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CASTE IN SOUTH ASIA:
FROM RITUAL HIERARCHY
TO POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE

ABSTRACT   Caste has been in existence for centuries in South Asia, though its forms and contents vary across the region. Caste is a mode of power, a weapon of action and one of the criteria of making people's collective identity within groups. I argue, in this paper, that caste is a product of complex histories and exists today in multiple forms. There has been a major change from treating caste as a rigid ritual stratum to caste as "identity to negotiate power and resources." It operates as a symbol of collective identity and a basis for collective bargaining of limited resources and representation in various organizations and administrative institutions. The caste system eroded at the ritual level, but emerged at the political and economic levels in India and Nepal.

Keywords: Caste system, identity politics, inequality, collective bargaining, Nepal

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is about caste in South Asia, its historical context and position in people's everyday life, relations among the castes, and the changes taking place in these relations. South Asia is one of the most culturally diverse regions in the world, home to nearly one-sixth of the world population and the site of longtime processes of social, cultural and economic change. According to SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) South Asia in 2005 encompasses India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, and Afghanistan. Some would also include Burma as it was a province of British India until 1937. As contentious as the concept of South Asia might be, the people within the region (particularly in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Nepal) nonetheless share social, cultural, linguistic and religious practices across national boundaries, as a result of centuries-long interaction and exchange. One of the distinctive features of South Asian culture in historic and recent times is the way in which it has shared a sense of community at different cultural and technological levels, allowing people in the region to a large extent to retain their identity and establish intercommunity relationships.[1] Types of interrelationships and exploitation in the past were structured through the caste system, identifying a particular caste division of labor that led to specific forms of hierarchy.

Though caste and ethnic identities in South Asia appear to be conspicuously salient, they cannot be considered as fixed, bounded, and static. Centuries of cultural interaction and exchange among different caste and ethnic groups and religious minorities have resulted in the overlapping, blurring and hybridization of identities.[2] I have written on the subject,[3] opposing some views and supporting others.

Caste has indeed been in existence for centuries in South Asia, though its forms and contents vary across the region. A common theory of caste was articulated during the British colonial rule when caste and "untouchables" were perceived to belong particularly on the Indian subcontinent and being part of Hindu practices. The colonial writers developed theories and models of the caste system as a peacefully integrated system, constantly reproducing itself through the idea of *karma* (doctrine), *dharma* (religion) and notions of purity and pollution.[4] According to this understanding, caste was found among all Hindus and without any internal variation or difference.

[1]   G. Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, New Delhi 2013.

[2]   A.R. Momin (ed.), *Diversity, Ethnicity and Identity in South Asia*, Jaipur 2009.

[3]   M. Subedi, 'Paradoxes of Caste System: Theoretical Discussion,' *SASS Journal*, Vol. 3 (2008); idem, 'Caste System: Theories and Practices in Nepal,' *Himalayan Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 4 (2010), at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3126/hjsa.v4i0.4672>; idem, 'Some Theoretical Considerations on Caste,' *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 7 (2013), at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3126/dsaj.v7i0.10437>; idem, 'Changes in Livelihood and Caste Relations in Udipur,' *Himalayan Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 6 (2014), at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3126/hjsa.v6i0.10690>.

[4]   S.S. Jodhka, G. Shah, *Comparative Contexts of Discrimination. Caste and Untouchability in South Asia*, New Delhi 2010.

This article does not offer a history of caste but acknowledges the importance of having a historical approach to understanding what caste is in India and Nepal in the 21st century. I argue that there has been a major change from treating caste as a rigid stratum to the current perception of caste as "identity to negotiate power and resources." I mainly focus on the dynamics of caste identity formation and its changing context in India and Nepal.

In the next section, I describe some defining elements of the caste concept and discuss caste as a special form of social stratification. Section 3 presents some social scientists' views on caste in South Asia, and in section 4 and 5, I relate caste to two particular issues – inequality and identity.

2. THE CASTE SYSTEM: THEORETICAL ISSUES

Defining Caste

Caste is one human mode of social inequality and differences. It is a mode of power, a weapon of action, one of the criteria of making people's collective voice and developing the understanding and misunderstanding between and within groups. The study of caste and its dynamics helps us to learn and recognize that humans are influenced by a social life that conditions and powerfully shapes not only thoughts and feelings but also their sense of self and relations with others.

Caste may be defined *as a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system*.[5] Berreman[6] has defined the caste system as a "system of birth-ascribed stratification, of socio-cultural pluralism, and of hierarchical interaction." Hutton[7] describes a functional view of caste system for individual members, community functions, and function for the state and society as a whole. Ghurye[8] gives a comprehensive definition of caste. According to him, the six main features of the caste system are: segmental division of society, hierarchy of groups, restriction of feeding and social intercourse, allied and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and restriction on marriage.

Sociologists and social-anthropologists use the word "caste" in two different senses. On the one hand it is used without any particular geographical limitation to denote the type of class system in which hierarchy is very sharply defined and in which the bound-

[5]   A. Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power. Changing Patterns of Stratification in Tanjore Village*, Berkeley 1965, p. 46.

[6]   G.D. Berreman, 'Caste as Social Process,' *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1967), p. 70.

[7]   J.H. Hutton, *Caste in India. Its Nature, Function and Origin*, Bombay 1946.

[8]   G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, Bombay 1950.

aries between the different layers of the hierarchy are rigidly fixed.[9] A ruling class may be described as a caste when class endogamy is strikingly obvious and when the inheritance of privilege has become narrowly restricted to members of that caste in perpetuity. This kind of situation is likely to arise when the ruling group is distinguished from the inferior group or groups by large differences in the standard of living or by other easily recognized labels or conditions.[10] Thus, it is usually easy to locate an individual in his/her stratum, and when this is done, one knows how to deal with him/her even without knowing him/her personally. If X belongs to the first stratum and Y to the second one, X will be considered socially superior to Y, irrespective of their personal qualities, and be treated accordingly.

The other use of the word 'caste' is to specifically define the social organization found in traditional regional societies in India and within adjacent Hindu and related populations in Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka,[11] and which to a large extent have survived to the present day.

Clearly there has been a long debate in the literature over whether the caste system is a unique Hindu social and cultural phenomenon or simply one manifestation of general processes of social stratification.[12] Whether caste is best considered as a cultural or a structural phenomenon is a question much debated by sociologists.[13] Max Weber, for example, stated that ... *caste is the fundamental institution of Hinduism*.[14] He implies thereby that caste is a specifically cultural concept, but he proceeds with the remarks that *there are also castes among the Mohammedans of India ... Castes are also found among Buddhists*.[15] This contradiction leads to an inquiry into the nature of caste. Some scholars view caste as unique to Hindu India or at least to South Asia while other scholars tend to argue that cross-cultural comparisons can be effective only on the social structure level and not in terms of cultural patterns and value systems.[16] Those who hold the latter view find caste groups in such widely scattered areas as the Arabian Peninsula, Polynesia, North Africa, East Africa, Guatemala, Japan, aboriginal

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[9]   E.R. Leach, 'Caste, Class and Slavery: the Taxonomic Problem' in A. Reuck, J. Knight (eds.), *Caste and Race*, London 1967, p. 9.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.; J.H. Hutton, *Caste in India...*; L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and its Implication*, Chicago 1980; M. Marriott, R.B. Inden, 'Caste System' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 3, London 1985.

[12] E.R. Leach, 'Introduction: What Should We Mean by Caste?' in idem (ed.), *Aspects of Castes in South India, Ceylon and North-west Pakistan*, Cambridge 1960; S. Sinha, 'Caste in India: Its Essential Pattern of Socio-cultural Integration' in A. Reuck, J. Knight (eds.), *Caste and Race*, London 1967; G.D. Berreman, 'The Concept of Caste' in D.L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, London–New York 1968; A. Appadurai, 'Is Homo Hierarchicus?,' *American Ethnologists*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1986), at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/ae.1986.13.4.02a00090>; H.A. Gould, *The Hindu Caste System*, Vol. 1: *The Sacralization of a Social Order*, Delhi 1990.

[13] E.R. Leach, 'Introduction...,' p. 1.

[14] Cited in ibid., p. 2.

[15] Ibid.

[16] S. Sinha, 'Caste in India...,' p. 93.

North America and the contemporary United States. The following sections include illustrations of these two schools of thought.

Caste and Social Stratification

Students of comparative sociology argue that every system of social stratification allocates power and privilege in the society in which it occurs, and most, if not all, such systems are associated with some ranked division of labor that promotes interdependence. Caste systems represent one type of social stratification, its uniqueness being that the differentiation between groups is based on birth-ascription. Berreman[17] argued that analyses of caste systems often have overlooked that they are more than simply rigid systems of stratification. Thus, castes are groups that usually have specific names and in some ways are interdependent. Between the castes there exist barriers to social intercourse, cultural differences, and differential degrees of power and privileges. Caste is often associated with a degree of occupational specialization.[18] Berreman argued that a caste system resembles a culturally pluralistic society whose discrete sections are ranked vertically. The Indian caste system, therefore, is analogous to social structures elsewhere in which rank is ascribed, such as, for instance, racial differentiation in the United States.

Comparative social theorists have generally characterized caste systems not as unique religious, ideological or structural categories, but as a matter of social differentiation and social stratification. Among the anthropologists studying caste in India, there exist different theoretical approaches, including those[19] who regard it as an extreme form of social stratification, comparable with other forms of inequality based on social classes, wealth or political power. This approach emphasizes that the caste system is held together by power concentrated in certain groups (the landholding and dominant caste), more than on a general consensus among the population.

Quigley[20] discussed caste in terms of bounded groups and argued that very strict separation and endogamy only operate in particular circumstances and for particular groups. Those who aspire to dominance have to define themselves as belonging to a particular group and that this is always an inherently fluid business. Castes are always relatively, rather than absolutely, bounded. Quigley argued that one way to begin explaining caste is to say what it is not – that is, to see it in comparative perspective.

Jacques J. Maquet[21] described the tri-partite system, comparing three different groups among the Rwanda people: Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa. The immediately noticeable

[17]   G.D. Berreman, 'The Brahmanical View of Caste' in D. Gupta (ed.), *Social Stratification*, New Delhi 1991.

[18]   Idem, *Hindus of the Himalayas. Ethnography and Change*, Berkeley 1972.

[19]   Ibid.; F.G. Bailey, *Caste and the Economic Frontier*, Manchester 1957; A. Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power...*; D. Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste*, New Delhi 1999.

[20]   D. Quigley, *The Interpretation ...*

[21]   J.J. Maquet, 'Rwanda Castes' in A. Tuden, L. Plotinicov (eds.), *Social Stratification in Africa*, New York 1970.

differences among these groups occur in their activities, their social statuses, and their physical types.[22] To be Tutsi, a Hutu or a Twa gave an individual a different status in society. Birth ascribed social status and occupation, marriage endogamy, and food transaction rules are very similar to a caste model. Thus, Rwanda strata are more castes than classes.

There are studies that have found castes also among Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians. In a study of social stratification among the Pathan in the Swat Valley in North Pakistan, Fredrik Barth[23] argued that the concept of caste and its definition must be based on structural criteria and not on particular features of the Hindu philosophical scheme.

Barth compares social stratification among the people of Swat with the Hindu caste system. Although the people of Swat are Muslims, Barth considers their division into social groups, known as *qoum*, similar to castes. The population is divided into various *qoums* that strongly resemble Hindu castes. Following the basic characteristics of the Indian caste system, Barth postulated the patron-client relationship as the basis of the caste system. According to Barth, the Pathan system of patronage and the Hindu *jajmani* system are similar, where the lower status groups pay service to the higher groups. Each *qoum* are ranked by status, and high portions of the marriages are endogamous. In Swat, as in Hindu societies, the notion that pollution derives from body processes marks off certain castes as occupationally polluted. The indigenous polluted castes include washermen, sieve-makers, and dancers.[24] This is similar to India, making it a matter of structure rather than of culture.

In Barth's essay, caste was analyzed not as a set of ritual groups, but as a pattern of social stratification. Caste systems are considered to be characterized by a relatively high degree of congruence between the various status frameworks found in the community, with their hierarchies based on caste categories.[25] He further argues that social identities should be composed of the silent features of life circumstances for different caste at different times.

In another study of Bali-Hindu people in Indonesia, Barth[26] argued that the *basic division of population is that of caste*. This provides a different picture than the one of Hindu caste in Nepal and India. On the one hand, people are divided on the basis of the *warna* system, and, on the other hand, caste is not a very salient feature of their everyday life and contemporary social relations. According to Barth,[27] many aspects of caste behavior are no longer observed. For instance, the level of seating and the head elevation are no longer respected by the general public, even in the context of formal

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[22]   Ibid., p. 95.

[23]   F. Barth, 'The System of Social Stratification in Swat, North Pakistan' in E.R. Leach (ed.), *Aspects of Castes in South India, Ceylon and North-west Pakistan*, Cambridge 1960 (*Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology*, 2).

[24]   Ibid.

[25]   Ibid.

[26]   F. Barth, *Balinese Worlds*, Chicago 1993, p. 31.

[27]   Ibid., p. 233.

ritual. Endogamy is disappearing, so that even high caste girls are increasingly marrying down, and wealth and modern education are far more significant assets than high birth and *caste in North Bali exhibits confusing features*[28] and provides paradoxes about purity and pollution.

These two brilliant studies by Barth provided the clear picture showing that there are more Hindu caste similarities in the non-Hindu area (Swat), while there are Hindus in Bali without traditional types of castes or varna rights and duties. It can be said that Barth's generative models see social reality as an emergent phenomenon.[29] According to Sharma,[30] Muslims in India are divided into groups closely parallel to the caste system and notions of pollution and untouchables are found among them. Caste groups are found even in Sri Lanka, where Buddhism has been the religion of the Sinhalese people. Examples of similar caste systems are also reported from Burma, Japan and some other countries.[31]

3. SOME PERSPECTIVES ON CASTE AND CASTE SYSTEMS IN SOUTH ASIA

As stated earlier, one school of thought comprehends caste as a Hindu social construct, a total symbolic world, unique, self-contained, and not comparable to other systems. Most of these theorists would agree with the classic definition given by Bouglé,[32] who wrote that the spirit of caste unites these three tendencies: repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization. Four varna categories were constructed to organize society along economic and occupational lines. Spiritual leaders and teachers were called Brahmins. Warriors and nobility were called Kshatriyas. Merchants and producers were called Vaishyas. Laborers were called Sudras.

Max Weber, perhaps the most outstanding comparative sociologist, clearly defined Hindu social identity in terms of caste, and caste in terms of ritual. Weber considered the Indian society an "ideal type" of his general notion of belief systems as main determinants of the social and economic structure (in contrast to the Marxist view). In India, the link between religious beliefs and social differentiation was direct and explicit, whereas in Western society the connection is indirect and obscure. Hence to Weber caste appeared as an integral aspect of Hinduism, and he began by declaring this central notion quite axiomatically: *before any things else, without caste there is no Hindu.*[33] We-

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[28] Ibid., p. 235.

[29] S.J. Tambiah, 'General and Theoretical Homo Hierarchicus: An Eassy on the Caste System,' *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 74 (1972), pp. 832-835.

[30] K.L. Sharma, *Indian Social Structure and Change*, Jaipur 2007.

[31] Ibid.

[32] C. Bouglé, *Essays on the Caste System*, Cambridge 1971.

[33] Weber quoted in R. Lunheim, *Desert People. Caste and Community – a Rajasthani Village*, Tronheim 1993, p. 64.

ber then went on to explore the alleged parallel between caste and guild. He concluded that there was much more to caste than mere occupational specialization. In Weber's view of caste and Hinduism, the *karma* doctrine was the key principle of cosmic reality.

How was it that the *karma* theology, which is found in several ideologies other than Hinduism, in India combined with caste to form such a peculiar structure? In his analysis Weber was uncertain, but argued that the evolution of caste in ancient India had been determined by racial differences. Weber did not elaborate the comparative perspective explicitly, but the juxtaposition was symbolic for how an understanding of the caste system influenced sociological thought about the distinctive characteristics of Western civilization.

The French scholar Louis Dumont wrote a famous book on caste, *Homo Hierarchicus*, originally published in French in 1966 and translated into English in 1970. The book offered a textually-informed image of caste, portraying purity and pollution as the organizing principles of caste structure and hierarchy.[34] These unique core principles of caste hierarchy, according to Dumont, are observed in writings as well as in the everyday life of all Hindus (understandably in India). The Dumontian notion of caste puts hierarchy at the centre and assumes that this more or less (coiled in the notions of purity and pollution) prevails all over Hindu populations.

Dumont argues that a structural analysis is concerned with the relationships, not substance-relationship parts, and between parts and totality. For Dumont, it was legitimate to include in the caste system only what we could call inter-caste relations, and not intra-caste relations. For Dumont, the dominant principle of Hindu caste system was hierarchy – hierarchy, of course, of a religious, rather than of a political kind. Other key principles were purity and impurity, also being religious, and interdependence by which parts are interrelated, and related to the whole. Thus, Dumont said that *the Indian caste system is not individualistic; it emphasizes its totality, not its individual members*.[35] This religiously based conception of hierarchy is different from its meaning in other parts of the world.

For Dumont's purpose, the most important feature of the *varna* writings was the superior status of the Brahman over the Kshatriya on the basis of the Brahaman's monopoly of the offering of sacrifices. Brahman and Kshatriya are interdependent and superior to the other two *varnas*. It is a matter of an absolute distinction between priesthood and royalty. The Brahman performs sacrifices and never rules; the Kshatriya rules, but never performs sacrifices. But the Kshatriya is dependent upon, and inferior to the Brahaman. Dumont indicated that the disjunction, in the dominant Indian tradition, between priest and king is different from those societies in which the king is also a high priest (ancient Egypt, for example), as well as from modern Western societies where the political is both completely secularized and absolutely autonomous from religion.

Dumont's notion was criticized as it failed to explain the social change, dynamism and individualistic strivings that can and do take place even within the orthodox Hin-

34   L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus...*

35   Ibid.; P. Kolenda, *Caste, Cult and Hierarchy. Essays on the Culture of India*, Meerut 1981.

du way of living. The most important criticism, among others, is methodological. Gerald Berreman[36] has argued that Dumont had listened too much to Brahmans and their religious texts, which, in Berreman's argument, offer an artificial, stiff, stereotypic and idealized view of caste. Dumont was concerned essentially with the structure of value and not with the structure of interest.[37] It can of course be argued that Dumont's observation apply to the traditional and not to contemporary India.

Dumont advocated the continuity of the caste system by emphasizing its functions for individual members, for a group, and for the entire Indian society or state. Such an advocacy during the British days had led to the promotion of their colonial interest in India.

Dumont's dualism, hierarchy and purity of caste as a religious phenomenon have been challenged by Gloria Godwin Raheja[38] based on fieldwork in Pahansu, India, an Utter Pradesh village dominated by landowning Gujars. She revisited rural intercaste exchanges and found that reciprocal and symmetrical exchange of service for grain. Two important aspects she called "centrality" and "rank." The former is the process whereby powerful landowners reproduce their dominant political and social position at the "center" of a system of redistribution. The Gujar caste holds 98 percent of all arable land in Pahansu and are hence, by virtue of economic strength, the dominant caste. Raheja suggested that castes were interrelated by three different orders that were actualized and emphasized to various degrees depending on the contexts. The "hierarchical ordering" constituted by the principle of ritual purity, has the Brahman and the Bhangi (sweeper) as its extreme points.[39] This ordering corresponds to the traditional conception of caste rank.

Inter-caste relationships and Gujar dominance are, however, constituted primarily by *dan* (religious gift) prestations made in and through *jajmani* relationships. *Jajmani* relationships entail an ordering of mutuality in which the members of the service castes receive a share of the harvests, "payment" for loyalty and service rendered to their Gujar patron (*jajman*). Although asymmetrical, and linked with power and economy, *jajmani* relations do not define a hierarchical order among castes. Raheja[40] saw the dominant land-controlling caste at the centre of the local *jajmani* system. Its ritual centrality, rather than superior purity of Brahmans, makes the system operate. Raheja's study clearly demonstrated the multi-dimensionality of caste in Hindu society.

In spite of the variation in their empirical reasoning, description and analysis are saturated with accounts of purity and pollution, and the manifold taboos of interdictions associated with them. They have given a central place to the rules relating to food, drink and marriage in their accounts of caste. These rules were so elaborate and com-

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[36] G.D. Berreman, 'The Brahmanical View...'

[37] A. Béteille, *Society and Politics in India. Essays in a Comparative Perspective*, London 1991, p. 132.

[38] G.G. Raheja, 'Centrality, Mutuality and Hierarchy: Shifting Aspects of Inter-caste Relationship in North India' in M. Marriott (ed.), *India through Hindu Categories*, New Delhi 1990.

[39] Ibid., p. 3.

[40] Ibid.

plex with greater variation in different places. These views follow the paradigm where society is divided into a set of rigid, hierarchical groups bound together in an immutable bond, justified in terms of moral superiority of the clean caste to those considered unclean.[41] These customs which had been practiced in the past are rapidly losing their meaning and significance among educated, urban dwellers, at school or at work. Today, caste in South Asia does not have the moral and ethical basis of ritual purity and pollution and hierarchy.

McKim Marriott[42] advocated an interpretative framework based upon "coded bodily substance" concepts to analyze the Hindu caste system, slightly different from the one proposed by Dumont. He saw caste as built on a series of notions concerning bodily substances and inter-personal exchanges. Based on the study of the Konduru village in the Andhra Pradesh, India, he introduced the interactional approach focusing on who is willing to accept food, water, etc., from whom as a sign of relative status. Those of lower ranks are supposedly willing to accept food from those of higher ranks, but not vice versa.

The Brahman caste appears nowhere as receivers of any lower forms of substance--code, such as ordinary payment for services, wives from a lower caste, or ordinary cooked food. Brahmans typically accept substance-code only in a very perfect form, such as a gift of a piece of land, money or grain. Brahmans take the highest position through their own divinity, through their exclusive exchanges with still higher, more generous goods, and through their great gifts to other-terrestrial men – cosmic knowledge in the form of substance-transformative ceremonies, teaching and advice.[43]

Castes that follow, according to Marriott, some kind of maximizing strategy include Rajput and their allies which try to increase a symmetrical exchange through land control, labor, or food distribution, as well as maximizing strategies of marriage, descent and diet to achieve the greatest quality and potency in substance, action, and group substance-code. Perhaps the most important aspect of these strategies is that it makes it easy to find out the local caste ranking. However, does eating the proper food symbolize religious purity or does it actually make a person pure? Knowledge is another important component being a symbol of high status and sacredness, and is seen as partly independent of purity and pollution per se. The strategy is unable to answer the questions addressed above.

Dirks[44] argues that the most prominent and related transformed traditions are kingship and caste. In pre-colonial South India – as in other parts of India – local kings were part of a dynamic network of major and minor kings struggling for dominance in warfare as much as in worship and support of temples. Kingship was an institution involv-

[41]   S. Mitra, 'Caste, Democracy and Politics of Community Formation in India' in M.S. Chatterjee, U. Sharma (eds.), *Contextualizing Caste, Post-Doumontian Approach*, Oxford 1994 (*Sociological Review Monograph*).

[42]   M. Marriott, 'Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism' in B. Kapferer (ed.), *Transaction and Meaning. Direction in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behaviour*, Philadelphia 1976.

[43]   Ibid.

[44]   N.B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind. Colonialism and Making of Modern India*, Princeton 2001.

ing the political and religious domains. The social hierarchy, Dirks argues, at that time was not so much based on the ideology of the pure and the impure as on the institution of the king. Ruling was about people not territory. A system of gift giving was common. The king bestowed honors, privileges, and tax-free land on all sorts of institutions and people, such as his militia affine, castes, priests, and village heads, thereby securing their loyalty and support as well as his own position.

The British, Dirks argues, did not understand how this system worked and what it was all about. In effect, they froze kingship by taking away the political and dynamic aspect and turning it into a theatre state, a hollow crown. He emphasized that the colonial project was not one homogenous design of planning and insight but rather a matter of unintended consequences. Caste replaced the crown that came before. Caste became the colonial form of society; it justified denial of political rights to Indian subjects (not citizens) and explained the necessity of colonial rule.[45] And caste became the focus of progressive movements and debates – both local and national – about the character of post-colonial politics.

4. CASTE, SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

In a caste-based society, high caste groups promote their own advancement and initiate various economic changes at the community and regional levels that effectively marginalize the people in several important ways. For instance, as rising elites begin to accrue power, privilege and status, they increasingly draw economically dependent sectors of the population into important production roles or labor-intensive group activities. Arnold[46] argued that if rising elites learn to control information, technology and/ or transportation that are critical to economic success and thus orchestrating networks of interdependencies limiting the power outside their small circle, then non-elites become marginalized from positions of substantial political or economic influence. This process establishes the foundation for permanent social inequality.

The ability of dominant groups to bring more and more labor under their control resulted rather quickly in large wealth inequities and higher social positions for some. Higher caste groups gained considerably more power, wealth and influence than the lower caste groups, thus bringing them higher economic status. The Dalits were forced to continue their work to sustain food, clothing and shelter. Men continued to work for wages or *jajamani* systems and the households became increasingly stratified based on caste identity. Dalit women continued to secure the subsistence in traditional ways, doing most of the household work and supporting their husbands.[47]

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[45]   Ibid., p. 16.

[46]   J.E. Arnold, 'Social Inequality, Marginalization and Economic Process' in T.D. Price, G.M. Feinman (eds.), *Foundations of Social Inequality*, New York 1995 (*Fundamental Issues in Archaeology. Language of Science*).

[47]   K.L. Sharma, *Indian Social Structure...*; M. Subedi, 'Changes in Livelihood...'

Commenting on the nature of the ongoing change, G.S. Ghurye as early as in 1932 argued that attacks on the hierarchy started with the rise of non-Brahmin movements in the southern provinces in India. These mobilizations generated a new kind of collective sentiments and the feeling of caste solidarity. M.N. Srinivas developed this point further. Focusing specifically on the possible consequences of modern technology and representational politics, both of which were introduced by colonial rulers in India, he argued that, far from disappearing with the process of modernization, caste was experiencing a "horizontal consolidation." Commenting on the impact of modern technology on caste, Srinivas wrote:

The coming in of printing, of a regular postal service, of vernacular newspapers and books, of the telegraph, railway and bus, enabled the representatives of a caste living in different areas to meet and discuss their common problems and interests. Western education gave new political values such as liberty and equality. The educated leaders started caste journals and held caste conferences. Funds were collected to organize the caste, and to help the poorer members. Caste hostels, hospitals, cooperative societies etc., became a common feature of urban social life. In general, it may be confidently said that the last hundred years have been a great increase in caste solidarity, and the concomitant decrease of a sense of interdependence between different castes living in a region.[48]

Béteille[49] studied the changing patterns of stratification in a South Indian village and focused on the gradual transformation of a social system that was structured primarily on distinction of caste – between the Brahmins, the middle level and non--Brahmins, and the Adi-Dravidas. As early as 1965, Béteille showed how the forces of modernization had rendered some areas of village life caste-free, while others were still governed by the caste system. He found that the locus of power had shifted from the caste structure to more differentiating institutions such as the *panchayats* and the political parties.

Assignment of a piece of land to an individual for the purpose of collection of revenue was a common practice in India and Nepal. This practice is called *jagirdari* system. The land was considered properties of individual families. The ruling families and other chiefs exercised administrative authority in their areas. The *jagirdari* system helped to accumulate land and property. The *jagirdar* who collected revenue and exercised administrative authority in their areas became *zamindar* (big landlords) of the village.

The *jagirdari* and *zamindari* in the past vested a kind of economic power in the hands of the upper castes, which reinforced their ritual status and its accompanying privileges and obligations. The abolition of *zamindari*, land reform program and population growth aided subdivision of landholding in India and Nepal. Based on the empirical material from six villages in Rajasthan, Sharma[50] mentioned that two types of changes had taken place in the village community. The first one was described as

48   M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, New York 1962, pp. 74-75.

49   A. Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power...*

50   K.L. Sharma, *Social Stratification and Mobility*, New Delhi 1994.

a structural change, including the abolition of the *jagirdari* and *zamindari* systems, the introduction of adult franchise, *Panchayati Raj*, and the co-operatives, etc. The villages which were dominated by powerful *zamindars* today are home to thousands of small, family farms. The second type of change included changes in infrastructure, such as the establishment and construction of modern schools and roads, and migration.

The abolition of these institutions has thus affected the role of ritual superiority in the village's social stratification system. Many aspects of the traditional patron-client relations have been weakened; a variety of ritual obligations are now becoming obsolete. Consequently, the upper castes are finding new means through political participation, mechanization of agriculture, etc., to compensate for the loss of their traditional social status. On the one hand, this leads to adoption of new skills and technologies, and on the other hand, it weakens the role of traditional values and rituals in their social and cultural life.

Education is another factor through which some castes that previously were not dominant in a village, have improved their status. In such cases, the position of the educated families compares even more favorably with that of the former dominant castes families whom they have now replaced. Mobility in caste structure is evidenced by a sense of caste solidarity that exists in the minds of the people of the various castes. This sense of caste unity prevails more among the Dalits than the "upper" castes.

There is another level at which this condition needs to be approached in order to gain an insight into the exact nature of change in the caste-occupation nexus. For instance, what has happened to ancient occupations that have survived changes in economic structure, such as priests in temples, scavengers, traditional moneylenders, and several of the agricultural jobs? Are these jobs still performed by castes to which they were traditionally allocated? Or, is the reshuffling of the deck total, that is, is the modern occupational structure randomly distributed across castes? It is likely to find more change than continuity of the traditional caste-based occupations?[51]

Also, what happens to those who have left traditional jobs, either because these occupations themselves are vanishing or because of the quest for better jobs? Is it true that "lower castes" tend to get absorbed into lower paying and less prestigious modern occupations and higher castes get concentrated at the upper end of the modern spectrum?[52] It is possible that the link between caste and occupation can be broken and yet the overlap of caste and class can be very strong. If this is true, the contemporary situation could be regarded as a permutation of an earlier caste structure where the link between caste and occupation may be strong for some castes, weak for others, but the association between caste and status or, more correctly, between caste and privilege, persists, albeit in a different form. It can never be argued that the cumulative advantage of the

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[51]   D. Gupta, 'Caste and Politics; Identity over System,' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 34 (2005), at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.34.081804.120649>; K.L. Sharma, *Indian Social Structure...*; C. Mishra, *Essays on the Sociology of Nepal*, Kathmandu 2007; M. Subedi, 'Changes in Livelihood...'

[52]   A. Despande, *The Grammar of Caste. Economic Discrimination in Contemporary India*, New Delhi 2011.

upper castes has been so strong that they no longer need an institutional structure of hereditary reservations in order to perpetuate their privilege. This is one more instance where a rigorous social and economic investigation into the caste composition of the occupational structure can help to obtain an objective, larger picture of the nature and degree of change. Does this suggest that caste today simply captures class? This is a perennial question, confounded by the fact that the overlap between the two is very strong, although, to my belief, distinct.

One of the most significant contributors to the study of caste, Srinivas[53] argued that the subsistence economy of rural India, dependent on *jati*-based division of labor, is the 'essence of caste.' As this is rapidly breaking down, it *augurs the end of social order which has continued for 2000 years or more*. He suggested that production will be freed from a *jati*-based division of labor, economic relation involving money becoming autonomous, and that payments in goods will be replaced by cash. Indian rural society will move, or is moving, from status to contract.

The reality, as any serious observer of India and Nepal can tell, is that caste has changed tremendously over time. So much that many, especially those with exposure only to the metropolitan cities, believe for all purposes that it is virtually dead. It would be argued, for instance, that the fewer overt instances of "untouchables" in urban areas than in the more traditional rural settings, demonstrate that caste is increasingly irrelevant. However, that should be the least expected outcome in a society in which the "untouchable" phenomenon has been formally abolished for six decades. What is astonishing is the extent of untouchable practice that continues in the country, even in urban settings, despite the abolition after independence, the bulk of which is unreported and goes unpublished. Caste-based matrimonial alliances continue to be more the rule than the exception, even among otherwise westernized, modern, apparently caste-blind youth. The agitation against caste-based quotas in education and employment that are pre-dominantly urban based, display a very high level of caste consciousness and use overt caste-related slogans and acts of protest, thus putting a question mark on the supposed disappearance of caste in urban India.[54]

It would, therefore, not be an exaggeration to argue that caste remains a powerful and potent force in Indian society, decisively shaping the contours of social and political development. Here again, Srinivas[55] took the view that while the caste system is dying, individual castes are flourishing. He discussed the post-independence mobilization of people on the basis of ethnicity and caste, and how this has resulted in the "horizontal stretch" of caste. Thus, he suggested that what are called castes today, are more accurately clusters of (agnate) sub-castes that have come together to improve their access to such scarce resources as political power, economic opportunities, government jobs, and professional education.

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[53]   M.N. Srinivas, 'An Obituary on Caste as a System,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2003), at <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/4413162>.

[54]   Ibid., p. 8.

[55]   Ibid., p. 459.

It can be argued that the real key to the degree of change in the caste system is the degree of change in conditions of those who are its worst sufferers – the (ex-)untouchables. As long as the three dimensions of untouchable – exclusion, humiliation, and exploitation – continue to persist, we cannot declare the caste system to be dead.

5. CASTE, RECOGNITION AND IDENTITY POLITICS

In the past, the caste system was maintained to a greater extent as a system of exploitation of poor low-ranking groups by the more prosperous high-ranking groups. As stated earlier, land was largely held by dominant castes that economically exploited low-ranking landless laborers and poor artisans, degrading them with ritual emphasis on purity and pollution. After independence, the leaders decided that the country should be democratic, socialist, and secular. Untouchability was legally forbidden and positive discrimination for the depressed groups was envisioned.

The framer of the Constitution of India had a deep concern for the uplift of lower castes. They were listed in three categories. The first category is called Scheduled Castes (SC), the "untouchables" or Dalits. The second category is Scheduled Tribes (ST), including those communities who did not accept the caste system. The ST also claimed themselves as aboriginals. The third category is called Other Backward Classes (OBC). The Constitution provided reserved seats in favor of SC, ST and OBC in the House of the People, legislative assemblies of the state, opportunities in higher education, and special educational benefits.

Caste groups have been trying to use strategic essentialism for a sense of belonging and memories of solidarity. They are pulling together closely allied sub-castes in their quest for political influence. Traditional hierarchical concerns are minimized in favor of strengthening horizontal unity. Thus, while pollution observances are declined, caste consciousness is not.

Gupta argues that *what is easily visible to the naked eye today is that castes, high and low, are moving both up and down the hierarchy. Further, this hierarchy is not reckoned solely in ritual terms any longer, even if that have once been the case.*[56] Village economy is no longer closely tied to agriculture, and as the families of erstwhile dominant castes are mostly small farmers today, the prestige of the caste system has been roughed up as well. In other words, the village economy is rapidly moving towards the manufacturing and service sectors. To live like a landlord is no longer what it was earlier expected to be. He further says, *yes, of course, democracy has added this process, but that too would have been ineffective unless the village economy had taken the turn that it has.*[57]

With the breakdown of the closed village economy and the rise of democratic politics, the competitive element embedded in caste has come to the fore. This has re-

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[56]   D. Gupta, 'Foreword' in S.S. Jodhka (ed.), *Changing Caste. Ideology, Identity and Mobility*, New Delhi 2012, p. xvi (*Studies in Indian Sociology*, 2).

[57]   Ibid., p. xviii.

sulted in the collapse of the caste system but also in the rise of caste identities.[58] Caste relations have been moving away from traditional relationships of socio-economic interdependence towards more competitive models of social interaction. There remain groups that one continues to call "castes," but they are set in a different system. Distinguishing between caste and caste system, then, is one way to begin speaking about the structural transformation of caste. Caste is no longer defined in terms of endogamy, hereditary and relative rank (although such identifiers are implied), but as a "political fraction" in competition with "other such factions for common economic and political goal."

Despande[59] argued that the breakdown of the caste hierarchy has broken the traditional links between caste and profession, and released enormous entrepreneurial energies in the South. She wrote:

It is true that over time, occupational structure itself has undergone a profound change, while caste division has been relatively static. In addition, the post independence Constitution guarantees each India the freedom of choice of occupation. Thus, without fear of contradiction, one can upheld this statement for several castes, for example, members of the erstwhile warrior castes will not necessarily choose the military as a career in the present. Conversely, the military is no longer the preserve of certain castes, to the exclusion of others. It is also true that any kind of skill acquisition (for example, admission to a management or a computer course, or to a dental school) is not contingent upon one's caste status. Indeed, none of the modern occupations are determined by birth, and most are not caste-based.[60]

One of the serious problems that South Asian countries have been facing is social inequality. The constitutions of India and Nepal have incorporated caste-based reservations as one of the methods to minimize social inequality. Identification of oppressed groups is done in terms of caste groups or *jati*. In order to realize equality, Indian government has accepted the existence of caste groups as a reality and conducts administration accordingly. It is notable that the kind of classification of caste group they employ is almost the same as in the Brahminical caste hierarchy model. They just label it differently.

In the Constitution of 1990, after the successful people's movement for multi-party democracy, Nepal tried to address existing diversity. Special provisions were made in the constitution to enact necessary acts and regulations to improve the socio-economic conditions of deprived caste/ethnic groups by increasing their access to the national mainstream and engaging them in development and decision making processes. Periodic development plans after 1990 recognized social, economic, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, geographical, and other diversity in Nepal and initiated to address the concerns of women, Dalits and Janjatis, and people living in remote regions. The 2007 Interim Constitution stipulated that at least one-third of its members should be women, and

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[58]   Idem, 'Caste and Politics...'

[59]   A. Despande, *The Grammar of Caste...*

[60]   Ibid., pp. 3-4.

also to have a proportional representation of Dalits and Janjatis in Constituent Assembly. The result is that the country now has a highly diverse assembly that will prepare the new, post-conflict constitution.

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) provides a range of political and legal instruments to combat past inequalities through positive discrimination when recruiting people for public service jobs in the government and universities. Additionally, special provisions are made for allocation of educational, economic and social resources. This measure is considered to be a milestone in making the civil service, academic institution and other workplaces inclusive.[61] Thus, reservation policy was adopted with the objectives of creating a representative public service, mainstreaming excluded people, and narrowing down the gap between dominant and excluded groups. The major reason for the formulation of an inclusive policy is to increase the presence of excluded groups in public institutions and in decision-making processes.

Contributing to the self-awareness rally has been an essential part of identity building processes in Nepal. For instance, Dalit and Janjati organizations have their own networks, publication houses, and distribution channels. Dalit and Janjati authors often consciously address a Janjati or Dalit leadership instead of the general public and interpret their identity as authors and their writings as a part of the social and political awareness movement. The struggle carried out by political parties and their sister organizations for political or social change has formed a broader alliance toward Dalit's movement for justice. Most of the political parties have their own Dalit sister organizations. For example, one fraction in the Maoist party is a sister organization called Dalit Mukti Morcha; the Nepali Congress' has Nepal Dalit Sangh; the CPN (UML) has Mukti Samaj; the CPN (Masal) has Jatiya Samata Samaj; the RPP has Prajatantrik Janautthan Sangathan; and the Sadbhawana Party's sister organization is called Dalit Utthan Manch, etc. Many Dalit activists argue that the Dalit movement is political and that without the involvement of these sister organizations it would be almost impossible to obtain the desired changes in the government's policies and programs. However, so far the Dalit leaders have not been strong enough to advocate this issue within the parties and in government representation.

Dalit and Janjati literature has been included in the curricula in school, college, and universities, thus offering an opportunity to create awareness about their position in politics and society. The focus is on the dark side of traditional caste-based society, where people were rejected according to their imagined impurity. Many Janjati and Dalit intellectuals are focusing on the authentic social experiences of being rejected by others. As a result, the phenomenon of social discrimination is being attacked in an effective manner. Increasing Janjati and Dalit writings in quality and quantity have been supportive for identity politics and negotiating in representation and participation based on caste identity.

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[61] G.D.Awasthi, R. Adhikary, *Changes in Nepalese Civil Service after the Adoption of Inclusive Policy and Reform Measures*, Kathmandu 2012.

6. CONCLUSION

Although caste-based discrimination is prohibited in the constitutions of most South Asian countries, it still persists in different forms. Originally, caste was a system for the division of labor, and social relations between different caste groups were regulated by the *jajmani* system. With the decline of the *jajmani* system and increasing livelihood diversification, caste has got several localized and diverse structures. Occupational diversification beyond the conventional orthodox line has contributed to lessen caste-based occupation ideology. Stress on ritual hierarchy, purity, and pollution is a less strong feature of caste.

In the past, Dumont, Hutton, Ghurye, and many other scholars regarded caste as a complete system encompassing the whole society. Today, caste exists, but not as a complete system. Legal basis for group hierarchies, restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, disadvantages and privileges among the different sections, limited choice of occupation, and restriction on marriage have become quite weak and flexible. Marrying rules have been flexible. The basis for caste differentiation has shifted, leading to changes in inter and intra caste relations. Caste identity has become an instrument to mobilize people for economic and political gains. The shifts in the caste system have been from ritual hierarchy to identity politics, from ascribed and designated status to negotiated positions of power, from ritual definitions of roles and positions to civic and political definitions of the same.[62]

To sum up, caste is a product of complex histories and exists today in multiple forms. One of the most visible and powerful aspects of caste is the way in which it operates as a symbol of collective identity and a basis for collective bargaining of limited resources and representation in various political organizations and administrative institutions. These political aims often have created new alliances of identity between various groups like Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Classes in India, and between Brahmin-Chhetris, Janjatis, and Dalits in Nepal. Caste groups as political pressure assemblages work well in India and Nepal. The caste system eroded at the ritual level, but emerged at the political and economic levels as the politics of difference.

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[62] R. Kothari, 'Rise of the Dalits and the Renewed Debate on Caste.' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 29, No. 26 (1994).

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