

The Caste-Class Question: A Review of Intersections and Contradictions

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to revisit and (re)interrogate the age-old caste and class question and thus delve into a critical inquiry of the existing scholarships concerning theoretical frameworks of caste. Breaking away from colonial (mis)interpretations and the subsequent *Dumontian* understanding of Indian society, this paper illustrates intricate relationships of caste with land, private property, division of labour and subsequent class relations. By doing so, the paper asserts that the socio-cultural attributes, such as, caste, are determined and shaped over the playfield of class relations.

Keywords: *Caste, Class, Dominant Caste, Division of Labour, Brahminical Approach, Marxist Perspective*

Introduction

The debate on whether caste or class is the primary reality in India has been a long-standing concern in Sociology (Gupta 1981: 2093). Some of the common misconceptions regarding caste and class in India are; “caste and class are polar opposites; caste is being replaced by class; caste is a rural phenomenon whereas class is found in urban-industrial settings; caste is an ascriptive system and class is based on the achievement principle; caste is a closed system and does not permit mobility for its members, whereas class is an open system and allows mobility for its members; India has/had a caste system, hence a ‘caste model’ for studying society; and the West has/had classes, hence a ‘class model’ for studying Western societies” (Sharma 1984: 1).

These ideas have their roots in the colonial dichotomy prevalent during the British and post-independence eras. The primary reason of this (mis)conceived dichotomy is that it is not based on people’s observed or documented behaviour but rather on the beliefs held and expressed by specific segments of society. As understood in the classical texts, it gave caste a primary and universal significance. However, the fundamental unit of the system, the various

castes, which are thought to be non-antagonistic, are governed by a few more or less clearly stated principles or rules that govern the entire system (Sharma 1984: 2).

Indian society is a complex mesh of social, economic, and cultural elements. Amongst various social institutions, the caste system and class divisions hold a prominent place in determining individuals' social and economic status. In Indian history and society, it is often argued that caste and class are two distinct concepts. However, according to Hira Singh (2014), classes existed in India long before the caste system was fully developed, and the caste hierarchy was primarily built on the foundation of class relations. Singh supports this argument with reference to the emergence of the Brahmin and Kshatriya classes in the Vedic period. He explains that these two upper Varnas became dominant due to their control over crucial resources. The Brahmins managed religious and ritual authority, while the Kshatriyas held power over military and administrative structures (Singh 2014: 16). This material control predates the codification of the caste system and laid the groundwork for the later solidification of these divisions into a rigid, hereditary hierarchy. Singh's argument suggests that the caste system was not an independent or purely religious phenomenon, but a structural response to pre-existing class relations, wherein economic and power disparities were ideologically legitimized and institutionalized through religious and social systems.

The aim of this paper is to revisit and re-interrogate the age-old caste and class questions. Thus delve into a critical inquiry of the existing scholarships concerning theoretical frameworks of caste. Breaking away from colonial mis-interpretations and the subsequent Dumontian understanding of Indian society, this paper illustrates intricate relationships of caste with land, private property, division of labour and subsequent class relations. By doing so, the paper asserts that the socio-cultural attributes, such as, caste, are determined and shaped over the playfield of class relations. In Gramscian terms, this can be better understood as the relationship between base and superstructure, where class relations act as the base and caste as a part of the superstructure (Gramsci 1971: 377). At the same time, it is important to note that the relationship between base and superstructure, class and caste in this case, is not neatly compartmentalised. It is a dialectical relationship which continuously configures and shapes each other, with class relations acting as the foundational determinant. This approach to study the caste-class question reopens further avenues to conduct research and understand the changing dynamics of the Indian society today.

Methods and Methodology: Reading the Caste-Class Question

This paper adopts a critical review methodology, seeking to re-examine the caste-class question not through isolated textual analysis but through a layered engagement with theoretical frameworks, field studies, and historical material. The approach is rooted in the conviction

that the caste question cannot be adequately addressed without a dialectical understanding of its relationship to class relations, a methodological choice aligned with the Marxist tradition of historical materialism (Desai 1981: 13-14; Singh 2023: 62).

The texts chosen for this review are not incidental but selected for the way they have shaped or challenged dominant academic narratives. Work of Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970), which laid foundation to the study, was engaged with for their lasting influence on the 'Brahminical' framing of caste, whereas the sociological interventions of Bêteille (1965), Srinivas (1959) and Gupta (1981) provide crucial correctives from the 'field-view' perspective. To counterbalance the ascriptive-idealist lens of much early sociological writing, this paper turns to scholars like Kosambi (1965) and Sharma (1980). Their historical analyses ground caste hierarchies in evolving economic and political contexts.

At each step, the focus has been to foreground the dialectics of social structures rather than accepting static categories. Particular attention has been paid to ethnographic studies and economic histories which illuminate the ways caste is articulated through land ownership, labour division, and political control (Bardhan 1984: 88-90; Jeffrey 2000: 121). This methodological framework deliberately blends textual analysis with empirical studies to avoid the pitfalls of both abstraction and anecdote.

Thus, this paper is not a linear literature review but an iterative process of reading caste through class, emphasising those texts, in which they attempt to question the ideological partitioning of these categories.

Structured Overview of the Argument

In order to critically interrogate the caste-class question through both theoretical and empirical lenses, this paper unfolds through a structured sequence of sections. Each of these sections is built upon the previous section. The first substantive section, "Caste as Primordial Reality: The Dumontian Legacy", opens with a critique of the Brahminical approach, particularly Louis Dumont's influential thesis that caste is a self-sustaining and ideologically closed system rooted in Hindu ritual hierarchies. This section highlights the limitations of this framework in accounting for the socio-economic dimensions of caste.

The second section, "The Concept of the Dominant Caste", engages with M. N. Srinivas' formulation of the 'dominant caste' and its subsequent critiques. The discussion emphasizes how the 'dominant caste' category masks underlying class relations and inadvertently shifts focus away from the material foundations of social power.

The third section, "Class, Caste, and Power: Understanding the Rural Landscape", explores the intersection of caste, class, and power through ethnographic studies, particularly in rural

settings. This section demonstrates how the entrenchment of economic inequalities – especially in terms of land ownership and political clout – underpins the persistence of caste hierarchies.

The fourth section, “Caste and Land: The Role of Private Property”, traces the evolution of caste relations in connection with the transformation of land tenure systems, particularly the feudal and post-feudal arrangements that consolidated the economic dominance of certain caste groups.

The fifth section, “Occupational Guilds, Tribe-Caste Continuum, and Caste-Class Interplay”, revisits the historical emergence of caste from occupational formations and tribal social structures, unpacking the class dimensions embedded within these transitions.

The sixth section, “Division of Labourers”, investigates the hereditary nature of the division of labour in the caste system, and its centrality to the reproduction of class-based exploitation – reinforcing both social immobility and economic inequality.

The seventh section, “Marxist Perspective on Caste”, reaffirms the importance of historical materialism as an analytical framework to interrogate caste beyond its surface-level manifestations, challenging idealist and cultural explanations.

The eighth section, “Class Relations and the Caste System”, synthesizes the theoretical arguments developed earlier by revisiting the relationship between class structures and the evolution of caste hierarchies. Drawing on both classical and contemporary Marxist scholarship, this section argues that caste has always functioned as a historically specific mode of class domination, rather than as a *sui generis* social order.

Finally, the Conclusion consolidates the critique by restating the argument that caste, rather than being an autonomous or cultural system, is deeply embedded in and conditioned by class relations and must be studied accordingly for both academic clarity and emancipator politics.

Caste as Primordial Reality: The Dumontian Legacy

The two primary paradigms of understanding caste are the Brahminical and Marxist approaches. The Brahminical approach believes castes to be the primordial reality of Indian society, as derived from the Dumontian understanding of the Hindu ideology, and establishes a strict hierarchy based on ritual purity. This hierarchy is absolute, with power being of secondary importance.

The Dumontian understanding of Indian society emerges from the Weberian differentiation between class and status, with caste falling under the latter category. However, Weber’s characterization of class and status is somewhat ambiguous, particularly regarding the long-term differences between the two. While economic power stabilization is essential for status

usurpation, it also creates a precarious situation. Unfortunately, Weber's conceptualization does not resolve this ambiguity (Singh 2014: 1).

As per the Brahminical approach, caste is a unique status group defined by a specific characteristic. Customs, laws, and rituals all work together to maintain caste distinctions, which results in ritual impurity if there is any physical interaction between people from different castes. This stigma can only be resolved through religious acts. The caste system is thus believed to be a psychological manifestation, perpetually binding down the inhabitants of India. To bring about a more just, egalitarian and progressive order, caste sentiment or belief in the caste system needs to be erased from the minds of Indians (Gupta 1981: 2094).

Gupta (1981: 2096) notes that the caste system cannot be explained as a mental embodiment as it resulted from a long historical process that involved constant competition between various communities for political and economic power. The Brahmin's authority in spiritual matters has been challenged frequently, and even the spiritual leader's role was not always a Brahmin's prerogative. He further suggests that the legitimating of kingship was primarily political and economic, with the role of the priest suppressing the secular nature of kingly power. A king's peers provided political and military support necessary for rule.

While Weber argues that India's lack of feudalism can be attributed to the caste system, which places the Brahmin at the highest spiritual authority, Thapar (2002: 63) suggests that the clan concept organizes the Hindu social structure. Further, one major flaw in Weber's perspective on feudalism in India and the West is that he only considers the political relationships between landlords and ignores the relationships between serfs and landlords, which is the fundamental basis of feudalism. Instead, he separates a specific cultural trait, fealty, from its structural foundations, making it the hallmark of feudalism. Weber posits that Western society progressed from tribalism to slavery, then to serfdom (feudalism), and ultimately to capitalism. On the other hand, the Indian society, structured by the caste system rooted in Hinduism, did not progress beyond the tribal stage (Singh 2014: 15).

The Hindu religion has shaped the issue of caste consciousness in India and continues to be influenced by it to this day. However, it is essential to note that caste stratification in India is not solely based on religion, particularly Hinduism. Suraj Bandopadhyay and Donal Von Eschen (1991: 354) state that studies on stratification often differentiate between three static or cross-sectional dimensions, that is, economic class, status, and power; and one dynamic or temporal dimension i.e. social mobility. A system may be stratified along each of the static dimensions. However, these dimensions can intersect, resulting in an individual's low position on one being counterbalanced by a higher position on another, which prevents the overall system from being excessively stratified. Conversely, a system could be highly stratified concerning the

static dimensions because they tend to coincide while experiencing significant social mobility over time, thus negating the system's classification as highly stratified.

The Concept of the Dominant Caste

Srinivas' (2009) concept of the 'dominant caste' includes the six characteristics of a significant amount of arable land in the region, numerical strength, and a high position in the social hierarchy, as well as access to urban resources, administrative positions, and western education has faced challenges in the rural society. In rural society, all of these characteristics are secondary or tertiary manifestations of the formation of the upper-class stratum. However, these traditional scholars, similar to colonial administrators, baulked at acknowledging class relationships. As a result, since not all six of the caste's attributes must be present in a single caste entity, as its originator later admitted, the class was forced into a nebulous identity of the 'dominant caste' (Srinivas 2009: 75).

André Beteille (1991: 3-28) argued that the caste system's rigidity and hierarchical nature creates a power dynamic, leading to economic and political conflicts. He proposed modifying the traditional caste model, emphasizing the role of economic and political conflict in shaping the caste structure. He further states that, with the aid of certain scholars, the 'casteisation' of society is now advancing to the level of high politics. On the other hand, caste is increasingly being recognized at low politics as an identification within the class stratum in which its members belong. In reality, the upper echelons of politics have been much infiltrated by the promoted false consciousness, created by both politicians and scholars, that even the Mandal Commission designated caste as the standard for social backwardness in India (Beteille 1991: 12).

Class, Caste and Power: Understanding the Rural Landscape

In his seminal work, 'Caste, Class, and Power' (1965), André Beteille offers a nuanced analysis of the relationship between caste, class, and power in rural India, challenging prevailing narratives on social stratification. Beteille's study focuses on a South Indian village, the village of Kottayam, and provides an ethnographic examination of how caste hierarchies intersect with class structures to maintain social inequality.

Beteille contends that while caste continues to be a dominant form of social stratification, it is deeply intertwined with economic factors. His work reveals how the elite classes in the village maintain their dominance not only through traditional caste-based social structures but also through control over economic resources, such as land. He stresses that class relations are central in understanding power dynamics, but caste continues to play a crucial role in determining the distribution of power and privilege.

One of Bêteille's major contributions is his analysis of how social mobility is constrained by both caste and class, showing that even though economic mobility might seem possible through changes in occupation or wealth, it is significantly limited by the rigid caste system that continues to affect individuals' opportunities and access to power.

The three static dimensions, namely, class, status, and power, exhibit steep stratification and are closely aligned, with social mobility remaining relatively low over the long term. When examining economic stratification, a significant gap in data emerges, particularly in rural contexts. Rural census and survey data often fail to adequately capture the extent of economic inequalities, primarily due to the limitations of large-scale surveys in addressing the nuances of rural life. This gap in data leads to an incomplete picture of the true economic stratification within rural communities. For example, anthropological village studies, such as those conducted by Bêteille (1965) in his study of a Tanjore village, provide a more nuanced understanding of rural inequality by focusing on the intersection of caste and class in determining access to resources, land ownership, and political power. These studies reveal significant inequalities that are often overlooked by aggregate census data. For instance, while census data may categorize individuals broadly by income brackets or occupational categories, they often fail to capture the informal power structures within villages that significantly influence economic outcomes. In contrast, ethnographic studies document the stark disparities in landholding patterns, the monopolization of resources by certain caste groups, and the hierarchical control of village politics, which perpetuate economic inequality. Thus, anthropological research highlights the importance of looking beyond formal data to understand the full extent of economic stratification, providing a more complete view of the social fabric in rural India.

The correlation between caste and class remains strong in rural areas due to the inheritance of land, buildings, and jewellery, primarily passed down through generations. This inheritance system is a significant factor in maintaining economic power within certain caste groups. The new occupational structure has created more opportunities for lower castes to advance, but well-paying jobs remain disproportionately accessible to those from higher-caste backgrounds. As Bêteille (1965: 54) notes, upper castes are often given preference by employers due to their historical possession of literacy and educational skills, which have been critical in accessing better employment opportunities. Despite shifting occupational structures and some degree of social mobility, the villagers continue to maintain a strong connection between caste and class by aligning a caste's status with its evolving economic achievements (Bêteille 1965: 63). This phenomenon underscores the ongoing relevance of caste as a determinant of economic position and social power, despite the modernizing influence of changing job markets.

The majority of villages have highly structured, pyramidal patron-client networks, where the majority of villagers are clients of a small number of elite family cliques, each of which is typically well organized internally. This structure is deeply embedded in the political fabric of rural India, where elite families exert significant control over local institutions. As Béteille (1965: 78) argues, these ruling families often dominate all aspects of village life, including the panchayats, and have such strong connections with the state that many believe they can commit crimes without facing punishment. In contrast, most villagers are disorganised, with few formal connections, and they are often excluded from co-operatives or other formal associations. As Jeffrey (2000: 121) notes, the elite families' control over the village's economy and politics creates a system of patronage that limits political participation from the general population. The majority of villagers, on the other hand, hardly engage in politics at all and frequently harbour fear towards government officials and politically influential families in their communities, perceiving the latter as corrupt and self-serving. This disconnect between the elite and the common villagers often leads to a lack of political agency among the rural poor, with many being wary of political participation and viewing it as a tool for elite self-preservation rather than genuine societal progress (Béteille 1965: 78; Jeffrey 2000: 121).

Power and caste are closely related, with the powerful being from higher castes. The wealthy, upper caste neighbourhood got most of the drinking wells, while the lower class; lower caste neighbourhood lacked and needed such sources. The relationship between power, class, and caste is complex and bidirectional. Power is critical in achieving wealth and high caste status, increasing power, class, and caste status. In the rural society of the study area, class, status, and power are highly stratified and closely connected. However, could social mobility play a role in moderating this system over time? The empirical data suggests otherwise. The mobility data yields three significant conclusions, which are relatively uncommon in quantitative studies of rural India.

The villages have just recently experienced much change. As Béteille (1965: 80) observes, rural villages in India have been undergoing significant transformations due to economic shifts, political developments, and social reorganization. The recent mobility that has taken place is primarily structural rather than exchange-based. Exchange mobility is often considered the most accurate indicator of a stratification system's effectiveness, whereby some individuals fall in social position, while others rise to take their place (Weber 1978: 229). However, most movement in the villages has only been structural, linked to shifts in the arrangement of positions within the social hierarchy. As Béteille (1965: 75) points out, structural mobility results from changes in the relative proportions of desired and undesirable positions within the village. Such shifts often occur when certain positions gain or lose economic value or when new positions emerge within the community due to economic or political developments. This

type of mobility, therefore, reflects the overall reorganization of the social structure rather than individual upward or downward movement within the established hierarchy.

The limited exchange mobility in rural areas has reinforced the strong connection between class, caste, and power, as it has primarily involved upper-caste families moving up and lower-caste families moving down (Béteille 1965: 78). Members of the upper castes leverage their preferential access to government services such as irrigation, modern agricultural inputs, and high-paying non-agricultural jobs to enhance their status (Béteille 1965: 85). Recently, however, there has been some movement in the opposite direction, with lower-caste individuals gaining access to better opportunities. This shift, though gradual, is beginning to polarize the rural economy, further entrenching economic disparities along caste lines and potentially deepening social divisions (Jeffrey 2000: 142). This is contrary to the expectations of many authors (Chakravarti 1993: 58; Desai 2007: 112), who believed that the emergence of a new occupational structure would weaken the connection between caste and class.

Caste and Land: The Role of Private Property

Singh (2014: 14) states that India transitioned during the Vedic period. Religious and secular beneficiaries gained control over land and other agricultural resources during this time, creating two main classes: landlords, who held land grants, and peasants, who were the primary producers. The landlords limited the peasants' unrestricted access to lands. As a result, two classes were established: dependent peasants, who were allowed to own land in exchange for tributes and rent, and landlords, who held a monopoly on economic and political power, giving rise to a system of feudalism.

Indian land grants were characterised by several features that reflected their feudal nature. One such feature was primogeniture, which was enforced as a mechanism to ensure that the estate was not divided among heirs, thereby enabling it to fulfil the public duties associated with these land grants. Primogeniture was also seen as prioritising the ruling class's interests over familial ones. This practice ensured that the estate remained intact and cohesive, which would have compromised its productivity and ability to serve the public good. This feudal system of land grants was, therefore, designed to maintain the power and influence of the ruling class while also ensuring that the land remained productive and served the needs of society.

The distinction between private property and chieftship was significant within Hindu legal doctrine. Chiefship, as defined in anthropological studies, (e.g., Clastres, 1977: 78), refers to a form of political leadership that is distinct from private property systems. According to this principle, the chiefship was exempt from the division of private property, which followed the

principle of primogeniture. As per this principle, in matters of private property, each son would receive an equal share of the family estate, while the chiefship was considered the property of the public domain, and its owner was required to perform the duties of a royal official.

Occupational Guilds, Tribe-Caste Continuum, and Caste-Class Interplay

Nirmal Kumar Bose's (1961) idea of caste emerging from the formation of occupational guilds offers a sociologically grounded understanding of caste beyond the rigidity of ritual status alone. According to Bose (1961: 20-25), castes in India historically evolved out of professional groups that functioned as self-regulating guilds. These occupational communities often bore internal cohesion, endogamy, and autonomy in work-related affairs. Over time, as these guilds settled into more static and intergenerational occupations, they acquired ritual identities and social rankings, gradually giving rise to caste formations. Importantly, Bose's formulation challenges the notion of caste as a purely religious or ideological system; instead, he locates its emergence in material, productive relations. This perspective resonates with Dumont's (1970) critique but departs from it by rooting caste in economic life rather than in ideology alone.

The 'tribe-caste continuum', a concept further elaborated by anthropologists, namely, Bailey (1960) and Srinivas (1966), is equally crucial for understanding caste-class interplay. In several regions, especially in the colonial and early postcolonial periods, tribal communities began to mimic caste-based practices to gain access to land rights, state patronage, or social legitimacy. This process, sometimes described as 'Sanskritisation', did not imply a unidirectional movement towards caste hierarchy but rather a strategic adaptation to socio-economic conditions. As Xaxa (1999: 1519-1520) notes, these transformations were driven by external pressures such as land alienation, the integration into market economies, and political restructuring. The overlap and mutual influence between caste and tribe thus reflect a dynamic socio-economic interplay rather than a rigid dichotomy.

This continuum also illustrates the broader class implications of caste in India. As peasant groups or tribal communities were absorbed into the agrarian structure, often through state-mediated processes of land settlement or forest clearing, they encountered a hierarchy not only of ritual purity but also of property and labour relations. Caste groups thus came to mirror class distinctions, where dominant castes controlled land and surplus extraction, while subordinated castes or tribes provided labour. This fusion of caste and class is evidenced in regions, such as, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, where tribal peasantries were progressively proletarianized and ritual status became an idiom for class subordination (Bardhan 1984: 88-90).

In summing up, the historical emergence of caste through occupational guilds and the tribe-caste continuum are both embedded in material transformations, namely, land control,

occupational division and political economy. These formations cannot be understood without a critical estimation of how caste structures were continuously shaped by and in turn structured class relations.

Division of Labour/ Labourers

Human society produces various forms of social existence through social labour across multiple domains of activity. The division of labour refers to how social labour is organized and can be classified as mental and manual, skilled and unskilled, clean/unclean, supervisory/non-supervisory, coercive/non-coercive, and activities about the base or superstructure. Hereditary forms of labour division, such as the caste system in India gave birth to social classes or groups that control the means of production and impose social laws that govern a particular division of labour in the form of a caste system (Bapuji 2009: 339-356).

Individuals from the lower castes face resource scarcity, limiting their capacity to engage in productive activities. These resources are primarily controlled by the upper castes, which constitute only a tiny fraction of the population. As a result, the majority of individuals in the lower castes are constrained to perform menial and often unpleasant manual labour. Conversely, the majority of skilled labour that demands both physical and intellectual expertise is performed by those in the upper castes (Ranganayakamma 2002).

Ranganayakamma further argues that to address the issue of 'caste' in society, it is necessary to reform the traditional division of labour and eliminate the private ownership rights over the means of production held by the upper castes. With the elimination of this system, upper caste individuals who are not currently employed will join the workforce. The old division of labour will be abolished as a result, resulting in the lower castes being forced into mental labour and the upper castes into manual labour. It is essential to adjust the division of labour so that each person can perform specific types of manual and mental labour, including dirty jobs that are both less and more filthy, for society to function correctly. This shift also involves inter-caste marriages and other superstructural changes, which, however, cannot occur unless there is a drastic change in property relations and the current division of labour (Ranganayakamma 2002).

Marxist Perspective on Caste

In his Presidential Address delivered at the 15th All India Sociological Conference held at Meerut, A. R. Desai proposed and explained the relevance of the Marxist approach to the study of Indian society. He addresses his critics and explains his arguments as follows:

“I would like to draw attention to a deep prejudicial attitude among scholars to the Marxist approach. It is commonly believed that Marxism is a form of naive economic determinism,

or that it treats economic factor as the sole factor determining every aspect of human life. Marx, as we have seen even in his preliminary formulation, is not trying to reduce everything in economic terms. In fact, he was engaged in pointing out crucial importance of the basic activity, namely, the activity of producing things, for survival and persistence of mankind. He was rather attempting to uncover the inter-relationship between this basic activity, characterised as “economic” activity and other activities, and forms of organizations commonly described as “non-economic” in the totality of social existence by pointing out how social relations of production i.e. property relations which shape the vital activity needed for very survival, persistence and development of human species, should be viewed as axial for understanding any society and the changes that take place within it. Marx also pointed out that different subformations within a society would be understood adequately if seen in the context of the historical level of means of production and the nature of property relations which shape and provide the resource availability and resource allocation for different institutions constituting that society” (Desai 1981: 13-14).

As we can clearly see here, Desai was well aware of the caricature of Marxism projected as naive economic determinism. In response, he presented a holistic and sociologically relevant Marxist approach.

The Marxist perspective on the caste system emphasizes socio-historical factors, instead of the idea that it originated from the Hindu mind. Marxism views the caste system as a system that developed and crystallized over time and served to rationalize and legitimize a system of exploitation.

Class Relations and the Caste System

To fully understand the nature and evolution of the caste system in India, it is essential to consider the role of class relations. The caste system has undergone many changes throughout its history, and shifts in the underlying class structure of Indian society have been the main driving force behind these changes. Scholars such as D. D. Kosambi and R. S. Sharma have shown that caste hierarchies often mirrored the material relations of production and control over surplus. Kosambi (1965: 111-115) emphasized the importance of changes in agrarian relations, urbanization and trade, in shaping caste formations. Similarly, Sharma (1980: 25-31) illustrated how land ownership and the rise of feudal relations during the early medieval period transformed caste into a mechanism of surplus extraction and labour control. More recently, sociologists such as Javeed Alam (1999) and Dipankar Gupta (2000) have argued that caste persists in modern India not in spite of, but through, its adaptation to capitalist development and electoral politics. Alam (1999: 18-21) points to the incorporation of caste into democratic mobilization, while Gupta (2000: 73-76) demonstrates how caste identity is reconfigured under market forces, revealing a continuing entanglement between caste and class.

The basis of caste, according to Singh (2023: 63), is the monopoly of the means of production and subsistence. The basis of the caste system and the basis for the exploitation, marginalisation, and stigmatisation of the Dalits lies, on the one hand, with absolute reliance of the Dalits on the dominant castes for their survival; together with the monopoly of political power and cultural influence/ideologies by the dominant castes, on the other. More importantly, according to Singh (2023: 62), only the Marxist approach possesses the ideas, theoretical framework and methodology necessary to deconstruct caste due to the interaction of political, cultural, and ideological elements from a broad historical perspective. The first step towards decolonising the sociology of caste is to replace the trans-historical, cultural, and religious view of caste that characterises mainstream sociology with a historical-materialist approach, which is a prerequisite for the theory of caste and the praxis of caste annihilation.

Conclusion

In the preceding sections, the author has dealt with the existing scholarship as to how the categories of caste and class are sought to be defined and related to each other. As discussed, the two primary paradigms of understanding caste are the Brahminical and Marxist approaches. The Brahminical approach believes castes to be the primordial reality of Indian society, as derived from the Dumontian understanding of the Hindu ideology, and establishes a strict hierarchy based on ritual purity. Caste is considered as a self-sustaining and ideologically closed system rooted in Hindu ritual hierarchies. This Brahminical approach, which we call Dumontian in the discipline of sociology, is also colloquially translated as ‘Brahminism’ in the arena of social and political discourses.

There are limitations of the Dumontian framework in accounting for the socio-economic dimensions of caste, as highlighted in the discussions on private property, labour, dominant caste, etc. The Dumontian framework and subsequent derivations have thus rightly been criticised by scholars ranging from post-colonial, structural-functionalist to Marxist schools (Khare 2009); ultimately leading to the triumph of the ‘field-view’ over ‘book-view’ of caste (Jodhka 1998: 324). This shift reflects a broader conceptual journey in caste studies, from viewing caste as a static, textual and pan-Indian system rooted in Brahminical ideology and to understand it as a dynamic, locally embedded structure shaped by everyday social and economic relations (Srinivas 1955; Beteille 1965; Jodhka 1998: 324). At the same time, this scholarly engagement and development has failed to travel beyond the boundaries of academia, with the socio-political arena still being overwhelmed with a ‘Brahminical’ school of thought and its religio-cultural critique.

Marx and Engels had famously said, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx and Engels 1986: 35). The philosophy and approach of

historical materialism was subsequently established as a universalist framework to study origins and development of various societies from antiquity to present. On the other hand, colonial and orientalist frameworks sought to establish 'uniqueness' of the colonized East in contrast to the 'civilized' West, resulting in the myth that India is a caste society, which cannot be fully comprehended by utilising frameworks and tools of class analysis. An asterisk was put over "all hitherto existing society*", marking India and the East as excluded.

Indian societies, just like any other society, are a product of historical transformations in political economy and continue to be shaped by the same. The socio-cultural attributes, like caste, are determined and shaped over the field of class relations. The dominance of a particular caste is not edged in stone but is constantly contested and negotiated. Rapidly changing class relations, owing to deeper penetrations of market economy, has resulted in newer assertions and coping-up mechanisms.

This paper also contests the category of 'dominant caste', as conceptualized by sociologists (Srinivas 1959: 1). The definitions of 'dominant caste' sought to adopt various facets of class analysis; without committing to the philosophy and method of class analysis per se. This obscured a thorough study of class reality of India and instead presented to us a distorted 'caste-view' of Indian societies. The debate on caste studies got stuck between the frameworks of 'book-view' and 'field-view' (Jodhka 1998: 324), but a critical inquiry of the overall encompassing paradigm of 'caste-view' needs to be undertaken.

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