can do nothing but reinforce this.

#### DOING THE MODERNITY OF CASTE

As the most important and least understood set of reasons for the negative neglect of caste inequality have to do with the ‘bad odour’ that has surrounded this category in modern times. In the classic orientalist approach, caste was held out as incontrovertible proof of India’s otherness and its failure to meet the standards of modern-Western

morality. This was hammered home so hard that it entered Indian psyche as well, and the beginnings of nationalism could be seen in the reformist mode, by insisting that Indians had to give up their old ways of life and acquire new ones, and so on. What happened here was that without realising it, we acquiesced in the totality of Indian tradition as it was, and became modern. And this is what happened here was that without re-claiming our past, without re-characterizing caste as a social system, without re-judging its place in the modern world, we locked into the modern axis as an unchallengeable reality. The modern axis is an undeniable and unfortunate part of our past, that had no place in modern society. As soon as we started of declaring that had no place in modern society, and apparatuses which foster and encourage it, it will be so committed to this way. We were so committed to this fact. And anyone who did not accept this diagnosis that caste was being systematically practised in the name of India, as our nation, get rid of the colour of caste, and encourage it, it will be so committed to this fact. And anyone who did not accept this diagnosis that caste was being systematically practised in the name of India, as our nation, as the case of Ambedkar and Löwenthal, most sociologists [like Srinivas and others] were from different backgrounds, they could not see that in the accidental experience of personal experience to overcome the colour of caste in the past. Thus, Indian society was unable to address adequately the forms in which caste was practised as a modern institution, specially its new modes of reproduction, the fresh meanings and functions it was acquiring in India. Although sociologists were tirelessly documenting the continued existence of the phenomenon, they were doing so from within a disciplinary perspective that placed it primarily in the world of 'tradition', which, in practical terms, meant the village, ritual practices, kinship norms and so on. They were ill-equipped, therefore, to track its progress in modern contexts like big-city Chinese restaurants and among safari-suited, English-speaking people who would be genuinely aghast at the idea that caste was part of their social identity.

CHAPTER SIX

## *The Centrality of the Middle Class*

Class seems to be the social science concept that has suffered the sharpest decline in popularity and prestige during the last decade. This is in strong contrast to the 1970s and '80s, when it had inspired and energized the social sciences in India, particularly history and economics. Since then, the collapse of socialism and the broader disarray of Marxism as a political philosophy and a social scientific perspective have made the riches-to-rags story of class seem so self-evident that it tends to be taken for granted. The current intellectual climate does not encourage a critical examination of the reasons for the marginalization of the class concept.

These reasons may be divided into two broad groups: the first relates to the rise of other concepts and categories that have taken over much of the explanatory ground that class used to occupy; while the second (and older) group concerns the internal inadequacies of class itself. Recent developments—like the rise to prominence of categories like gender, race, and ethnicity; the salience of ‘new social movements’ organized around non-traditional issues like the environment or peace; and the spread of various types of ‘identity politics’—seem to bear little or no direct relation to the changing fortunes of the concept of class. But all of these have certainly deepened the crisis of the class concept and amplified the long-standing complaints about its inadequacies.

- would help "recapture the streets for Hindus and end the policy of appeasement of the Muslim minority". (Sharma 1995:278.)
24. Such instances have been reported in several major communal riots, but a recent (and relatively well-documented) instance is once again in Bombay. Evidence for this emerged in the hearings of the Sri Krishna Commission, specially during the examination of the notorious Shiv Sena MLA (now an MP), Madhukar Sapordar. (The hearings were being reported by the daily press, but extensive accounts can also be found in the fortnightly *Frontline*.) Sadly, fresh evidence of this sort is being provided regularly—the Gujarat riots of March-April 2002 offer yet another (and possibly the most sustained) instance of systematically organized communal violence.
25. Detailed accounts of such instances are to be found in Veena Das's attempts to explore the spatialization of violence in the anti-Sikh riots of Delhi following Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, and in the study of the Khurja riots. (Das 1996; Chakravarti et al. 1992.)
26. Despite their regulation, loudspeakers are used to hurl abusive and insulting slogans, and to whip up mass hysteria. (In the 1984 Ganesh procession, the police confiscated 300 unlicenced public address systems.) The Bonalu procession, in which men now outnumber women, has resulted in major riots in 1981 (the first time it was reorganized on the model of the 1980 Ganesh procession), and 1984. The Ganesh procession has provoked at least half a dozen riots since 1980.
27. To begin with, Naidu reveals that some of the investigators in her study, "who are old city residents and participate in the Ganesh procession, say that they always carry a knife during the procession—a telling commentary on what the culture of religious processions has deteriorated into". (Naidu 1990:134.)
28. This, of course, is not an exceptional event, since the cow has often served as a symbolic rallying point in Hindu-Muslim conflict in the subcontinent. See, for example, Yang (1980) and Freitag (1980).

### 5. Caste Inequalities in India Today

1. I have pursued this theme in greater detail in two academic papers, one focusing on the factors of disciplinary location responsible for the lopsided understanding of caste in Indian sociology, and the other suggesting what sociologists need to do to re-orient social policy relating to caste inequality. (Deshpande 2003a, 2003b.)
2. It is important to emphasize that this is a general assessment of the discipline as a whole – although some scholars have indeed written on the material inequality aspect of caste (André Béteille and Gerald Berreman are the best known examples; for examples, see Béteille 1991a, 1991b, and Berreman 1979), they have been the exceptions that prove the rule of disciplinary indifference. 'Explanations for so massive and so obvious an error of omission must necessarily be complex,' as Satish Saberwal (1999:106) has written in an important article discussing the invisibility in Indian sociology of what he calls 'secular inequalities', meaning thereby a more general conception of inequality than merely caste inequality (such as the unequal income distribution and high levels of poverty and so on). His explanation is in terms of the prevailing state/national ideologies, the influence of American cultural anthropology and the personal backgrounds of Indian sociologists. It is interesting to note, however, that Saberwal's article (first published in 1979) is itself almost 'invisible' in the literature. Although it has been included in an anthology on social inequality in India (Sharma 1999), it is not discussed or cited in the mainstream literature, including, for example, Béteille (1991c), or three major anthologies on caste published recently (Sharma and Chatterjee 1994; M.N. Srinivas 1996b; and Fuller 1996).
3. Sociologists have been struggling with these implications of received models of caste for a long time. A comprehensive critique of these issues (and of the Dumont model in particular) is to be found in Dipankar Gupta's essay on 'Continuous hierarchies and discrete castes' (Gupta 2000).
4. In his critique of Dumont and Leach, André Béteille has argued that

- conceptualizing castes as non-antagonistic and complementary strata deflects attention from conflict and competition among them. ('The politics of "non-antagonistic" strata,' in Beteille 1991.)
5. As A.M. Shah (1999:199-200) has pointed out, studies of what Srinivas has called the 'horizontal dimension' of caste went into a decline after 1931, the last effective census to report caste. Their place was taken in independent India by the 'village studies' tradition of scholarship, so that the 'vertical' unity of caste(s) received much greater attention than their 'horizontal' unity. This is the background to the dearth of macro data on caste inequality so sharply highlighted by the Mandal controversy.
  6. Partial exceptions are to be found in Shri Prakash, 1997, and Radhakrishnan, 1996.
  7. For a critique of the main arguments cited to oppose inclusion of caste in the Census, see Deshpande 1999.
  8. The problems have to do with changes in the 'reference period' for the 55<sup>th</sup> Round survey (the period over which respondents are asked to report their consumption of various commodities). It is feared that these changes may make the 55<sup>th</sup> Round data incompatible with the previous rounds, so that comparisons across time cannot be made reliably. However, I am not comparing across rounds but across caste/community groups within the same round, and there is no reason to believe that different castes/communities will be differently affected by the changes in the reference period.
  9. I must emphasize that these are only rough guesses because the NSSO does not publish data on cross-tabulations of caste with community – that is, it does not tell us how many sample households were both Christian and Scheduled Tribe, OBC and Muslim etc. So, when we devise an estimate of Hindu Upper Castes by subtracting the non-Hindu religions from the 'Other Castes' category, we are bound to get an underestimate because of the 'double subtraction' of those households that belong to SC, ST, or OBC as well as a non-Hindu religious community. However, this is unlikely to make a huge difference to comparative proportions because Muslims are the

only sizeable minority, and within them, it is the OBC Muslims who are probably the most numerous. Nevertheless, it is important for the reader to realize that the 'Hindu Upper Caste' estimates are provided only for illustrative purposes and must not be treated on a par with the other figures. That is why the Tables including it bear a question mark.

10. But perhaps the problem would persist even if these technical issues were not involved, for, as social scientists all over the world know only too well, it is much more difficult to study the rich and powerful than it is to study the poor and powerless. Unlike 'normal' subjects of research, people of higher economic and social status than the researcher are usually able to simply deny access or, at the very least, to shape the conditions and results of research.
11. See the letter from S.S. Gill, Secretary of the Commission, requesting this information reproduced in Appendix VII of the Mandal Commission Report.

#### **6. The Centrality of the Middle Class**

1. As has frequently remarked and bemoaned, Marx never systematically defined and elaborated the concept of class, in spite of the centrality of that concept to his work. To the perpetual frustration of people who seek in the texts of Marx authoritative answers to theoretical problems, in the one place where he promises such an elaboration—the final chapter of *Capital* Volume 3, entitled 'Classes'—the text stops after only a page.' Erik Olin Wright (1985:6).
2. There were actually three 'fundamental classes' identified in the plan for *Capital*, namely the working class, capitalists and landlords. The last category has spawned a separate literature on the development of capitalism in agriculture.
3. For example, the recent writings of Pavan Varma, Sumanta Banerjee, or Partha Chatterjee.
4. Barbara Ehrenreich shows how some of the best known works in