

Caste and democracy: the politics of exclusion and inclusion

Sheth, D. L.

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sheth, D. L. (2006). Caste and democracy: the politics of exclusion and inclusion. In K.-S. Rehberg (Ed.), *Soziale Ungleichheit, kulturelle Unterschiede: Verhandlungen des 32. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in München. Teilbd. 1 und 2* (pp. 1084-1099). Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verl. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-144778>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Caste and Democracy: The Politics of Exclusion and Inclusion¹

D. L. Sheth

Caste is the most intensively and widely studied South Asian institution and there is no need to reiterate the established wisdom here. I however wish to focus on, rather attempt to reformulate, some propositions on caste in terms that can facilitate a more direct and precise understanding of the contemporary structures of social exclusion in India. Before we proceed with this exercise two important, even if obvious, points need to be underlined. First, while many new forms of exclusion are indeed structurally integral to the caste system, there also are those unrelated to caste as well as the ones representing a combination of caste and non-caste elements. Second, in making of a social policy for combating exclusion, it is crucial to take account of both, the changed political-cultural context of exclusion (modernity, nation-state and democracy) and the ideological and structural changes that have occurred in the caste-system itself (Sheth 2002).

I. Social exclusion, Issues of theory and policy

Much of the thinking (and policy-making) on the issue of social exclusion in India is informed by the conventional (comparative-sociological) theory of caste. Since this theory views caste primarily as a hierarchy of statuses, a stratificatory system peculiar to a traditional society (Dumont 1980) its relationship with contemporary structures of exclusion prevailing in the modern, national societies has remained underexplored. Consequently, social exclusion in India (a modernising, traditional society) is almost unidimensionally problematised in terms of *status*-inequality, a hierarchical form persisting obstinately from the past in the face of modernity (Dumont). It is only recently that caste is being seen as a hierarchically patterned system of substantially existing *communities* which struggle and compete for resource – social, cultural, political and economic – on the ground; in the process, often

¹ I am grateful to Martin Linkenbach-Fuchs for his gentle prodings and lively discussions in that led me to preparing this paper.

flaunting the rules of hierarchy and changing statuses assigned to them. (e.g. Desai 1988; Jaiswal 1998; Quigley 1999; Sheth 1999)

The social policy however, continues to remain in the grip of the conventional theory and identifies victims of social exclusion in terms of their *traditional-status* disabilities. Accordingly, benefits of the policy remain by and large confined to members of certain involuntary, hereditary groups located at the bottom of the traditional hierarchy (the lower *sudras*) as well as those defined out of the «sacred, ideological frame of social hierarchy, i.e. the outcaste and the aboriginal groups. In this almost exclusively status-based and power-neutral conception of social exclusion the other non-status dimensions and forms of exclusion – not sufficiently explored in the comparative theory of caste – remain unrecognised by the policy. Consequently, exclusions based on gender discrimination, economic poverty, cultural marginalization of religious, linguistic and racial minorities, regional backwardness, old age and physical disability have been inadequately addressed.

It is indeed true that even the above (non-caste) type of social exclusion is experienced more acutely by those belonging to the lowest rungs of the traditional hierarchy. This fact, however, cannot justify the argument – often made in the discourse of social justice in India – that *all* contemporary forms of exclusion are symptomatic expressions of the caste system. Put differently, the policy, rooted as it is in the conventional theory of caste, has failed to address forms of social exclusion resulting from the changes in the traditional stratificatory system – the process in which caste is conflated with the other, newer, forms of exclusion. Consequently, the policy has remained stuck in the old paradigm that problematises social exclusion generally as an issue of extending political equality and social welfare to the traditionally discriminated specific social groups. If this policy goal is realized, it is often assumed, the other forms of exclusion will dissolve in the ongoing processes of political modernization and nation-building.

To conclude, the new forms of exclusion even when they conflate with caste, do not make much sense to the conventional status theory. This is presumably so because the new realities of social exclusion, often structurally overlapping with caste, do not easily fit the theory's binary categories of caste *versus* class, collectivity *versus* individual, hierarchy *versus* equality and the traditional (South Asian) *versus* modern (Western) society. Social exclusion is then viewed as a persistent feature of the traditional society, an extreme form of status disability, continuing from the past. The theory fails to recognize that status-disability of a caste is structurally linked to its collective-power deficiency, and that remedying exclusion is not (and really never was) primarily a (social) question of improving ritual status, e.g. through sanskritization. The issue of status mobility is, and has always been chiefly a political question, i.e., the one of redefining power-relations.

Need for a political-social theory of caste: The hitherto unexplored relationship between caste and contemporary forms of social exclusion could be better understood if the conventional status theory is modified with the help of insights generated by some *recent* (as well as some earlier ones but neglected by the conventional, ritual (religious) status theorists of caste) *theoretical and empirical-historical* researches (Klass 1980; Desai 1988; Milner 1994; Jaiswal 1998; Quigley 1999; Sheth 1999; Byley 1999; Dirks 2001; Srinivas 2003) which enable us to view *political power as a constitutive principle* of caste, counteracting and constantly seeking to even undermine its systemic principle, i.e. status.

Viewed from the empirical-historical perspective, caste can be seen as a plurality of socio-political collectivities which continually struggled, strived, and competed for acquiring higher statuses in the society, even as they sought to maintain their different cultural identities. Caste has thus been a contested terrain from its inception in which hegemonic ideologies are being crafted and sought to be institutionalised by certain dominant social groups (communities), ensuring generational perpetuation of their power and control over resources in the society and, in the process, ensuring for themselves higher (upper caste) social (ritual) status on a highly durable basis. Such dominance (achieved by establishing a near monopoly of power and knowledge in the society) has been passively, but constantly, resisted by the subjugated communities aspiring to social mobility. Quite a few of these communities however, periodically, forcefully challenged the upper-caste dominance by producing counter-ideological discourses and often even forming political alliances among themselves. By mobilising military support of their compatriots leaders of some such communities even managed to acquire power in form of kingship or generally by establishing membership to the ›class of rulers‹ (rajanyas/kshatriyas). In such moments of history the lower-status, subjugated groups succeeded in moving upward in the ritual hierarchy demonstrating, in the process, the salience of the power-principle of caste over the status-principle.

Thus, by balancing the so far overemphasized (overly determining) principle of (ritual) status with that of (political) power, caste can be more concretely conceptualised, firstly, as the institution that has been structuring and maintaining, for centuries, *relations of power* among different *communities*. As such, it seeks to legitimise these power relations: (a) through systematically dispensing various mixes of economic and cultural assets/opportunities *and* deprivations to different communities and (b) through endowing religious/ideological sanctification of such dispensations. Secondly, being primarily a power system its sacralization and the elaborate mechanisms of rewards *and* punishments it evolved, did not and could not succeed in substantially and permanently incorporating or recasting the cultural and historical identities of different communities in terms of hierarchical relations.

In sum, if we were to grasp the special nature of exclusion in the South Asian societies (arising from a peculiar fusion of processes of status-allocation and power-distribution), it is necessary to focus on the political and historical aspects of caste – which enables us to view it as a sacralized *power structure* – rather than exclusively on its desubstantialised structural aspect which confines our view of caste to its being an all-time, ideologically (religiously) determined hierarchy of ritual statuses.

Caste: A Self-reproducing Power Structure

Evolved over centuries, caste sustained communitarian identities of innumerable groups ethnically, culturally and socially distinct from each other and at the same time, held these communities together in a vast network of local hierarchies. Communities in different local hierarchies were arranged, normatively uniformly, in an ascriptively unequal macro-system of graded exclusion, which was politically, economically and epistemically dominated by a few, select communities through ages. The graded structure of exclusion was never a permanently fixed arrangement, and a fairly frequent upward and downward movement of communities took place within and across local hierarchies. However, a large divide always existed between communities in the small ruling sector (the *dvijas* or the twice born) which among themselves held virtual monopoly of different *types* of power (intellectual, political and economic) and a vast sector of the numerous other communities (the *sudras*) were ascriptively expected to engage directly in primary production and service related activities (Ambedkar 1946). A third and a relatively smaller sector of communities (of the excluded others: *a-varna*) developed over time at system's periphery as a consequence of persistent and often ruthless enforcement of the principle of graded exclusion by the ruling communities. For these communities of the third sector, the system functioning on the principle of *graded exclusion* produced a situation of an all round, permanent exclusion. They were never formally recognized as a part of the system. As such, they were not assigned any specifically defined role or work in the system's production and service domains nor in any other domain – thus depriving them of any means of livelihood. (Ambedkar 1948) This systemic deprivation of livelihood accompanied by the social, cultural and moral exclusion of these communities forced them to live in a perpetual situation of economic and moral compulsion and »adopt« means of livelihood involving work that was discarded as »unclean« and degrading by the communities whom the system granted one or the other entitlement, ensuring them some kind of a right to work. These communities of the third sector being ousted even from graded exclusion, remained permanently degraded, leaving them, unlike the other communities, little or no scope for upward mobility.

The intriguing question is how the caste character of exclusion – a hegemony of a few traditionally empowered communities based on graded exclusion, over the rest of the society – has survived in the South Asian societies in one form or the other, despite the fundamental ideological and structural changes that have occurred over a long period through the spread of religions like Islam and Christianity as well as of modern secular and egalitarian ideologies, all opposed to the very idea of hierarchy based on inherited statuses. It is difficult to deal with this question unless we take account of these long surviving, highly adaptive (and hence resilient) structures of exclusion.

Two Faces of Caste

Two commonly misconceived notions of caste held by policy-makers and often even by the analysts, come in the way of understanding its resilient and yet adaptive nature: first, that caste is a permanently fixed hierarchy of *hereditary groups*, second that a caste derives its identity almost exclusively from the status it has in the hierarchy. In fact caste has another face which is often shrouded in theory, i.e. of a *community*. It is important to elaborate and clarify here these two rather different existences of caste – the hierarchical and communitarian – in order that we understand why caste has remained the most resilient among the stratificatory structures.

Caste as a hierarchy of statuses: Seen in a historical perspective caste, or a caste-like structure, is a hierarchy of social *forms* within which concretely existing groups hold statuses, but from which they may move out and occupy other statuses. Thus the actual groups to which statuses are attached have always moved up and down in the hierarchies, in which process a group could detach itself from a given (born in) status and credibly adopt another higher status or may get pushed to a lower one. Thus when a group moves in the hierarchy, from one status to another, it inheres the power and privilege (or lack of it) of the status it enters. In this sense power and privileges are structurally tied to a status and not necessarily to a specific hereditary group. It is by resolutely sticking to certain statuses that historically a few groups traditionally representing epistemic, political/military and economic power have been able to dominate the entire system and maintain a degree of legitimacy of their power. This relationship between the group/community and status is although sustained by the ideology of hereditary virtues fixing permanent ritual distances among groups, historically there have been continuous countervailing movements to caste, which periodically resulted in several groups moving out of their born-in statuses and getting into new statuses. In the past the movements like Jainism, Buddhism, Tantricism and Bhakti caused such reshuffling of groups across statuses, in the ongoing hierarchal system. Yet, despite formidable ideological challenges and

some structural impacts they made on it, by and large, traditionally dominating groups retained power in the system, usually by redefining, often relaxing the rules which maintained ritual distances and prevented choices. But it is only in the modern times that both ideological *and* structural challenges have converged, with implications for imploding the old hierarchical structure. These changes have, however, yet not appreciably reduced the power of the old status groups in the society. They have only made it unnecessary for the ruling status-groups to sustain and justify their claims to power in ritual or ascriptive terms; insofar as the intrinsic value of status survives in the society, the traditional status-groups can discard the old ideological terms and use new ones for validating their continuing status-power.

Caste as a Network of Ethnic Communities

It is important to note that even in the traditional hierarchy-determined system of social hegemony the included and excluded communities did not exist in a bi-polar structure of power. The graded structure of exclusion also *linked* communities to each other in such a manner that caste could also be seen as a graded structure of *inclusion* in which power percolated to every community irrespective of its location in the hierarchy. This caused each community to experience a sense of social salience in the system. Put in more concrete terms, despite being tied in a structure of hierarchy a community at each level, except probably at the bottom most level, enjoyed a degree of dominance over some others below it. The dominance was however maintained not just through exercise of power but also by a system of mutual obligation and dependence among the communities. While this system never pretended to establish one, culturally homogenized political community, it did sustain a common symbolic meaning system making communications possible across *types* of communities (representing denominational, ethnic, linguistic, and occupational-cultural differences) and *levels* of hierarchy. No community had a cultural identity autonomous of the other, it was always expressed in *relational* terms, where a particular identity could not be self-perceived or perceived by others in terms independent and underivable from those defining the systemic whole.

It will thus be an overly simplified view of the traditional caste system, if it holds that in it the distinct and hierarchically ordered communities lived a completely localized existence and had their identities constituted by statuses they occupied. In the system of graded dominance no community, not even the one at the top, enjoyed absolute power. Each dominating group was entitled to only one type (intellectual or political or economic) power, which again percolated downward to other similar communities. This allowed many communities, despite hierarchical differences, to interact with each other in horizontal spaces marked by a degree of mutu-

ality and cooperation among them. In this system of hierarchy each community was simultaneously a status group and an autonomous community in its own right. A community also developed some kind of a social capital for itself, ironically, through performing specific roles and developing specialized skills and crafts assigned to it in the hierarchy. But this contributed also to the growth of social assets for the community and imparted it with some especially identifiable psycho-cultural characteristics. These characteristics and assets cumulatively formed a basis of a cultural recognition of the community – often in terms independent of its status in the social hierarchy – and of its social mobility. All this allowed/encouraged every community, irrespective of its location in the hierarchy, to construct its special ›history‹ and build legends justifying its autonomous existence in a non-hierarchical, horizontal space and the place of pride it held in the society.

A community also maintained a degree of political and social governance for itself, and evolved mechanisms and procedures for settlements of disputes within it and of resolving conflicts vis-à-vis the other communities. The political authority of the state wherever and in whatever form it existed (King, an oligarchy, ruling council, a panchayat) was usually negatively defined as the one charged with *preventing* major transgressions or defiance of the generally and conventionally recognized social and economic codes of the system as a whole. It also sought to prevent the use of raw power or unsanctioned dominance by one community over the other. In short, operating within the rules of an ascriptively ordered hierarchy, (rather by constantly bending these rules) the communities were able to find large social and economic spaces, and acquire distinctive cultural identities for themselves.

To conclude, in this hierarchically ordered world of communities, contrary to common belief, no community was expected to live, or it really lived, with a hierarchically defined (caste) unidimensional identity. Probably that made it possible for the system to constantly accommodate immigrant and invading ethnic groups as well as the ever arising new occupational groups, in the system's flexible hierarchy. It even made it possible for some of them to move vertically upward in the hierarchy and be structurally a part of the ruling status groups. To put it differently, the communities did not live in a prison house of identities; just as they detached and reattached themselves with statuses, they also discarded the old and donned new identities, through their movements in time and space.

II. Caste and Democratic Politics²

For some two decades after Independence, the political discourse on caste was dominated by left-radical parties and liberal-modernist intellectuals who saw, rather simplistically, changes in the caste system in linear terms, i.e., changes as suggestive of its transformation into a system of polarized economic classes. In believing so, they ignored the fact that while caste had lost its significance as a ritual-status group it survived as a ›community‹, seeking alliances with other similar communities with whom it shared commonality of political interest and consciousness. Consequently, political parties of the Left, both the communist and the socialist, by and large, sought to articulate political issues and devise strategies of mobilizing electoral support in terms of economic interests which in their view divided the social classes in India. In the event, although these parties could credibly claim to represent the poorer strata and they even occupied some significant political spaces in opposition to the Congress party at the time of Independence, they failed to expand their electoral support in any significant measure for decades after Independence.

Politicisation of Caste

Put simply, competitive politics required that a political party seeking wider electoral bases must view castes neither as a pure category of ›interest‹ nor of ›identity‹. The involvement of castes in politics fused ›interest‹ and ›identity‹ in such a manner that a number of castes could share common interests and identity in the form of larger social-political conglomerates. The process was of *politicization* of castes, which by incorporating castes in competitive politics reorganized and recast the elements of both hierarchy and separation among castes in larger social collectivities. These new collectivities did not resemble the *varna* categories or any thing like a polarized class-structure in politics. The emergence of these socio-political entities in Indian politics defied the conventional categories of political analysis, i.e., class analysis vs. caste analysis. The singular impact of competitive democratic politics on the caste system thus was that it delegitimized the old hierarchical relations among castes, facilitating new, horizontal power relations among them.

Congress Dominance: First Phase of Politicization: The process of politicization of castes acquired a great deal of sophistication in the politics of the Congress party, which scrupulously avoided taking any theoretical-ideological position on the issue of caste versus class. The Congress party, being politically aware of the change in the agrarian context, saw castes as socio-economic entities seeking new identities

² This section heavily borrows from my earlier work, *Secularisation of Caste* (Sheth 1999).

through politics in the place of the old identities derived from their traditional status in the ritual hierarchy. Thus, by relying on the caste calculus for its electoral politics and, at the same time, articulating political issues in terms of economic development and national integration, the Congress was able to evolve durable electoral bases across castes and to maintain its image as the only and truly national party. This winning combination of ›caste politics‹ and ›nationalist ideology‹ secured for the Congress Party a dominant position in Indian politics for nearly three decades after Independence. The Congress party rarely used such dichotomies as upper-castes vs. lower castes or the capitalists vs. working class in its political discourse. Its politics was largely addressed to linking vertically the rule of the newly emergent upper-caste and English speaking – ›national elite‹ to lower-caste support. And the ideology used for legitimation of this vertical social linkage in politics was neither class-ideology nor caste-ideology; the key concept was ›nation-building‹.

The Congress party projected its politics and programmes at the *national* level as representing ›national aspirations‹ of the Indian people. At the *regional* levels, the party consolidated its social base by endorsing the power of the numerically strong and upwardly mobile dominant, but traditionally of lower status, castes of land-owning peasants e.g., the Marathas in Maharashtra, the Reddys in Andhra, the Patidars in Gujarat, the Jats in Uttar Pradesh and so on. In the process it created patron-client type of relationships in electoral politics, relationships of unequal but reliable exchanges between political patrons – the upper and dominant (intermediate) castes – and the numerous ›client‹ castes at the bottom of the pile, popularly known as the Congress ›vote-banks‹. Thus, in the initial two decades after Independence, the hierarchical caste relations were processed politically through elections. This ensured for the Congress a political consensus across castes, despite the fact that it was presided over by the hegemony of a small upper-caste, English-educated elite in collaboration with the regional social elites belonging by and large to the upwardly mobile castes of landed peasants. The latter, however, were often viewed by the former, (i.e., the ›national elite‹, with the self-image of modernizers) as parochial traditionalists. Still the alliance held.

This collaboration between the two types of elites, created a new structure of representational power in the society, around which grew a small middle-class. This class constituted of the upper-caste national elite living in urban areas *and* the rural social elite belonging to the dominant peasant castes as well as those upper caste members living in rural areas. The ruling national elites although belonged to the upper *dvija* castes they had become detached from their traditional ritual status and functions. They had acquired new interests in the changed (planned) economy, and life-styles which came through modern education, non-traditional occupations, and a degree of westernization which accompanied this process. The dominant castes of the regional elites, still depended more on *sanskritization* than on ›westernization‹ in

their pursuit of upward social mobility. But they encouraged their new generations to take to modern, English-medium education and to new professions. In the process, despite their *sudra* origins, but thanks to their acquisition of new power in the changed rural economy and politics, several peasant communities succeeded in claiming social status equivalent to the middle-class *dvijas*.

Consequently, such communities as Patidars, Marathas, Reddys, Kammas, and their analogues in different regions were identified with ›upper castes‹, and not with ›backward castes‹. Acquisition of modern education and interest in the new (planned) economy enabled them, like the *dvija* upper-castes, to claim for themselves a new social status and identity, i.e., of the middle class.

At the same time, the caste identities of both these sections of the ›middle class‹ were far from dissolved. They could comfortably own both the upper caste status and the middle-*class* identity as both categories had become concomitant with each other. While the alliance between the upper caste national-elite and the dominant-caste regional elites remained tenuous in politics, they together continued to function as a new power-group in the larger society. In the formation and functioning of this middle-class as a power group of elites the caste had indeed fused with the class and status dimension had acquired a pronounced power dimension. But insofar as this process of converting traditional status into new power was restricted only to the upper rungs in the ritual hierarchy, they sought to use that power in establishing their own caste-like hegemony over the rest of the society. It is this nexus between the upper traditional status and new power that inhibited the transformative potentials of both modernization and democracy in India.

This conflation of the traditional status system with the new power system, however, worked quite differently for the numerous non-*dvija* lower castes. In negotiating their way into the new power-system, their traditional low status, contrary to what it did for the upper and the intermediate castes, worked as a liability. The functions attached to their very low traditional statuses had lost relevance or were devalued in the modern occupational system. Moreover, since formal education was not mandated for them in the traditional status system, they were slow to take to modern education when compared with the upper castes. Nor did they have the advantage of inherited wealth as their traditional status had tied them to subsistence livelihood patterns of the *jajmani* system.

In brief, for the lower castes of small and marginal peasants, artisans, the ex-untouchables and the numerous tribal communities, their low statuses in the traditional hierarchy worked negatively for their entry in the modern sector. Whatever social capital and economic security they had in the traditional status system was wiped out through the modernization process; they no longer enjoyed the protection that they had in the traditional status system against the arbitrary use of hierarchical power by the upper castes. On top of that they had no means or resources to

enter the modern sector in any significant way, except becoming its underclass. They remained at the bottom rung of both the hierarchies, the sacred and the secular, of caste *and* class.

This did objectively create an elite-mass kind of division in politics, but it still did not produce any awareness of polarization of socio-economic classes in the society. In any event, it did not create any space for class-based politics. In fact, all attempts of the left parties at political mobilization of the numerous lower-castes as a *class* of proletarians did not achieve any significant results either for their electoral or revolutionary politics. Neither did their politics, focused as it was on class ideology, make much of a dent on Congress-dominated politics marked by the rhetoric of national integration and social harmony. In effect, Congress could establish the political hegemony of the upper-castes oriented middle-class with the electoral consent of the lower-castes! A very peculiar caste-class linkage was thus forged in which the upper castes functioned in politics with the self-identity of a *class* (ruling or ›middle‹) and the lower-castes, despite their class-like political aspirations, with the consciousness of their separate *caste* identities. The latter were linked to the former in a vertical system of political exchange through the Congress party, rather than horizontally with one another.

Politics of Reservations: Second Phase of Politicization

It took some three decades after Independence for the lower castes of peasants, artisans, the ex-untouchables and the tribals to express their resentment about the patron-client relationship that had politically bound them to the Congress party. With a growing awareness of their numerical strength and the role it could play in achieving their share in political power, their resentment took the form of political action and movements. An awareness among the lower castes about using political means for upward social mobility and for staking claims as larger social collectivities for share in political power had arisen during the colonial period, but it was subdued after Independence, for almost three decades and a half of Congress dominance.

It was around mid 1970's that the upper caste hegemony over national politics began to be seriously challenged. This was largely due to the social policies of the State, particularly that of Reservations (affirmative action). Despite tardy implementation, toward the end of the 1970's the Reservations policy that was for long in-existence in many states of the Indian union had created a small but significant section, in each of the lower caste groups, which had acquired modern education, had entered the bureaucracy and other non-traditional occupations. In the process a small, but a highly vocal political leadership emerged, from among the lower castes.

The process of politicization of castes, however, came to head at the beginning of the 1980's. This was when the Second Commission for Backward Classes (the Mandal Commission) proposed to extend reservations in jobs and educational seats to the Other Backward Classes (i.e., to castes of lower peasantry and artisans) in *all* states and union territories and at the central Government level. This proposal was stoutly opposed by sections of the upper and the intermediate castes who by then were largely ensconced in the middle-class. They saw the newly politicized lower castes forcing their way into the middle class (particularly into white-collar jobs), that too not through open competition but on ›caste-based‹ reservations. This created a confrontation of interest between the upper and intermediate castes on the one hand and the lower castes on the other. But, it led to a resurgence of lower castes in national politics. This resurgent politics, guided by lower-caste aspirations to enter the middle class, was pejoratively derided as the ›Mandalization of politics‹ by the English-educated elite. The so called Mandalized politics, an euphemism for politicization of lower castes, has since resulted in radically altering the social bases of politics in India.

Firstly, the Congress party-dominated politics of social consensus, presided over by the hegemony of an upper-caste, English-educated elite came to an end. The Congress organization could no longer function as the system of vertical management of region-caste factions. The elite at the top could not accommodate the ever increasing claims and pressures from below, by different sections of the lower castes, for their share in power. Since mid-1970's through the 1980's, large sections of the lower strata of social groups abandoned the Congress and constituted themselves into shifting alliances of their own separate political parties. The vertical arrangement of the region-caste factions that the Congress had perfected just collapsed. The national parties – the Congress, the BJP, and the Communist parties alike – had now to negotiate for political support directly with the social-political collectivities of the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) or with the regional-caste parties constituted by them.

Secondly, the categories of the OBCs, SCs and the STs, expressly devised for the administrative purpose of implementing the Reservations policy, perhaps as an unintended consequence, acquired a strong social and political content and surfaced as new social formations in the macro-stratificatory system. They now operated in politics with the self-consciousness of socio-economic groups. Not content with proxy-representations by the upper caste, middle class elites, they wanted political power for themselves. Politics now became a contest for representation among horizontal power groups, representing social collectivises as identified by the policy of Reservations. These groups began to bargain with different existing parties or formed their own new parties. Whatever survived of the hierarchical dimension of the traditional stratificatory system in politics was thus effectively horizontalized.

Thirdly, the ›Mandalized politics‹ by generating aspirations among the lower castes to attain ›middle class‹ status and lifestyles prevented the process of *class* polarization. This politics created new compulsions in the social arena. The old middle-class, dominated by the upper and intermediate castes, was now compelled to admit expansion beyond itself and make spaces, even if grudgingly, for different sections of the lower castes. At the same time, lower castes while forming coalitions in politics, began to compete among themselves intensely at the social level for an entry into the growing middle-class.

In sum, the state policy of affirmative action gave a big impetus to the process of politicization of castes (as well as to de-ritualization of inter-caste relations). The policy itself, by providing special educational and occupational opportunities to members of the numerous lower castes, converted their traditional disability of low ritual status into an asset for acquiring new means for upward social mobility. What politicization of castes has thus done, along with the spread of urbanization and industrialization, is to have contributed to the emergence of a new type of stratificatory system in which the old middle-class has not only expanded in numbers, but has begun to acquire new social and political characteristics.

Classization of Caste

›Classization‹ is a problematic, and admittedly an inelegant concept used for describing certain type of changes in caste. As a category derived from the conventional ›class analysis‹ it articulates the issue of change in linear and dichotomous terms, i.e., how, is caste transforming itself into a polarized structure of economic classes? Just as the role of *status* and other ›non-class‹ elements (e.g., gender, ethnicity etc.) is routinely ignored in analyses of class in the Western society, ›Class analysis‹ in India undermines the role of ›caste‹ elements in class and *vice versa*. At the other end the spectrum are scholars devoted to ›caste-analysis‹; they have little use for a concept like ›classization‹. Accustomed to viewing caste as a local hierarchy and to interpreting changes *in it*, in terms of the caste system's own ideology and rules, they view class elements in caste, (e.g., the role of modern education, occupational mobility, economic and political power, etc.) as elements extraneous to the caste system; which, it, of course, incorporates and recast them in its own image to maintain its *systemic* continuity.

Emergence of a New Middle-Class

All these changes have imparted a structural substantiality to the macro-stratificatory system of a kind it did not have in the past. In absence of a centralized polity, the system functioned super structurally as an ideology of *varna* hierarchy. Lacking structural substance, it served as a »common social language« and supplied normative categories of legitimation of statuses to various local, substantive hierarchies of *jatis*. But after India became a pan-Indian political entity governed by a liberal democratic State, as we saw earlier, new social formations – each comprising a number of *jatis*, often across ritual hierarchies and religious communities – emerged at the regional and all-India levels. Deriving its nomenclature from the official classification devised by the State in the course of implementing its policy of affirmative action (Reservations), the new formations began to be identified as: the forward or the »upper castes«, the backward castes (OBCs), the *dalits* or Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the tribals or the Scheduled Tribes (STs).

Unlike status groups of the caste *system*, the new social formations function as relatively loose and open-ended entities, competing with each other for political power. In this competition, members of the upper-caste formation have available to them the *resources* of their erstwhile traditional higher status and those of lower-caste formations have the advantages accruing to them from the State's policy of affirmative action. Thus, the emergent stratificatory system represents a kind of fusion between the old status system and the new power system. Put differently, the ritual hierarchy of closed status groups has transformed into a fairly open and fluid system of social stratification.

This system is in making; it cannot be described either in caste terms or in pure class terms. However, the salience of one category in this newly emergent stratificatory system has become visible in recent years. It can be characterized as the »new middle class« because its emergence is directly traceable to the disintegration of the caste *system*, this has made it socially much more diversified compared to the old, upper-caste oriented middle-class that existed at the time of Independence. Moreover, high status in the traditional hierarchy worked implicitly as a criterion for entry into the »old« middle-class, and »sanskritized« life-styles constituted its cultural syndrome. Both rituality and sanskritization have virtually lost their relevance in the formation of the »new« middle-class. Membership of today's middle-class is associated with new life-styles (modern consumption patterns), ownership of certain economic assets and the *self-consciousness* of belonging to the »middle-class«. As such, it is open to members of different castes – which have acquired modern education, taken to non-traditional occupations and/or command higher incomes and the political power – to enter this »middle-class«.

And yet, the ›new middle class‹ cannot be seen as constituting a pure *class* category – a construct which in fact is a theoretical fiction. It carries some elements of caste within it, in so far as entry of an individual in the middle-class is facilitated by the collective political and economic resources of his/her caste. For example, upper-caste individuals entering the middle class have at their disposal the resources that were attached to the status of their caste in the traditional hierarchy. Similarly for lower caste members, lacking in traditional status resources, their entry into the ›middle-class‹ is facilitated by the modern-legal provisions like affirmative action to which they are entitled by virtue of their low traditional status. It seems the Indian ›middle class‹ will continue to carry caste elements within it, to the extent that modern status aspirations are pursued, and the possibility of their realization is seen, by individuals in terms of the castes to which they belong.

To conclude, democratic politics has subjected caste to a continuous process of secularization. This process has transformed caste along the dimensions of de-ritualization, politicization and classization, with the result that caste has been reduced, to a kinship-based micro-community. But at the same time its members have been acquiring new structural locations and identities which are derived from the new categories of stratification premised on a different set of principles than those of the ritual hierarchy. By thus forming themselves into larger horizontal social groups, members of different castes are now increasingly competing for entry into the ›middle class‹. The result is, members of the lower castes have entered the middle class in sizeable numbers. This has begun to change the character and composition of the old, pre-Independence, middle-class which was constituted almost entirely by a small English-educated upper-caste elite.

References

- Ambedkar, B. R. (1948), *The Untouchables: who were they and why they became Untouchables*, Delhi.
- Ambedkar, B. R. (1946) *Who were the Shudras?*, Bombay.
- Bayly, Susan (1999), *The New Cambridge History of India: Caste, Society and Politics in India from The Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge.
- Desai, I. P. (1988), »A critique of Division and Hierarchy«, in: Shah, A. M./Desai, I. P. (eds.), *Division and Hierarchy: An Overview of Caste in Gujarat*, Delhi, pp. 40–49.
- Desai, I. P. (1984) »Should Caste be the Basis for Recognising Backwardness«, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 19, no. 28, pp. 1106–1116.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. (2001), *Caste of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, New Delhi.
- Dumont, Louis (1980), *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, Chicago.
- Jaiswal, Suvira (1998), *Caste: Origin, Function and Dimensions of Change*, New Delhi.
- Klass, Morton (1980), *Caste: The Emergence of the South Asian Social System*, Philadelphia.

-
- Milner, Murray Jr. (1994), *Status and Sacredness: A General Theory of Status Relations and an Analysis of Indian Culture*, New York.
- Quigley, Declan (1999), *The Interpretation of Caste*, New Delhi.
- Sheth, D. L. (1999), »Secularisation of Caste and Making of New Middle Class«, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 34, no. 34–35, pp. 2502–2510.
- Sheth, D. L. (2002), »Caste and Class: Social Reality and Political Representations«, in: Shah, Ghan-shyam (ed.), New Delhi, pp. 209–233.
- Srinivas, M. N. (2003), »An obituary on Caste as a system«, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 38, no. 5, pp. 455–459.