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## **Is there Today Caste System or there is only Caste in India?**

*Abstract:* The main focus of the paper is that caste system has always been resilient and dynamic due to its inner inconsistencies and contradictions on the one hand, and due to its interpenetration into economy, polity and culture on the other. The aim of this paper is to understand continuity and change in the caste system. Caste has engaged people, hence it has acquired a meta-legal approval. Caste has never been a simple ritual hierarchy because it has encompassed the entire matrix of socio-economic and political relations.

It has been argued that there is a need to reconceptualize caste. Caste is no more simply a system of idea and values. More important is to see actual behaviour of the people vis-à-vis the role of caste as a system. Caste has become a matter of interpretation rather than substantialization. It refers to a purposive rationality. Its discrete use provides a description of the problems of Indian society, polity and economy. However, besides caste, there are new status groups, varied forms of social mobility, and structural processes of change and dominance. In such a situation, “family” and “individual” are emerging as agencies of reproduction of inequality/equality.

Caste is becoming more of a state of mind of an individual. Contemporary changes have reshaped caste. The policy of reservations based on caste has kept it alive and vibrant. Protests against caste-based reservations have also contributed to the continuity of caste. Caste may be elusive for some who have distanced from their social and cultural roots, but for others, who continue to be there in villages and towns, caste is enduring, and it is there in practice in one way or other. At times, caste-based outbursts surface, though in everyday life, caste is not so visible as a means of social control.

*Keywords:* Caste System, Caste Society, Stratification, Social mobility, Caste-free areas.

### **Introduction**

The question about caste as a “system” has always remained in vogue as it has been projected mistakenly as a sort of absolute institution relating to prescription and proscription of practice and behaviour of people, particularly among Hindus in Indian society. Available authentic sources indicate that caste system has always been resilient and dynamic as it has been affected by its inner logical inconsistencies and contradictions on the one hand, and it has also affected economy, polity, culture and religion on the other, and due to this dual process, it has never been a static and stagnant system.

In a comprehensive historical analysis of caste, Susan Bayly (2000: 4) rightly states that not a single static system of caste has dominated Indian life since ancient times. Though important scriptural writings have extolled generalized caste ideals. Bayly also mentions that no so-called caste society was formed out of the castelike observances

of the medieval realms. Today, manifestations of caste are far more generalized than before. She observes that caste as we now recognize has been endangered, shaped and perpetuated by recent political and social developments. The elements of “traditional” castes as we know today, Bayly says, have their roots in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The main objective of this paper is to understand and analyze continuity and change in the caste system as a social force, having varying forms, manifestations and activities. Caste has always engaged people, often directly, with varied functions and obligations. Based on a set of norms, which acquired a sort of meta-legal approval, people have been grouped as Jatis, and arranged as higher and lower entities.

As Bayly (2000: 1–24) mentions that the British rule significantly expanded and sharpened caste norms and conventions, recreated many manifestations of caste language and ideology as a source of power and authority, Nicholas B. Dirks (2003) also considers caste as a modern political phenomenon, a creation of the British colonialism. Both Bayly and Dirks consider that the powerful colonial state supported norms and conventions of the caste system. Before the British, there were more of castelike elements rather than a rigid and static caste system. It is due to the British that caste became an effective mechanism and resource for the people across the boundaries of religion, language, faith and economic status. In view of such an understanding of caste, most of the theories of the origin of caste, and also the recent explanation given by Louis Dumont (1972) regarding the principle of pure and impure as the all-embracing theory of caste do not stand validated. Since caste has its reincarnation in British colonialism, it can't be explained in terms of the orientalist explanation as well.

Caste is unique in one significant manner that it refers to alliances/linkages among different caste-groups in a given village or a setting, hence jajmani system or systemic incorporation of different castes in the organic whole. However, different castes also enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, and this provided them a segmentary character. Caste had thus both organic as well as segmentary character at the same time. Because of this complexity and external political influences, caste has always been a “contentious” phenomenon. Despite its unique nature, caste is like race in America, class in Britain and faction in Italy (Bayly: *op. cit.*: 1) in terms of a system of social stratification.

### **Defining Caste as a System**

Before we explain in somewhat detail the nature and functioning of the caste system in general, and also in some particular contexts, it may be desirable to mention that within each caste, in principle, all members are equal, but in reality, individuals and families have also been distinguished and differentiated based on their achieved status, despite equal ascribed ritual status, that is, birth in the same caste. Thus, alongwith ritual hierarchy of castes, intracaste and intercaste distinctions based on non-ritual criteria, were given due consideration and weightage. Clearly this implies that caste incorporated class, and the congruence of these two further implied inclusion of power in the orbit of caste. Though birth in a given caste could not be mutilated, but at the

same time, it did not rule out a noticeable play of extra-caste considerations. Thus, caste was always more than a simple hierarchy based on the notion of “pure” and “impure” or a set of values and ideas (Louis Dumont: *op. cit.*; M. N. Srinivas 1952, 1962), which encompassed the entire matrix of socio-economic and political relations.

Even ethnosociologist like Ronald B. Inden (1990: 213–62) is of the view that castes were as political assemblages or “subject-citizenries” within medieval kingdoms. Each region had its specific schemes and groupings, hence no uniform all-embracing scheme of caste gradations. Caste was a dynamic, diverse and multidimensional reality of Indian society. Bayly argues that there is nothing like an orientalist fiction or monolithic cultural code regarding origin and functioning of the caste system (*op. cit.*: 6). Caste has become a system of oppression, a scheme of social disabilities and hindrances like any other system of inequities.

Today, caste is a reality, though of a different kind. It is a means of political mobilization, of discrete use for specific goals, and more for seeking reservations in educational institutions and government services. Earlier, caste was more of a base for socio-cultural relations enacted through *jajmani* system and rules of marriage and commensality. Education, migration and mobility, secular occupations, office and political power have threatened the “caste society” to a very large extent.

The propagation of caste system as an absolute and rigid system has done more harm to the Indian society than the caste system itself. Projection of caste as an ideology itself became an ideology of its propagators. This became, no doubt, even before the advent of British rule in India, however, the British granted an added impetus to both caste and feudalism for the reasons best known to them. Writings by James Tod (1990), Herbert Risley (1969), J. H. Hutton (1963) and many others are a clear evidence of the glorification of feudalism and caste as institutions of highest merit and for good of the Indian people. Such a doctored blasphemy helped the British in pacifying the agitating souls against their rule and also sealed revelation of full facts relating to demerits of the caste system.

The British created two histories: (1) which they desired to create and produce; and (2) which they did not like to be written and desired to remain it dormant or dead. For example, at times, the functionaries of lower castes withdrew their services rendered to higher castes when they were not paid their just dues, wages, and rewards. A barber, being dissatisfied, declined to do his job of cutting hair, and other multiple services. So was done by a potter, who refused to supply earthen pots. A carpenter denied supply of ploughs and other wooden implements required in agriculture, when he was dissatisfied with his patrons. Under a hierarchical system, these were the systemic provisions for seeking “fair justice”, if not “absolute justice.” The concept of “justice” as explained by John Rawls (1999) is quite appropriate here. After a tug of war, which ensued because of injustice done to the lower caste functionaries, under public pressure and because of non-availability of alternatives to the services rendered to the patrons, often the higher caste patrons acceded to the legitimate demands of their service castes.

While distinguishing between *jati* and *varna*, R. S. Khare (1983: 85) writes that the concept of *jati* implies the experience of caste in everyday social life, whereas the

concept of verna refers to the “ideal and symbolic archetypes.” Thus, caste is quite specific in its functioning; and verna is a loose/vague entity, being the fourfold division of society. Jati identifies its members in a village or in a given specific set of villages. Because of such an identification, caste persists as caste, despite distinctions based on wealth, education and other achievements of its members. Markers of castes are distinct, and not reducible to material, racial, religious and educational differences. This is why upper and lower castes are not necessarily rich and poor classes, respectively. Caste difference is distinct, but it has never been the sole basis of differences in other domains. The following questions emanate from the foregoing discussion:

- 1) Is caste an all-pervading essence of Indian society?
- 2) How the scriptural prescriptions are found in everyday life of the people?
- 3) Is sanskritization not a superficial process of change?
- 4) What has nearly vanished the pure-impure syndrome from Indian social life?
- 5) Why the caste-based occupations have almost disappeared?

Despite the pure-impure dichotomy and relational matrix, caste was more than the purity/impurity contention. In caste, power emanated not just from ritualized ranks, it also originated from several other factors, including the nature of work, economic standing, numerical strength and performance of individual members. No doubt, some of the indigenous concepts provided clues for functioning of the Indian society, away from the prescriptions of the scriptural texts, but more important was the actual functioning of the caste system itself. There were always disputes about the ordering of castes, sometimes even in a given village, there were ambiguous ranks of people. As we have stated earlier that the lower castes, on certain occasions, challenged the upper castes, regarding their rights and claims for the duties which they performed for them as functionaries under the jajmani system. Claims, disputes, bargaining, denial and reconciliation were always there in everyday life.

### **Caste and Non-castelike Phenomena**

Another point is also pertinent here that ritual hierarchy was not absolute even in principle as it has been made out to be, mainly because of propagation of a certain imagery of the caste system by the British. For example, certain rituals could be performed/completed, which were in the ritual purview of the lower caste functionaries, such as sweepers, shoemakers, barbers, potters, blacksmiths, etc., only when they agreed to render their services. These lower caste ritual-performers were treated as “pious” on given occasions, such as birth, marriage, death, etc; and they were paid customarily like the Brahmin priests. Harold Gould (1967: 26–55) has addressed the lower caste ritual-performers as “contra-priests”. A message of “equality” in an inequalitarian system is quite implicit through the concept of contra-priests.

In this way, caste system was not absolutely rigid, but flexibility was considerably less than its rigidity. There were mechanisms and devices which prevented openness in the system. It became an insulated system of intercaste relations. Endogamy and exogamy became the cardinal norms of marriage. Violation of rules of marriage,

and deviation from hereditary occupations, and understanding of commensality were taken as an offence, and invited punishment, including ostracization from the caste, heavy fines and hardships. Even today, stray instances of punishment are reported from some parts of India, but the way, in which such punishments are carried out, is quite different from what it used to be. The modalities are very different and so are the motives behind such incidences of the so-called violations, and so are the agencies which take upon themselves to punish the “offenders”.

Today, intercaste relations, which were the bedrock of the caste system, do not persist. The hierarchy, which was an overarching phenomenon, has given a way to stratification. Caste has become one of the several other criteria in status-determination. Jati (group) is being replaced by family (Beteille: 1998: 435–451; Sharma: 1974: 125–168) and individual. The two imply less rigidity, more flexibility, mobility and achievement. Family and individual are also not completely devoid of ascription. Caste is being devalued to a certain extent, and achievement is considered as a desired goal. Values and norms related to caste system have thus shown increasing tendency towards their decline. The system has become considerably weak, it is hardly in existence as it used to be in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or even upto India’s Independence in 1947. However, caste persists, not as a system so much, but as a means of reckoning and identity-making (Sharma 2001: 17–43). Caste as a system has been “questioned” and “interrogated” (Gupta 2000). Then, what is caste? In our view, caste is more of a notion, being appropriated by a select few, eclectically and discretely. The so-called leaders and strongmen of a given caste appropriate it for their specific aims and gains. It is used/misused as a plaything to have a mileage in community, politics, and to extract monetary benefit, out of the incidences of the so-called violations of the rules of marriage.

Another domain of appropriation of caste is elections at all levels, from Panchayati Raj Institutions (Village Civic Bodies) to Lok Sabha (Lower House of Indian Parliament). Even elections of the Students’ Unions are not free from the caste virus, and nor are the trade unions. In all these elections, candidates are nominated by political parties and groups based on caste considerations, particularly in terms of numerical strength of a caste in a given parliamentary/legislative constituency, and the muscle, men and money power of the contesting candidates of particular castes. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, often argued in his public utterances that caste was antithetical to democracy and merit. On the contrary, some scholars are of the view that caste is not against democracy and development (Kothari 1970a; 1970b). It is argued that caste-based nomination has a representative character, because an elected person would care for the interests and welfare of those fellowmen who have voted for him/her.

Caste as a system needs to be seen in terms of the ideology of pure and impure, division of labour, connubiality, commensality, caste panchayat or biradari, intracaste and intercaste relations, etc. Caste as a phenomenon and as a notion of reckoning can be observed in political mobilization, atrocities, violence, exploitation, etc. In a nutshell, the journey is though several centuries old, transformation of its systemic character into a discrete phenomenon is particularly a twentieth century incarnation,

and that too, mainly after India's Independence, in 1947. In view of these observations, K. L. Sharma (2001: op. cit.) has suggested a comprehensive study of caste with a view to understand: (1) caste-class nexus: its continuity and change, (2) changing character of intercaste and intracaste relations, and (3) nature of practice and levels of mobility in the caste system.

### **Caste and the State**

Caste and the Indian State have coexisted, and the latter has tried to twist and mutilate caste in innumerable ways. This was done more so by the British rule (Bayly: op. cit.; Dirks: op. cit.). The 1891 *Census* used the headings for social groups such as "agricultural and pastoral," "artisans and menials," "professionals," and even "vagrants." Rankings were made based on local evidence of "social precedence." Earlier in the 1881 *Census*, illustrated profiles of over 400 "races" and "tribes" were presented. "Orientalism" was clearly reflected in these *Census* reports and in the 119-volume series of Imperial Gazetteers. "Titles," "Races," "Stereotypes," expressions such as "Civilized/Uncivilized" were used in the context of caste. The Indian people were described as irrational, violent, childlike, morally underdeveloped, etc. The 1901 *Census* was the first one to evoke fierce controversies as it ranked all castes in terms of specific varna context. Determining caste rank in terms of ritual distance throughout the country was done with a political end-in-view. Besides this, H. H. Risley (op. cit.), the Census Commissioner for the 1901 *Census*, also described some other categories, such as "casteless tribes" and "landed, trading, military and priestly castes."

However, such a statist view of the caste was negated by some other surveys and studies. For example, Denzil Ibbetson (1916) vividly describes diversity and historicity in the making of caste. He is of the view that no generalized view of a uniform "caste society" could be found. The rural areas of the Punjab had distinctively non-"castelike" features. Norms and values of caste were found in different ways in different regional settings. Caste was dynamic and fluid, and material and political factors shaped the differences of jati and varna in different regional settings. In the Punjab, half of the population comprised of landowners, cultivators and pastoralists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Power and land control were the main bases of status. Society was quite open, and differences were of a fluid nature.

We have argued that caste is largely a creation of British colonialism, an instrument of British domination in terms of its policy of divide and rule. Caste was ritualized and hierarchized by the British by transforming the non-castelike elements into rigid ritualized phenomena. This was particularly done by H.H. Risley through 1901 Census. He worked out an index of ritual distance between castes/sub-castes and placed them in a rank-order, assigning higher and lower ranks. This process of politicization/statization of caste was further carried forward by J. H. Hutton in the Census of 1931, of which he was the Commissioner. Hutton eulogized caste by exaggerating its positive aspects (functions), which he pronounced as beneficial for the individual member of a caste, for his family, community, wider society, and the entire

state. The views voiced by Risley (op. cit.) and Hutton (op. cit.) gave credence to the caste as a system of hierarchy and social relations. The *Census* of 1941 was not a comprehensive one due to the ill-effects of the Second World War (1939–1945).

The first post-Independence *Census* conducted in 1951, did not include enumeration of caste, except counting of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs). From 1951 to 2001, six Censuses have been conducted without enumeration of caste, though caste has remained at the centre of Indian politics. Caste-based reservations were given to the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in 1993, based on the recommendations of the B.P. Mandal Commission (1978–1980), through a decision of the Supreme Court of India, in which “caste” was accepted as the basis of “backwardness” of some communities, including the SCs and the OBCs. During the Mandalization process, through intense debates, opinions were expressed in favour and against caste as the basis of reservation. It took quite sometime in settling down the turmoil caused by the acceptance of the Mandal Commission recommendations by the V. P. Singh government for reservation of 27% jobs for the OBCs.

The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government also introduced reservations in the Central government educational institutes, including Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), Indian Institute of Science (IIS), All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMSs), and the prestigious universities, such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi University, Banaras Hindu University, etc. Protests to this move was quite severe as it was said to be throttling of merit against the so-called caste-based social justice plank in educational institutions. Thus, it is not that only the colonial state used caste as a political instrument, this has persisted during the post-Independence period as well, almost in all walks of life, including elections, reservations and socio-cultural mobilizations.

The present UPA government seems to be inclined to use caste as a political tool more or less on the lines of British colonialism, perhaps under the influence of the regional parties, such as Janata Dal United (JDU), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Samajwadi Party (SP), headed by the three Yadavs, namely, Sharad Yadav, Lalu Prasad Yadav, and Mulayam Singh Yadav, respectively. The UPA government’s inclination to enumerate castes/sub-castes/sub-sub-castes in the 2011 Census once again reminds us of the 1901 and the 1931 caste-based Censuses and the Mandal Commission and its aftermath in 1990–93. In the aftermath of the acceptance of the Mandal Commission recommendations, several young people, particularly from among the upper castes, who protested against it, were killed and injured in police and paramilitary actions. There were also strong supporters of the Mandal Commission. Across the country, one could see a clear social and political divide on the Mandal issue.

The inclusion of caste enumeration in the 2011 Census would certainly generate more or less the similar mixed reactions, and the actors in this game are also more or less of the same sort. Why the present government has suddenly decided to consider incorporation of “caste” in the 2011 Census? How it would be done? In what way, castes, sub-castes, sub-sub-castes in different regions, sub-regions, districts and villages would be recorded? How the similar castes with different names, and different castes with similar names across the regions would be identified and recorded? Can

simple caste enumeration, without relating it to each and every individual and family, economic standing, nature of occupations, assets, education, and ritual criteria, etc., be useful for accelerating the process of social justice and development? It is that caste is information in knowledge society? Can caste be an index of solidarity? We are raising these questions because some have opined these views in favour of enumeration of caste. The protagonists of these views argue that caste has power. Caste is a code of behaviour. It enforces a range of behaviour, including rules of marriage as in a khap panchayat. Caste creates the grammar of interaction (Shiv Visvanathan 2010). Caste is the grid of familiarity and of survival. Caste is an instrument of the division of labour in society. Such an admiration of caste is a contradiction in terms, when we find “caste wars,” and exploitation of the poor of the lower castes by the upper caste landowning families. The inhuman and cruel diktats of Khap, particularly in Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh, are examples of the oppression of the weak by the self-appointed caste leaders. None of the victims of the Khaps are top political leaders and the rich people, who have often violated the rules of marriage, namely, caste endogamy and clan exogamy.

In another newspaper article (Kanchan Chandra 2010), the incorporation of enumeration of caste in the 2011 Census is stated as “a way of reinventing identities,” because “a caste census can widen options for self-definition instead of narrowing them.” Chandra also raises the questions: How to do it? How to know inequalities based on caste? These are relevant questions raised by Chandra. But then we may ask: Why not count only the poor and then relate them to their caste/sub-caste? Does caste today determine inequalities? To what extent caste has changed since Independence, despite “caste wars,” and caste-based reservations? Are all members/or a substantial section of a caste or of different castes are “backward”/poor or forward and well off? How to segregate the poor and the well off within the given castes/sub-castes? The problem is today to relate economic and social inequalities with caste/sub-caste, and not that of caste with economic and social disparities. What we need is to see several socio-economic segments in a given caste or a cluster of castes. Caste as such does not remain absolute or monolithic. It needs to be seen as an internally differentiated entity. Greater is the extent of differentiation, lesser becomes the relevance of caste as a determining factor in socio-economic inequalities.

Caste-based Census would raise several questions and problems relating to identities, social precedence, politics and development. Kanchan Chandra (op. cit.) rightly observes: “The main question raised by the prospect of a caste-based Census is not whether to collect Census data based on caste but how to do it in a way that does not trap citizens in caste identities.” Can caste-based data be used to address inequalities based on caste? Claims and counter-claims for higher/equal ranks would be made on the one hand, and claims for the ranks which could perhaps accrue more benefits, by way of reservations/quotes, would be made on the other. As we know the British rule first created a situation of divide, and then intervened after the 1901 Census, when people questioned their ranks, and then the British granted decrees in some cases. What would the present government do in case of similar confusions, ambiguities, claims and counter-claims? Without addressing such likely problems, arising out of

the caste-based census, the 2011 caste-based Census would be of no use and could cause irreparable damage to the Indian society. People would be further trapped in the caste tangles. The loosening ends of caste would be rejuvenated and reinvented, if the situation comparable with the 1901 and the 1931 Censuses occurs again after the 2011 Census. Chandra rightly asks: "How can a caste-based census in India avoid setting its own identity traps? The "Caste parties," like the BSP, the SP and the RJD have made several experiments of caste constructions/alliances in terms of "backward" and "forward" entities. They are now celebrating the incorporation of caste in the 2011 Census, because their gameplan for "caste-based politics" seems to get a new life.

Dipankar Gupta (2010) says that inclusion of enumeration of castes in the 2011 Census is "against citizens" of India, because "the Census is in service of the future and not to serve past prejudices of sectional interests." Citizenship needs to be valued more than caste and family, Gupta says. "As citizens we do not need caste but we need development, growth, employment and clear air." Caste is divisive, caste is against caste. "Caste politicians" and "caste academia" are on the same side of the coin. After the 2011 Census, there would be endless quarrels and claims for ranks and classifications which would suit for benefits in regard to education, jobs, and elections. It seems that the political leaders are competing with each other as patrons to seek support of the people in general, and of the rural people in particular. By supporting the inclusion of caste as an item in the Census, they would project themselves as the saviors of the rural people as particular castes would be there in the lists of beneficiary castes.

### **Caste and Electoral Politics: The Case of Rajasthan**

A recent example of a nexus between politics and caste can be cited from Rajasthan, a north-western state in India. Amazing and bewildering scenes and situations were innumerable in the latest elections held in 2009 for Rajasthan Assembly. These tantamounted to a mockery of Indian democracy and the Indian State. In the history of elections, since Independence, such a vulgar political scenario was witnessed for the first time. Let us cite some instances of the political vulgarization which were not only having devastating effects, but also had long-term and incurable imprints on Indian polity and society.

All the major political parties unhesitatingly admitted caste/casteism as the main criterion in nominating their candidates. In fact, the idea of winnability of a candidate had been mooted based on the supposed and fabricated numerical preponderance and support to a nominee in the constituency. Most of the aspirants for nomination presented the exaggerated numerical preponderance of their respective castes and communities. Neither the aspirants nor their political parties articulated and voiced the criteria for nomination such as commitment to ideology and programmes of development and change, and educational qualifications, professions, personal honesty and integrity, social work, etc.

Almost all castes and communities, including Brahmins, Rajputs, Vaishyas, Jains, Jats, Bairwas, Valmikis, Gujars, Meenas, Nais, Sindhis, Muslims, etc., had demanded

their particular share in political representation through nomination. All these castes and communities expressed their resolve to mobilize support for the parties which would nominate their respective caste leaders. Issues of nationalism, democracy and secularism were not raised in the elections as it was the case in the general elections of 1952, 1957 and 1962. Issues relating to communalism, terrorism, unemployment, economic regression, corruption, and socio-economic backwardness had also been relegated to the background.

Besides casteism, considerations of kinship and nepotism were also advocated openly in nomination of candidates by the major political parties. Daughters, sons, wives, nephews, nieces, and relatives were promoted based on their “winnability”. Obviously, they were said to be “capable” because of their ancestry and kinship ties with the political leadership of the State.

Such an electoral game has raised several questions about the Indian State and Society. The State is unable to check this electoral malice, and the society, particularly the masses, due to their perennial incompetence, can't stop this malady. The masses need leadership, and the leaders, taking undue advantage of this fact, become oligarchic, and develop greed for power.

Since India has a low level of development and asymmetrical structure of economic and cultural resources, its social base (caste and community) tends to orient itself for undeserving political acts and opinions. A caste leader becomes an oligarch, he does not delegate authority to leaders and workers down the line in his/her political party. A sort of opinion is created in favour of a leader based on his/her power, influence and social circles. Such a superimposed aura is a gross misrecognition of the masses and their capabilities. Ideology, education, honesty and integrity, etc., were not at all there in the electoral speeches and discourses in the elections held in 2009 for the State Legislature in Rajasthan. The issue of ‘development’ came up in a mutilated and ambivalent form, and therefore, it did not become the focal theme in these elections.

The questions which we may ask are: What is political representation? Who are represented? Can masses question political oligarchy and its material interests? Are the downtrodden united in their efforts to challenge the power elite? Answers to these questions lie in the fact that the nominees are the so-called caste/community patrons/protectors, kinsmen of top political bosses, favourites of the High Commands of political parties, etc.

Caste-based political nominations would not provide “accomplished politicians”, who could create a high degree of euphemization of debates and discourses on issues of development, democracy, secularism, social justice, human rights, etc. What we have today is extreme vulnerability of political power due to uncertainty of its retention. Politicians, therefore, try to retain their power, and transform it into social and cultural resources. Further, this resource is appropriated for reinforcing the political power. Thus, a political leader is today more of a ‘banker’ rather than a social worker. Such a leader also gains a personal notoriety. A political party with such entrenched leaders remains with a well-filled treasury, and as such a party represents the established social/caste interests.

### **Caste and Rules of Marriage**

The so-called purity of descent/caste or sub-caste is being reinvented by punishing the same clan marriages. A province in India, namely, Haryana, has attained notoriety in “honour killings” of young men and women on the pretext of violation of rules of marriage. The preparators of such a heinous crime have become self-appointed thekedars (protectors) of honour of their castes/communities. Their advertent or inadvertent ignorance of the rules of marriage, namely, caste endogamy and clan exogamy is clearly evident in such barbarous inhuman acts in the mischievously assumed notion of purity of descent or blood group. The killing of Virender Singh (*Times of India*, October 28, 2009) is thus one more instance of Haryana’s cruel orthodoxy and cognitive blindness. For such a horrifying situation in Haryana, which is, otherwise not so backward, at least in the field of agriculture, proves that economic development does not necessarily result into social development and awakening. Men of letters, social workers and politicians are mainly responsible for such a grave crime. Sometimes, the “violators” are inhumanly tortured to such an extent that they feel compelled to commit suicide. The people ought to know the meaning of “clan exogamy” and rules of avoidance, relating to marriage. Such a tendency is today a new form of caste-related orthodoxy in rural India.

Generally, hypergamous marriages are enacted in India, in which the status of the bridegroom is higher socially than that of the bride. Such a custom is known as anuloma. The opposite to this type is called hypogamous marriages or pratiloma. Besides the consideration of higher and lower status, clan exogamy is considered as a criterion in Hindu marriages. A clan or gotra is an exogamous unit assuming descendance from a common ancestor. A given caste would have several gotras as exogamous units. Each gotra has a name, and each individual supposedly belongs to a specific gotra. Some castes/subcastes could have common gotra names also. Often, the gotra names are drawn from the Brahmanical system and from the rishis (religious teachers), authors of sacred texts. Adherence to the rule of gotra exogamy is found among Brahmins more than the middle and lower castes.

J. H. Hutton in *Caste in India* (op. cit.) observes that the exogamous group within the endogamous caste or subcaste is very far from being a stable institution of consistent pattern. Infact, marriage is often regulated by prohibited degrees of kinship. The actual number of prohibited degrees varies from caste to caste as it depends upon the number of gotras in a given caste. There are also single gotra castes/sub-castes and the rule of clan exogamy becomes irrelevant to such castes. Avoidance of the gotras of father, mother, grand-mother, and maternal grand-mother, etc. is also based on the assumed names of the gotras. What one can know is lineage, that is, the line of descendance, and nothing beyond lineage is empirically known to the people. It is almost impractical to know lineage history beyond five or six generations.

Exogamous restrictions are observed in regard to sib, totem, village, gotra or spinda relationships. These criteria clearly indicate obscurantism or unscientific thinking in mate selection. K. M. Kapadia (1986: 117–135), a well-known authority on marriage, observes that there is nothing in the sanskrit texts to object to clan endogamy. Marriage

into the third generation or preferential marriage within the affines was prevalent even in eleventh century A.D. Marriage was allowed within the same gotra or between those who recited the same pravara (mantra). Kapadia says: “Manu did not likewise regard sagotra marriage as constituting a sin, serious or minor” (Ibid.: 127). Thus, Manu’s rule of exogamy was loose and elastic. Some commentators linked gotra and pravara, but its observance became a mere formality. It did not have substantial bearing on realities of life.

Based on such a mythological construction of the gotra and other related conceptions, caste panchayats, clan leaders and the bullies within the given castes in the villages have taken upon themselves to regulate rules of marriage. The law of the land has been suppressed by such ill-practised institutions and notorious individuals with a view to extract political and social mileage out of the present-day ambivalence and flux in the Indian society. Some people have made it a source of social and political power. Control over the community by hook and crook has become their creed. The thekedars of caste and community have established nexus with politicians and bureaucrats to enhance their reputation and dominance through such acts. Thus, caste is more of a political phenomenon in the countryside than a basis of inter-group relations.

This is an opaque culturology. Continuity of conventional cultural conceptualizations or their renewed versions are antithetical to true democracy. Caste has lost its base, namely, intercaste relations, interdependence and work ethics, but its penetration into politics or its discrete appropriation (or misuse) in social fields are clearly indicative of a disjunction and dissonance in India’s social life.

As politics is becoming a “family business”, so is becoming monopoly/control or regulation of the so-called rules of marriage. An absolutely unscientific idea of the mythological sagotra is being projected as a pious act, simply for self-aggrandizement. Common people can’t stop this decadent practice because the rule of might prevails in the village. The State and the Civil Society (including social workers) may check such happenings with a firm hand. Since most of the preparators remain unpunished, they look for the so-called violations to occur for making a fortune out of such happenings.

A very recent example of politics of caste and violation of clan exogamy is the view expressed by a young Congress Member of Parliament, Naveen Jindal, from Haryana, who is a tycoon and a graduate of the University of Texas Business School (Gupta 2010). Jindal supported the Khap’s diktat for prohibition on same gotra-marriage. Legally, such a prohibition can’t be sustained. Scientifically, in ten generations, genetic roots would disappear. Culturally, gotra is an assumed or mythological name assigned since times immemorial to a so-called caste/sub-caste. How, then, the sagotra marriages can be prohibited? On the contrary, there are communities which have preferential first cousin marriages, and a lot of prestige and premium are attached to such marriages. Are politicians doing hobnobbing with such issues to get a political mileage? What is a Khap? Who constitute it? How does it function? Khap is a sort of panchayat (court) of a caste or a sub-caste, whose members are the so-called elders in a given village or a set of villages (Chaukhala). The traditional caste panchayat in rural India used to help its weak and poor families, particularly in meeting expenses on marriages and in agricultural activities, including ploughing and harvesting of crops.

It used to punish/ostracize the violators of caste ethics, but at the same as a champion of brotherhood, it was always there to support its members to bridge the gap between the strong and the weak. The idea of biradari (community) connotes barabari (equality). The Khap as a panchayat has assumed only punitive functions, ignoring the basic tenet of community/equality. The fear of genetic disorder is falsely propagated for some ulterior motives, including power, money and social status. The Khap diktat is an onslaught on freedom of individuals. It is anti-democracy and anti-social justice.

In *India Today* (May 24, 2010), Dipankar Gupta, a well-known sociologist, observes: "Sadly, some of our elected leaders who blinded us by their demonstrations of modernity, have turned out to be closet traditionalists, or just plain political cowards. Many of those who we thought were young, bright and energetic, have already thrown in the towel and given in to traditional casteists." Gupta makes this observation on Jindal's support to the Khap diktat on sagotra marriages. Is the Khap an example of functioning of the caste system? Where is the caste system as the bedrock of inter-group social relations? Khap is not even a caste panchayat in a proper sense. Caste panchayat is a persisting and regular phenomenon. Khap is adhoc, constructed sporadically and episodically, hence it has no systemic character. Anyway, Khap claims to stand/represent as a body of a caste/sub-caste. Once again, we may reiterate that there is only "caste," without the caste system. And we need to understand the "caste" as it exists in this form.

### **Social Mobility: Individual and Family**

In my study of Six Villages in Rajasthan (K. L. Sharma 1974: 125–168), I have analyzed three levels of mobility in caste structure, that is, of a family, of a group, and of an individual. In no case, mobility of an entire group, that is, of a caste/sub-caste was evident. At none of the three levels mobility was there in equal measure. Mobility of members of a given family was attributed to the family, but it did not engage all the members in the act/process of mobility in an equal measure. When a noticeable number of families moved upward, socially, economically or politically, it was commonly referred as caste mobility. Such a misnomer of caste/group mobility persists even today, though no efforts, by a jati/group as such, are there in sight. No doubt, family facilitates mobility of its potentially capable members, concrete instances are that of mobility of individuals in any given context.

Social mobility has brought about intra-family, intracaste and intercaste status-distinctions and cleavages, which are neither determined by ritualistic considerations, nor they have created a new ritual hierarchy. Class-like differences of a high magnitude could be seen today in a given caste due to multifarious mobility of its individual members and families. Resultant social distinctions from mobility have significantly weakened hereditary occupations, connubiality, and commensality. Let us make it clear here that no uniform pattern of mobility is evident among different castes, families and individuals, and it is not in congruence with the traditional caste hierarchy or with the notion of pure and impure. Downward mobility of some families and groups

from among the higher castes, and upward mobility of the previously disadvantaged families and Jatis, are a stark reality of the present system of social stratification (K. L. Sharma 1974; 1997).

Increasing emphasis on the study of structural aspects of caste exposes the preeminence of caste as a unique cultural phenomenon, and brings out analytic and empiric distinctions between caste, class and power. Beyond caste, lies caste-class nexus and its ramifications, negating “caste alone” approach to the study of Indian society. Earlier regarding caste, I have observed: “Increasingly, caste is becoming a desideratum, a state of mind, a plastic and malleable institution. No more hypersymbolization is manifest to express caste differences and typifications on a continuing basis” (K. L. Sharma 2001: 7–8). Though, the “essential” of caste is largely delegitimised, yet some sporadic caste-based pronouncements and religious and metaphysical interpretations of caste and its divinity pose a challenge to secularism and democracy in Indian society.

Alongwith the role played by family and individual in weakening of the caste system, political and economic factors have contributed immensely in shaping the dynamics of Indian society. Historian Irfan Habib (1995: 161–179) strongly denounces Louis Dumont’s theory of caste as *Homo Hierarchicus* (Dumont: op. cit.). Habib observes: “The caste system, in its classical form, could therefore function with as much ease in a natural economy as in a market-oriented one. In either case, it helped essentially to maintain not a fabric of imagined purity (if it did, this was incidental), but a system of class exploitation as rigorous as any other”. In medieval India, caste system remained a means of a system of class exploitation, and the British colonized the caste system by their policy of “divide and rule”, and by propagating the norms of social distance. The census of 1901 by Herbert Risley (op. cit.) and the Census of 1931 by J. H. Hutton (op. cit.) are unambiguous examples of sheer politicization of caste by the British.

Some western scholars, namely, Louis Dumont (op. cit.), McKim Marriott (1989), Ronald B. Inden (1990), and AKos Ostor (1984) have advocated a renewed cultural-ological approach to the study of caste in particular. Emphasis is on application of ethnosociology and use of indigenous concepts and categories, with a view to revive the understanding of caste as a cultural aspect of Indian society. Those who distance from such a rejuvenated culturology, their view is that caste needs to be studied in the context of its setting and surroundings. For example, Dipankar Gupta (2000: 224–264) pleads emphatically for an intersubjective sociology/anthropology against typification to study the caste system. He is of the view that castes need to be seen as discrete entities, being all abiding and durable identities. Gupta also looks for “individual” in caste, as we did look for “family” and “individual”, and Andre Beteille did look for “family”. According to Gupta, individuals interrogate their own social existence, reflect on it, and maximize their options. By locating “individual” in caste, Gupta reinforces our earlier hypothesis of “levels of mobility” in caste structure (K. L. Sharma 1974: op. cit.), and demythologise the rigid and closed supersymbolisations, typifications and binary oppositions as vehemently proposed by Louis Dumont. Received knowledge and socio-cultural recipes are being questioned increasingly by “individual”.

### Attempts towards Reconceptualization of Caste

The main motive behind these points is to see how and to what extent ideas and values are basic for knowing actual and observable behaviour of people. To what extent Louis Dumont's thesis of special type of inequality based on caste system is in practice? We have mentioned earlier that the idea of pure and impure is central to Dumont's notion of caste hierarchy. But in our view, caste is in class and in other systems of social stratification, hence taxonomic problem persists relating to the distinction of caste from other stratificatory systems. Elsewhere, I have stated: "Caste is increasingly becoming a matter of interpretation rather than substantialisation. Caste refers to a purposive rationality, and at the same time, it provides a description and explanation of the pathologies of modern polity and economy. It is no more an absolutised system as it was characterized by punitive acts like ostracisation and social neglect. Caste obstructs, which occur occasionally by a way of killings and torture of the violators of caste ethics, are incongruent with the dwindling of the caste system in recent times" (K. L. Sharma 2001: 7).

Secondly, cliches, such as tradition and modernity, continuity and change, hierarchy and stratification, organic and segmentary structures, have led to unfounded dichotomies/antinomies of a resilient and harmonic society. A continued emphasis on caste as a homo hierarchicus, culture-bound and change-resisting system (Dumont: op. cit.) has undermined the very semblance of continuity and change. However, the encompassing capability of caste system has been questioned by several scholars, including Ram Krishna Mukherjee (1957), Andre Beteille (1966: 224-46; 1969: 219-35), K. L. Sharma (1974: op. cit.), and Dipankar Gupta (2000: op. cit.). Beteille has focused on the emergence of "differentiated institutional structures of various kinds", and the role of "interests" along with ideas, in shaping of social stratification. Further, he observes that a new "caste free occupational structure" and modern education have created a non-traditional basis of social relations, weakening intercaste and intracaste relations. Gupta is of the view that ultimately "individual" matters a lot in the caste system.

A reconceptualization of caste system is clearly evident in the notions such as "multiple status hierarchies", "attributational" criteria of caste ranking, "new castes", "levels of social mobility", "downward social mobility", "obverse structural process of social change", "structural criteria of dominance", "new status images", etc., (K. L. Sharma: 1974: op. cit.; 1977; 1980; 2010). These are expressions and articulations relating to change of the conventional constructions and orientations. Obviously, there is today a new discourse in vogue reflecting distantiation from caste as the basis of social relations and stratification by the alert and articulate sections of the upper, middle, and even the erstwhile depressed sections.

Thirdly, we also see a revival of a culturological framework (Mc Kim Marriott: 1989) to look once again at the Indian society through caste and religious categories. Such an approach considerably underrates the relevance of structural criteria in effecting change in the caste system. Historical and contextual contexts (Yogendra Singh: 1994: 28-59) of change cannot be sidelined in understanding of the changing

face of intercaste and intracaste relations and emergence of individual and family as more effective institutions and units of social stratification. When caste becomes weak, then family and individual emerge as stronger agencies of reproduction of equality and inequality. The two, separately as well as in conjunction, attack the traditional impediments to social mobility, and become significant units of status-evaluation.

Thus, “caste for itself” and caste as an everyday life phenomenon are two different aspects, generally unrelated to each other. In the first case, caste is an episodic, metaphoric and goal-oriented phenomenon; and in the second sense, it is a discrete, personalized, and family-specific behavioural/interactional phenomenon. Both the interpretations are not in tune with the “caste model” (Beteille 1966: 224–246) of Indian society. Caste-free relations, new patterns of alliances and configurations across biradarries, levels of mobility, downward mobility, etc., are reflected in new status dynamics and power equations. However, discrete use of caste identity, as a resource in mundane personal spheres, and as a symbolic entity in not-so-essential social domains, remains a reality of our social life.

### **Caste as a Phenomenon and not as a System**

Thus, in our view, caste is becoming more of a state of mind of an individual rather than continuing as an ideology, directing collective actions and practices. A pre-given ideology is being questioned for caste identity and mobilization. In her comprehensive analysis, Susan Bayly (op. cit.) argues that caste has been for many centuries a real and active part of Indian life, and not just a self-serving orientalist fiction. Contemporary political and social developments have shaped it. Bayly adopts a middle path as she is of the view that caste is not reducible to the realm of imagination or discourse. Caste or caste-like identities have been there in changing and often threatening circumstances. The titles, symbols, and lifestyles of caste have proved to be remarkably durable and adaptable. Thus, according to Bayly, caste is neither an orientalist fiction nor a shameful crime to be disguised or ignored in discussing India’s history. “Caste is not and never has been a fixed fact of Indian life” (op. cit.: 25).

Caste has been made and remade over a long period of time. Fluidity of caste has existed and persisted because of India’s remarkable cultural diversity and physical environment, and the diversity of its States (provinces) and political systems. A sequence of complex but intelligible changes in Indian life have brought about changes in India’s religion, state power and material environment. Caste is not just a coded way of communication or expression of differences in power and wealth. It is also not giving way to purely class-based social differences. It needs to be understood against the background of India’s political and social experiences, that is, patterns of statecraft, religion and economic life (Susan Bayly op. cit.: 366–367).

Why caste has become for so many the core symbol of community in India? Nicholas B. Dirks (op. cit.) addresses this question quite differently compared to Susan Bayly’s analysis. Dirks explains that caste is not some single system that reflects a core civilizational value, and not a basic expression of Indian tradition. According to Dirks,

caste is a modern phenomenon, that, it is, specifically, the product of an historical encounter between India and western colonial rule. Dirks writes: “It was under the British rule that “caste” became a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all, “systematizing” India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization” (Ibid.: 5). He further states: “In short, colonialism made caste what it is today” (Ibid.: 5). Caste has been continuously reinvented. Under colonialism, it was made out to be far more pervasive, far more totalizing, and far more uniform, and was made a fundamentally religious order.

Dirks considers caste as a political phenomenon in the British as well the post-British periods. Today, it is denied and accepted at the same time. Caste groups are asking for creation of social conditions essential for their development and progress. However, in everyday life caste has become nearly non-existent and passive. Recent incidences of the so-called violation of rules of marriage present a horrifying picture of caste in some parts of India. A couple of times, for example, in the state of Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh, some self-appointed “caste leaders” have punished the violators of the rules of marriage, that is, caste endogamy and clan exogamy. Obscurantism, orthodoxy, cognitive blindness, inhuman and cruel acts, emanating from the punitive actions against the so-called violators, reflect a totally blurred and opaque picture of the caste system.

Another manifestation of “caste” is observable in congregations of biradaris (Jati Samaj). Today, a couple of the so-called leaders of the upper castes have been engaged in mobilization of support of their fellowmen for political gains, in the name of realization of the demands, such as reservation, as it is available to the SCs, the STs, the OBCs, etc. The B.P. Mandal Commission’s Report (1978–80) and its acceptance by the Government of India drastically changed the Indian political scene in 1991–92. Aftereffects of the Mandalisation of Indian politics can be seen even today after two decades in the caste-based mobilizations for reservation by the upper castes, and in the demand for inclusion by some castes in the categories of the OBCs/STs/SCs.

While concluding this paper, we agree with Ishita Banerjee—Dube (2008: XV) as she observes: “Caste, elusive yet enduring, retains a critical importance as concept and practice in India today”. Caste has really a diverse and chequered career in history of India. Caste has become an imprecise and vague phenomenon. Today, caste is an episodic expression and articulation rather than a systemic institution. It is not, therefore, seen in everyday life. Because of such a blurring nature of caste, manipulations for its appropriation have surfaced, and its social and cultural fabric has been relegated to the background. Caste as an ideology of pure and impure is redundant in the present-day India.

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