

ACADEMIA | Letters

Caste: History and the Present

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The theoretical debate on caste among social scientists has receded into the background in recent years. This is unfortunate, as scholars tend to return to older works to understand the issue, and these works do not really reflect the knowledge we have at present. I wrote a book on the subject recently (Transaction and Hierarchy, Elements for a Theory of Caste – Manohar, Delhi, 2017) and I feel it may be useful to summarize some of my findings here. In this short article, I simply state my views - references can be found in the book mentioned..

But first, let me stress that caste is in no sense disappearing: indeed, the present wave of neo-liberal policies in India, with privatisation of enterprises and education, has strengthened the importance of caste ties, as selection to posts and educational institutions is less based on merit through examinations, and increasingly on social contact as also on corruption.

There is a tendency to assume that caste is as old as Indian civilization itself, but this assumption does not fit our historical knowledge. To be precise, however, we must distinguish between social stratification in general and caste as a specific form.

There was considerable class difference in the Indus civilization, and there is no doubt that the urban developments of the early part of the last millennium before the Common Era were stratified societies. At the time of Buddha and Mahavir – the middle of that millennium – we can distinguish both social classes and ethnic groups: there is no doubt that ethnic and social stratification was present. But we look in vain for the term *jati*, which only comes to designate a caste by the time of the Guptas, at the beginning of the Common Era.

It is true that the Varnas – the four-category classification of Indian society – is older than this: Brahmins are clearly distinguishable as a group in later Vedic times (ca. 1000 B.C.E.) and the Kshatriya category becomes important between that time and the time of the Buddha. But the two last categories – Vaishya and Shudra – were not constellated into groups even then.

In fact, if we look for a social order clearly identifiable as one of ranked castes, we have to wait for the Manusmriti ('Laws of Manu') which emerge in its known form somewhere between 100 B.C.E. and 200 C.E.. It must have been during this period, then, that caste as we now know it was beginning to take form. Many of the castes we know, did not yet exist then, and we know, from the Puranas, that the order advertised by the Manusmriti was highly contested. These texts abound with complaints, for example, that Brahmins were not respected.

As we enter the early middle ages, we are able to follow the formation of some of those castes that were to become important later. This is the case, for example, of the Rajputs, a category which appear in the texts around the turn of the first to the second millennium of the Common Era. It seems clear that their ancestors were chiefs and their followers who had managed to gain control over different regions of Western India. As these groups intermarried, they came to form exogamous clans and a more or less endogamous class, separate from peasants, merchants and others, which gradually became the Rajput caste. During this period we also encounter a number of other groups known as castes today, so that when we enter the early modern period, around 1500 C.E., we have reached what was later designated as a 'caste system'. Boundaries between the groups we call castes were gradually closing in this period.

In India as in the West, the mark of early modernity was the growth of the State. Kings, often with increased revenue from trade, started to recruit mercenary armies and acquire artillery. These developments drew a wedge between the effective power of the king and that of his vassals, so that the state formed a hierarchy rather than a loose conglomeration of alliances. But the difference between the 'modern' West and India seems to have been that kings in the latter region built their power on relationships to the various caste groups, creating a communitarian structure, rather than the atomised citizenry claimed for the modern West. Why this should be so, is something that has not yet been elucidated – but we might remark that India was, arguably, a more complex society than was the West at the time.

From the early modern period till today, then, caste has been an intrinsic feature of Indian society. It has been common to refer to this as the 'caste system'. But it is debatable whether the term 'system' is appropriate here, unless we simply take for granted that any society is a 'social system'.

First, and this is quite clear when we look at the history of distinct castes, the 'system' and the place various groups occupy within it have been constantly changing. Second, no hierarchical order of castes has ever been universally accepted: to be brief, we may distinguish a Brahmin perspective where Brahmins are at the top, a royal or Kshatriya-based perspective where the king is the apex of the social order, and probably a third, headed by the merchant castes, where purity, riches and 'economic utility' are the criteria that set the vegetarian, non-violent merchants above all other groups – the merchants do claim that their life-style is more

pure than that of the Brahmins. There may be other, less obvious models of the hierarchy, but what is certain is that there is no consensus on a single hierarchical order.

Competition between groups, and their social mobility, are therefore intrinsic to the caste order. This means that we cannot distinguish a 'traditional', more stable order from the present competitive situation: the efforts to define a traditional order must find their place in the efforts of various groups to legitimize or strengthen their present situation by reference to the past. We may distinguish three such efforts: groups that have been upwardly mobile in recent times tend to emphasize how their inherited qualities have gained for them a place above the 'lazy' or conservative groups: those who try to retain a threatened position refer to their 'traditional' greatness, and low-caste groups often cherish traditions of how by injustice they have fallen from their old and rightful place.

The myths that each caste entertains about its own past tend to emphasize the singularity of the community, which leads us to another important point: castes are not a single kind of group but several. The vast populations of millions of peasants that form the dominant castes are, like nations, communities only by imagination: small Brahmin or artisan groups of a few thousand people are communities in a quite different way. High or powerful castes build their identity upon a pride of achievement: some of the lower castes are united rather by their exclusion and stigma. We are far from a 'system' of similar building blocks forming a unified structure.

And yet the idea of such a structure is strong. It is implicit in the models – Brahmin, Kshatriya and Merchant-based – that the high castes construct to order a complex reality. And it is on this structural level that the specificity of the caste order emerges most clearly: in this, the French scholar Louis Dumont was right. The model of the caste order that he constructed corresponds, rather nicely, to a Brahmin view of the hierarchy – as, indeed, his critics such as Gerald Berreman remarked. The Dumontian perspective is therefore not unfounded, and it is still pertinent on the ideological level; what Dumont failed to do, was to recognise that this level did not represent the reality of social organisation, not even in an approximate way.

It is necessary, however, to take this ideological dimension into account, if we want to consider the particular Indian caste order as different from other types of social stratification. On the concrete level, power, wealth, exploitation and suppression is quite as much present in India as anywhere else. But the particular way in which the dominant groups structure and legitimise their vision of society, and the hierarchical structure of these constructions, remain specific to the caste order. This, indeed, is why the caste order may be considered as a particular kind of social stratification.