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## Caste mobility and social transformation: The case of dominant peasant caste

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### Abstract

Caste is the most important phenomenon in the Hindu religion. Despite more than seventy years of democratisation, caste is still the dominant reality of every Hindu. There have been serious attempts to make sense of caste's persistence in the existing literature (e.g. Dumont: 1988, Srinivas: 1977; Jodhka, 2015; Teltumbde, 2011; Dirks; 2001; Guru, 2011). The peculiarity of caste in India is that it intends to be secular in public space. However, in private spaces, a high caste consciousness is found in all castes, including Dalits.

The present paper is an attempt to cover the discourse of caste system in India. The paper is divided into three parts first part deals with the critical perspectives of caste. The second part deals with the concept of dominant peasant caste, while the third deals with the origin and development of dominant peasant castes.

**Keywords:** Caste mobility, social transformation, Hindu religion, existing literature

### Introduction

There is no universal accepted definition of Caste in India. Caste has a different meaning for different people. The understanding of caste may vary from person to person. In the most definitive word, the understanding of caste depends on time and space. From the ritual hierarchy of purity, pollution, and discrimination to an instrument of social and economic development of certain social groups, caste has presented a peculiar view of mobility. Various contours exist on how it survived for so long and what keeps it alive even in modern times (Jodhka, 2015).

Broadly, in social science, there are three crucial perspectives of understanding the caste system in India; First, it considers that caste is primarily found in the Indian subcontinent only, and it is a unique social phenomenon of social stratification. They consider caste a Hindu social construct and perceive that caste's spirit exists in all Hindus. This school's main features are; Hereditary, Hierarchy, Repulsion, Purity, and Pollution. Scholars like B.R. Ambedkar, Max Weber, Hutton, Bougle, Leach, Berreman, Appadurai, and Dumont supported this perspective

While the second perspective deals that the caste system is not only found in Hindus but also in other societies and countries. They claim this is an example of rigid social stratification where power or privileged is allotted according to the vertically ritual hierarchy. They say that in western countries, race and class are the media of social stratification, while in Arab countries, the presence of qoum is similar to caste. This perspective can be seen in the writings of Beteille, Barth, Bailey, Pocock, and Marriot.

The third perspectives is broad. This perspective claims that within the caste system, there is the possibility of socioeconomic mobility. They maintain that if caste still survived in India, there must have been some hidden truths that have not come out till now, so we need to seek a new avatar and strategy to explore Castes' hidden perspectives. M. N Srinivas, Gloria Raheja, Rajini Kothari, and Nicholas Dirks can be linked with this perspective. Now, we will discuss the three perspectives in details.

### Caste is a discriminatory and regressive Hindu Constructed system

In the simplest term, caste is the most dynamic hereditary social stratification of people based on purity, and pollution sometimes includes occupation. A significant number of works have been done on the Caste system.

The work of Loius Dumont, Pocock, Marriott and Leach have stressed that caste is to be defined in terms of its Hindu attributes and rationale and, therefore, is unique to Hindu India or at least to South Asia (Berreman 1968, p. 333)

The Rig-Veda hymn of PurushaSukta is the earliest reference to know about chaturvarna. For the first time in India, Dr. B.R Ambedkar systematically studied the caste concept in his book "Annihilation of Caste" says "Caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers." Max Weber, in his book "The Religion of India", considered caste an integrating aspect of Hinduism. At the same time, Bugle discussed the three principles of caste: hereditary specialisation, second Hierarchy and third Repulsion.

Louis Dumont in his book, "Homo hierarchicus: The caste system and its implications" says that the Hindu caste system is based on hierarchy, purity, and pollution principles. There is always Brahmin superiority in the Hindu system. Dumontian notion of caste mainly discuss the perspective of cultural difference.

### **Caste is a worldwide phenomenon of social stratification**

Bailey, Barth, Béteille, Berreman, De Vos Senart, and Wagatsuma have stressed that the caste system is to be defined in terms of structural features that are found not only in Hindu India but in several other societies as well (Gould 1990, p. 2)

Dumontian notion of caste was challenged by Gerald Berreman, arguing that all Hindus do not uniformly accept the Brahmanical hierarchy, and the power status of the Brahmin hierarchy is a false dichotomy. Berreman, in his book "Patronage and Exploitation Changing Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India", argues that the caste system is a social stratification applicable anywhere outside Hindu India. It could be applied to societies with hierarchical endogamous subdivisions where membership is hereditary and permanent, wherever they occur. Caste in India is the same as race in America or Burakumin in Japan. It denotes the allocation of power and privilege. Jacques J Maquest studied the Rwanda social groups; Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa had almost the same feature as the caste system in India. There is birth-based status and occupation endogamy as well. Fredrik Barth studied the Muslims of Swat and North Bali and found the caste system. He observed that the Qoum is similar to caste, and the Pathan patronage system is like the Hindu jajmani system.

### **Broader perspectives of the Caste system**

G.S Ghurye in his book observed that the Non-Brahmin movement in South India as an assertion of lower castes. G.S Ghurye bestows six main features of caste: Segmental division of society, hierarchy, restriction of feeding and social intercourse, Civil, and religious disabilities and privileges of the different sections, Lack of free choice of occupation, and restriction on marriage.

K.L Sharma, in his book "Indian Social Structure and Change", also saw caste's structural and peripheral changes. The two types of changes had taken place in the village community. The first can be described as a structural change, which included abolishing the Jagirdari and Zamindari systems, and introducing adult franchises, Panchayati Raj, and co-operatives. The second type of change had peripheral changes, such as establishing and constructing modern schools and roads and migration.

While Quigley says that caste is fluid and relative, it is not always absolute bonded. Furthermore, strict separation and endogamy were operated only in particular circumstances. He says we need to understand caste in terms of what caste is not.

Gloria Raheja heavenly criticised the Dumontian concept of caste. She did fieldwork in Pahanshu village in Uttar Pradesh, which landowning Gurjars dominated. Gurjars hold 98% of the land and control every aspect of life. All Caste, including Brahmins, was subordinate to them. Gurjars domination was constituted through the Jajmani relationship. She says the degrees of domination change context-wise. Raheja's view is nearer to the Marxist theory of means of production than to purity and pollution.

Nicholas Dirks in his book "Caste of mind" challenged the universal and hierarchical view of caste and said that caste was constructed and invented in British time. After the 1857 rebellion British followed the policy of non-interference in culture, customs, and tradition and used the census to universalise and euthanise caste. Britishers unintendedly justified and strengthened caste and kingship, which later transformed into more progressive local and national movements.

M.N Srinivas in his book "Social change in modern India" developed the idea of social change. He gave essential terms such as Sanskritisation, Westernization, Secularization, Dominant Caste", and "vertical (inter-caste) and horizontal (intra-caste) solidarities" Srinivas started Participatory observable fieldwork and sought to capture the fluid and dynamic essence of caste as a social institution. He says horizontal consolidation is increasing. Indian society is moving tremendously with time. However, it is becoming irrelevant; caste-based matrimony and agitation against caste-based quota signify a high level of Caste consciousness. He says caste would remain a potent force to change India's social and economic contours. He says not a caste but clusters of sub-castes come together for a better future and social and economic development. M N Srinivas considered caste as "hereditary, endogamous, and localised groups having a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in a local hierarchy of caste system."

### **Understanding the concept of the dominant peasant caste**

According to the 2011 Census, there are 11.8 crore cultivators and 14.4 crore agricultural workers in India. However, there is no clear definition of a farmer. Agriculture in India is a state subject. The National Commission of Farmers, headed by M.S. Swaminathan, was officially approved by the Centre in 2007 in consultations with the States. It says, "For this Policy, the term 'FARMER' will refer to a person actively engaged in the economic and livelihood activity of growing crops and producing other primary agricultural commodities and will include all operational agricultural holders, cultivators, agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, tenants, poultry and livestock rearers, fishers, beekeepers, gardeners, pastoralists, non-corporate planters and planting labourers, as well as persons engaged in various farming-related occupations such as sericulture, vermiculture and agro-forestry. The term will also include tribal families/persons engaged in shifting cultivation and in the collection, use and sale of minor and

non-timber forest produce <sup>[1]</sup>." The agriculture census categorises the operational holdings into five size classes <sup>[2]</sup>.

1.	Marginal	Below 1.00 hectare
2.	Small	1.00-2.00 hectares
3.	Semi-Medium	2.00-4.00 hectares
4.	Medium	4.00-10.00 hectares
5.	Large	10.00 hectare and above

Andre Béteille has worked on peasants in India. He argues that any person directly or indirectly involved in farming or their livelihood is farming. There are three types of Farmers in India; First, Landlord; Who have land but do not work themselves; instead, they hire labours for farming, which means they own land but do not work any hire the labourers. Second Peasant refers to those who own and cultivate the land and generally produce for self-consumption or family consumption. Total numbers of dominant peasant castes in India are included in this category. Further, regarding land control, the peasant can be categorised as Rich, middle and small peasants. Third, Sharecroppers or Landless who work for others do not have land, either take land for rent or depend on daily wages.

M. N Srinivas, in his book, "Dominant caste and other essays", propagated the dominant Caste Theory. According to this theory, in many of India's villages, there exists a particular caste which possesses most of the significant power resources -- viz, large numbers of cast members; ritual status not too low; most of the land and other economic assets; the performance of functionally influential and valued occupations; relatively advanced levels of Western education; and occupancy of authoritative offices in traditional/informal and modern formal local government institutions. (John MacDougal).

According to M N Srinivas, "A caste may be said to be dominant when it preponderates numerically over other castes and when it also wields predominant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can be more easily dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low."

Yogendra Singh (1994) also observes that social anthropologists have found the presence of dominant castes in most of the south Indian villages. The essential determinant of a dominant caste is the superior economic status, especially in land.

### The origin and development of dominant peasant Castes

Generally, traditional Hindu society is divided into four Varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudra. However, in reality, the Hindu social system has always been divided into five Varnas. The fifth Varna, named the Antyaz or Ati-shudra, or untouchable or outcastes, means those living away from the mainstream. Furthermore, do menial work. (Jaffrelet, C. (2018) <sup>[13]</sup>.

There are many reasons for the development of dominant peasant castes. They are traditionally placed in Shudra Varna. Nevertheless, these castes gained social, economic, and political mobility in colonial times. They got social acceptance through various Bhakti/Sanskritization movements like Jats, Yadav and many others. They were primarily tenants but got economic rights with the advent of

the British. In short, there are the following principal reasons for the development of Dominant Peasant Castes First, Sanskritization The process is inevitable to understand the social and group mobility in Hindu society. According to M N Srinivas,

"Sanskritization is a process by which a lower caste or tribe or any other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a higher or more often twice-born caste."

M.N Srinivas says that Dominant Caste has made much progress by this process: Yadav Kurmi, Kori in Bihar, Gujjar, Jats, Yadav, Kushwaha in North Central India, Reddy and Kapu in Andhra Pradesh, Okkalinga and Lingayat in Karnataka, Vellar, Vaniyar, Naidu, Gander in Tamilnadu, Nair, Ezhava in Kerala, Maratha in Maharashtra, Koli, Patel and Kshatriya in Gujarat, Karana in Orissa, are some castes who benefitted from this process. The Bhakti movement Sanskritized and assimilated the large sections within the Hindu fold. Most of the caste claimed the Kshatriya status, not Brahmins status, because Kshatriya had the land right. Patels were Sanskritized by the process and influence of Vallabhchhari and Swami Narayan Sampraday. The census of 1891 tells about the conflict between the upper caste and Yadav caste over-wearing of the sacred thread. In Gujarat, Rajput started the matrimonial alliance with the Koli castes; the Koli caste got an opportunity to rise in social and economic hierarchy and develop Koli Caste. (Rajni Kothari and Rushikesh Maru, 2014) Sanskritization's historical legacy can be traced to medieval and British times. In the Medieval and Bhakti period, there was no structural changes/development in the lower caste condition. However, during British time, critical structural changes occurred, like the lower caste officially got land rights and many others. J.H. Hutton noted in the 1931 census report that "a caste which had applied in one province to be called Brahman (priestly caste) asked in another to be named Rajput (warrior caste), and there are several instances at this census of castes claiming to be Brahman who claimed to be Rajputs ten years.

The second main reason is the social reform movements by Indian and Christian missionaries. Social reform movements improved the social, economic, and political condition of Dominant peasant castes throughout India. For example, the Jats in Haryana and Punjab tried to get into the mainstream through the Arya Samaj, the significant reform movement of Hindus and claimed the Kshatriya. Arya Samaj opened schools and universities for education in this area. (Nonica Data, 1999). Nadars in Tamilnadu got social, political and economic mobility upward through Christian missionary activities (Robert L Hardgrave)

The third reason is the Non-Brahmin Movement and also the Dravidian movement. Many organisations and movements were formed for this purpose. For example, Shri Narayan Dharma Movement was started by the Narayan guru who belonged to Ezhava Community. The Justice Party was formed by Dr T M Nair, Chetti, and Mudaliar in 1916 and 1925 by Ramaswami Naikar. He also started Dravida Kazhagam in 1944. Jyotirao Phule himself came from a backward caste. He established the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth Seeker's Society), which later grew into a non-Brahmin movement; first, he tried to create Bahujan identity castes and started a sizable non-Brahmin movement in

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/agriculture/who-is-a-farmer-government-has-no-clear-definition/article61612154.ece?homepage=true>

<sup>2</sup> <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1562687>

South India. However, the criticism of this movement is that dominant peasant castes hegemonised the movement. They only criticised but never gave up the Brahmanical practice. Scheduled Castes benefited with little and no improvement in their status. We can say power is shifting from one dominant caste to another in Tamilnadu. (M.S.A.Rao. (1979)<sup>[15]</sup>.

Fourth, the Settlement and Development of new villages have strengthened these castes. There are many theories of settlements of new villages. Most of the Indian villages' most common characteristics are the following; first, maximum homes belong to one caste. Second, few homes are of Brahmins for worship in temple vaishya for business and Dalits for manual works. This is due to the Shudras caste's historical migration to a new place due to the upper caste's exploitation. For example, in Rajasthan, jats were exploited mentally, economically and politically by Rajputs. They migrated to other places to escape the oppression and set up new villages. This phenomenon is found all over India.

Fifth, economic policies were adopted by the British. Three significant policies were adopted by the British. First Permanent Settlement: It is also known as the 'Zamindari system'. In 1793, Lord Cornwallis introduced it to Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and U.P. K. Banaras and applied some Karnataka areas. Under this system, the landlords, mostly the village's dominant peasant castes, were made permanent landowners. Second, Ryotwari system: This system was started in 1820 by Tomas Munro, the then governor of Madras, and was implemented in Madras, Bombay and some parts of Assam. Third, Mahalwari system: Lord Hastings implemented it in Central Province, Agra, and Punjab. Under this arrangement, 30% of the total land area came. In this system, land revenue was arranged in an entire village or mahal with the landlords or the princes, mostly from dominant peasant castes and claimed to be the head of the whole village or mahal. (Eric Stokes)

Sixth, Caste associations protected their interests. Caste associations undertake welfare programmes like education and health for their caste members. In educational spheres, these associations and the caste elite run schools and colleges, hostels, coaching classes, disburse education material, scholarships etc. Caste associations, particularly those of lower castes, frequently undertook to upgrade the caste's position in the social hierarchy. They pressed for extending privileges and rights to the caste either by turning to the state or emulating the social or ritual behaviour of higher castes. (Rudolph and Rudolph) The caste associations are the instruments of organisation, mobilisation, and articulation. (Nadar Mahajana Sangam) Functioned as a para community to achieve mobility, political power, and economic development for the community. (Hardgrave, R. L. (1969)<sup>[12]</sup>. The Kshatriyas of Gujarat formed the Kshatriya Sabha.

Seventh, democracy has also strengthened its position as dominant Peasant caste. They have politically united themselves, and at the maximum time, their caste candidates win the election of Panchayat. Most regional parties in India influence the dominant peasant caste; for example, the Yadav caste's influence can be seen in the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, Nadar in D.M.K. and Vaniyar in AIADMK, and Maratha in NCP. (Brass, 1965)<sup>[2]</sup> Rajini Kothari says electoral politics has endorsed and mobilised caste and identity politics.

Most importantly, the peasant or farmer castes have challenged the traditional lines of the power structure dominated by the upper caste. Richard Sisson analyses the development of the Congress party in one part of Rajasthan in terms of support bases. Jats were supported as new political groups other than the Upper caste.<sup>3</sup> Andre Beteille observed the caste class changes and power in a democracy. She says there is a power shift from one dominant caste to another. Rajini Kothari says identity politics in a democracy have strengthened these Castes

Eight Panchayat Raj systems strengthened democracy at the grassroots level and served dominant peasant castes' interests. Anand Teltumde, in his book Republic of Caste, explained how the villages had become the stronghold of Dominant peasant castes. They control all the subordinate groups. The dominant peasant caste mobilised its caste as it used it to influence the political system. The neo-Kshatriyas have got political mobility through the Panchayat raj system. (Anand Teltumbde, Kancha Ilaiah)

Ninth, these peasant castes improved their economic position with state-assisted community development programmes, and the Green revolution benefited rich peasants. Jats benefitted from the green revolution, while Maratha farmers benefited most from the sugar revolution. Patel took advantage of the white revolution related to the milk sector. (Etienne, G. 1968, Frankel, F. R. 1971)<sup>[9, 10]</sup>.

Tenth, Developmental programmes like land Reforms and the statutory provisions mentioned in the constitution strengthened their position. A large number of lands were allotted to the middle castes and lower castes after Independence. Dominant peasant castes also benefit from all developmental programmes in rural India.

## Conclusion

There is a paradox in Caste discourse, where caste's orthodox perspective gives the language of hierarchy, injustice, inequality, and discrimination. In contrast, the Dominant Peasant caste perspective speaks the language of assertion, pride, power, and future opportunities. The vast social category immensely empowered themselves using the same caste weapon, which historically discriminated against them, to empower themselves through various movements, associations, and methods. It is clear from the study that caste has changed tremendously both from internal and external factors. It is also clear that Dominant peasant castes have become the inevitable social and political group in India whose exigence cannot be ignored for long.

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