

## Why Hasn't Caste Disappeared Yet?

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**Surinder Jodhka brings new perspectives to the scholarship on caste and helps understand how this social institution has evolved and transformed itself in modernizing India. By empirically looking at the lived reality of caste, he reveals to what extent it is a constitutive element of everyday politics.**

Reviewed: Surinder Jodhka, *Caste in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Routledge 2015.

The sociology of India has been dominated by the study of caste for more than half a century, and Surinder Jodhka is one of the most eminent sociologists currently working in this field. This book is a culmination of more than a decade of research on caste that Jodhka has conducted across a variety of sites. Its primary focus is to study the changing manifestations of caste in contemporary India as the country's politics and economy have changed dramatically since the process of economic liberalization started in 1991 and the Congress party lost its political dominance. Jodhka locates these relatively recent changes in the context of the significant transformations in the understanding of caste in the last century or so. He underscores the importance of understanding the processes of colonial modernity by which caste has been redefined in this period. While this book is historically and theoretically informed, its strength lies in its relentlessly empirical approach.

### Going beyond the textbook view of caste

Jodhka locates three 'moments' in the conceptual trajectories of caste in its modern form. The first tendency he names 'caste as tradition' which is the popular textbook view of caste, a result of colonial knowledge production about India that focused on classical Hindu texts. In the words of Bernard Cohn, the widespread acceptance of such a textual view "led to a picture of Indian society as being static, time-less and space-less." Questions of regional variation, historical change across centuries or the relation of textual norms with actual practice were ignored in this view. The apogee of such an Orientalist 'book-view' of caste in the sophisticated language of modern social science came with Louis Dumont's 'Homo Hierarchicus' in 1966, which Jodhka suggests relied on a one-sided Brahmin view of caste. Crucially, a key impact of this thinking was that caste came to be seen as uniquely Indian, and any comparative study of caste with other forms of inequality prevalent globally was seen as mistaken. Indeed, Indian exceptionalism came to be best instantiated through caste.

A very different conceptual move is made with the emergence of the 'caste as power' perspective. This was largely the result of the rise of the discipline of sociology in India in the post-independence period with its emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork, and especially its initial concentration on 'village studies'. A crucial departure here was to see caste divisions as an extreme form of status divisions found in most

societies, following Max Weber. While the specificity of caste would be recognized, it would not be reduced to cultural difference. The second departure was a new focus on the empirics of caste, principally how its social reproduction requires the exercise of power. The key concept to emerge from such an approach is that of the ‘dominant caste,’ as M.N. Srinivas termed it. This is the clearest instance where status did not just encompass power, but power engendered status, as ritual status is really a function of material prosperity and political dominance. The power of ‘dominant castes’ is an offshoot of secular factors like landholding and demography, though often pre-modern textual traditions are channeled too. As the land-reform legislations of the post-independence era vested these agrarian middle castes with land titles, they became increasingly politically powerful at the state level, with the 1967 election being the tipping point.

This was the culmination of the horizontal consolidation of these castes at the provincial level. The rise of institutions like caste associations in the late colonial era had incubated this horizontal caste solidarity. The result was the politicization of caste. It had become the grammar of Indian politics at the ground level.

### **The Ambiguities of The “caste as humiliation” School**

By the late 1980s, while caste was already the central category of politics in India, its importance was still not acknowledged openly and it tended to be submerged under ‘caste-blind’ ideological battles. This changed, Jodhka argues, with the emergence of the ‘caste as humiliation’ school of thought. It was signaled by the rise of Dalit politics in this period, and accompanied by Ambedkar (<http://www.booksandideas.net/Ambedkar-and-the-Critique-of-Caste.html>) belatedly emerging as a national icon and the widespread dissemination of his ferocious political critique of caste.

While Jodhka’s schema is persuasive, one aspect that is under-explored is this third trajectory’s reliance on the first’s premise of caste as tradition, even if negatively. It too treats classical texts as if they had a direct relation to lived reality. Crucially, it also professes a pan-Indian idea of caste based on Varna<sup>1</sup>. Since the British conquest of India, a pan-Indian textual narrative about caste based on the idea of Varna has become hegemonic<sup>2</sup>. The varying methodologies of the All India caste census from 1871 to 1931 illustrate the difficulty of sorting the complex lived realities of caste into the straitjacketed formulas of textual notions of caste. Varna has historically provided a useful ideological tool for forging horizontal mobilization besides offering a language for upward mobility, especially in the colonial period<sup>3</sup>. Analysts however often mistake the instrumental deployment of the ideology of Varna to construct political identities to be a natural and historically inevitable process.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Varna' is the four fold division of caste of classical Hinduism

<sup>2</sup> “The British period may be seen as one in which the legal system rationalized the intricacies of local customary caste relationships in terms of classical Hindu legal concepts like Varna and pollution.” Galanter, Marc. "Law and caste in modern India." *Asian Survey* (1963): 544-559 at 558.

<sup>3</sup> For examples, see Srinivas, M.N. *Social change in modern India*. Orient Blackswan, 1995, p. 100-106.

Many seem to believe that contemporary political concepts like Scheduled Caste (SC)<sup>4</sup> are not just governmental categories, but come straight from Manusmriti<sup>5</sup> or some such Hindu textual source. The processes by which the lists of castes that feature in these categorizations were compiled are however much more complex, as Marc Galanter has shown in his revealing account of the process of collating the SC category in the 1930s. The basis of this categorization was untouchability but there were serious difficulties in conflating the very different practices of untouchability in Southern and Western India with those found in Northern or Eastern India.

### **The Regional Specificities of Caste**

Jodhka provides a useful counterpoint to pan-Indian narratives of caste by taking as his area of focus the Indian state of Punjab, which turns to be a particularly interesting place to think about contemporary debates on caste. Punjab has proportionately the highest SC population in the country, but many of the popular assumptions about caste do not prevail here. The majority of the SC population here is Sikh and the Brahmin presence is insignificant. There are as many as 39 SC communities in Punjab and Jodhka provides a vivid account of their diversity and the politics among them.

On one side is the Chamar cluster traditionally associated with leatherwork and largely located in the Doaba region of Punjab. They have increasingly given up agricultural labour and are more upwardly mobile with a long history of social reform movements like the Ad-dharm movement<sup>6</sup> and forging of the Ravidasi identity<sup>7</sup>. On the other side is the Chuhra cluster generally associated with scavenging work. It comprises of Mazhabi Sikhs concentrated in rural areas of the Malwa region and Balmikis in urban centres. With their relatively higher education levels, the Chamar communities had enjoyed the bulk of the reservation benefits for SCs in Punjab. This situation was undone in 1975 by a politically astute subdivision of the SC quota. 50% of the SC quota in Punjab was reserved for Mazhabis and Balmikis. This sub-categorization has come to stay. Even a judicial ruling against it in 2006 had to be negated because of the massive political upheaval it caused.

Similar sub-quotas are in place in Haryana and Tamil Nadu as well, and have been a longstanding demand in Andhra Pradesh. This example provided by Jodhka helps underline the fact that the term Dalit includes internal hierarchies and diverse communities. Successful mobilization along the lines of a composite Dalit identity requires political alliance building and a creation of Dalit consciousness. In other words, caste solidarity is as much a product of politics as class solidarity. There have been important attempts to politically forge such a Dalit identity, though even at the provincial level, it has been extremely unstable, succeeding only for limited periods of time. The most successful of these has been Mayawati's remarkable mobilization of the community in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), which has one-fifth of India's SC population. But even here, over time there has been friction between the largest SC

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<sup>4</sup> The "Scheduled Castes" is the legal name since 1936 collectively given to the groups officially identified as "untouchables." 1208 castes across India have been thus identified as SC.

<sup>5</sup> Manusmriti is an ancient legal text, one among the many Dharmasastras of Hinduism.

<sup>6</sup> The Ad Dharm movement was a socio-religious movement in in the 1920s Punjab aimed at securing an autonomous identity for 'untouchables'. The 1931 census listed its followers as a separate religious community.

<sup>7</sup> See Jodhka, p. 145-168

caste in the state, Jatav, to which Mayawati belongs, and the other SC castes. And rival parties have been quick to try and mobilize other SC castes, like the BJP did in the 2014 elections. In fact, Mayawati's UP is actually an exception in terms of her success at consolidating a Dalit political vote for more than a decade. The repeated failure of Dalit parties, including her own, to emulate Mayawati outside UP has shown that there is no available low-hanging 'Dalit vote' fruit to be plucked, and it will require a herculean effort to achieve.

### **The Various Avatars of Caste**

Jodhka emphasizes the transformations in caste structure in the last few decades, but he is simultaneously anxious to demonstrate that caste is by no means disappearing or likely to do so in a hurry. That naïve hope — entertained by mid-20<sup>th</sup> century modernization theory and its Marxist sub-branch— has long since proven mistaken.

In the last half century, the ideological and material basis of caste has further eroded, the former because ideas of caste-based hierarchy are no longer hegemonic and internalized among those low in the hierarchy. The latter has been a result of changes in the political economy of agriculture, especially in the regions that saw the green revolution. This structural transformation has been exacerbated by the more recent crisis in agriculture making it relatively unremunerative and unattractive. These changes mean that dalits are no longer tied to land and have opportunities to economically diversify and take up non-demeaning work.

However, these changes have attracted a violent backlash from the dominant castes in several regions, particularly in the form of the 'caste atrocity,' instances of which Jodhka analyses. This form of violence is usually inflicted by agrarian dominant castes, already threatened economically and now socially by the rise of the Dalit communities who were until recently subordinate to them. Inter-caste marriages in particular attract massive retribution. Jodhka provides an insightful account of these processes of resistance and reprisal in Punjab, which can serve as rich comparative fodder for understanding the changing dynamics between Dalits and dominant castes in other regions of India.

While 'the caste atrocity'<sup>8</sup> has emerged as a powerful means of reasserting caste hierarchies in the recent period, older forms of caste prejudice have been transfigured. The new occupational flexibility that came along with the transformations of caste in the era of economic liberalization should theoretically have provided new employment avenues for dalits. However, in two fascinating chapters on biases in corporate hiring and on difficulties in accessing credit for Dalit entrepreneurs in Panipat and Saharanpur, two small towns in North India, Jodhka brings home the difficulties in realizing the potential of these new options for upward mobility. In his interviews with company professionals in charge of hiring, Jodhka repeatedly encountered entrenched prejudices although all of them were committed in principle to 'caste-blind' recruitment.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Caste atrocity' or 'dalit atrocity' has come to denote upper caste violence against dalits as a reaction to their increased assertiveness or upward mobility. For a history of this term, see Mendelsohn, Oliver, and Marika Vicziany. *The Untouchables: Subordination, poverty and the state in modern India*. Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 44-76.

The emphasis in hiring was usually on family background and soft skills that only a privileged upbringing could provide and which are almost impossible to acquire for the first-generation educated. A revealing statement by one such hiring manager tells us all we need to know about this, “It is not tough to figure out their caste and social background. One gets to know about it the moment they open their mouth, the way they speak in English language.”

### **Understanding caste in a comparative perspective**

These research findings are crucial as caste-based discrimination in the private sector has not attracted the kind of attention it deserves. The public discourse on caste in India continues to be disproportionately framed by the reservation question<sup>9</sup>. It is imperative that there be a renewed focus on discrimination, especially in the economic sphere of access to private employment and credit. This is one area in which the Indian state and civil society have not intervened adequately, although Article 15(2) of the Constitution provides the broadest possible mandate for such interventions. This is also a field in which there is much to learn from comparative research in other countries. The jurisprudence on discrimination is highly developed in places like USA, and a careful study of their legislative and judicial experiences should inform future work on this area. Even in the case of understanding caste atrocity, Jodhka proposes that it is not very different from the lynchings common in post-Civil war USA. Such a placing of caste in a comparative frame with racial and other forms of discrimination from other parts of the world can help caste studies escape the insular frame of Indian exceptionalism. This call to develop a comparative perspective on caste is the key takeaway from this insightful and highly accessible book.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Reservation’ refers to caste-based quotas in public institutions in India