



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CASTE, CLASS AND MOBILITY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the relationship between caste, class and mobility in contemporary India. The existence of a caste system places India in a unique position where the study of class mobility is concerned. Certain castes have been historically associated with particular occupations, an association which is believed by some to be eroding due to processes associated with modernisation and resultant urbanisation. But despite the centrality of caste in Indian sociology, few studies have empirically analysed the relationship between caste and class or the influence of modernization processes on this relationship, particularly at the national level; and no study has used a gender perspective. My paper attempts to fill this research gap by studying the association between caste and class, and the role that caste background plays with regard to class mobility chances.

Using the 2004 National Election Study data from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, we find that while the relation between caste and class is not completely straightforward, a tentative picture of congruence between the two does appear; High Castes are seen to be concentrated in the higher social classes like the professional, large business and farming classes. Also, the association between caste and class origins is not seen to weaken over time or at least not by very much. Furthermore, lower castes like the Scheduled Castes seem to be experiencing difficulty in gaining upward class mobility though conversely High Castes are not cushioned from the forces of downward class mobility.

In sum, we find that in India modernisation has not had the expected effect as the association between caste and class has neither disappeared nor declined appreciably. However, we observe that when caste and class are studied together the influence of caste is much weaker than that of class origins where access to certain class destinations is concerned. Thus we conclude that the importance of class origins on class destinations has so far been underemphasized in the Indian literature.

KEYWORDS : caste, class and mobility, India modernization , farming classes.

INTRODUCTION

The existence of the caste system makes India a novel case study for analyzing intergenerational class mobility patterns. Certain castes/jatis (sub-castes) have been historically associated with particular occupations, but this association is believed by some to be eroding due to the processes associated with modernisation and the resultant urbanisation; also the importance of ascribed characteristics like caste, on individual's opportunities to gain access to scarce resources like jobs, is also expected to decline with modernisation (see Gist, 1954; Karanth, 1996; Panini, 1996 among others). Kolenda (1986) too has raised the question of whether in place of caste there is a class system emerging in India (pp. 108). This paper aims to study the relationship between caste, class and

mobility; and in particular it empirically explores the relation between caste and class in contemporary India.

Despite the centrality of caste in Indian sociology, and debates on whether class rather than caste ought to be the determining factor with regard to social disadvantage, few research studies have empirically analysed the relationship between caste and class, particularly at the national level (McMillan, 2005; Kumar et al, 2002a, b are notable exceptions). Most often the reluctance to study this relation has been due to the lack of adequate data to make such a study possible. This reluctance also stems from the wariness of sociologists (and social anthropologists) in using a national framework to study a concept as localised as *jati* (Kolenda, 1986; see also Deshpande, 1999). To an extent their arguments do hold some weight and localised ethnographic studies are invaluable to analyse this complex relationship. This should not, however, preclude national research that is able to study this caste-class relationship at a macro level. In the context of the enduring debates surrounding preferential policies, this is an important area for analysis in India (Kumar et al, 2002a)

In light of this, in this paper I attempt to answer questions arising from the literature on the relation between caste and class. Our emphasis here is on empirically analysing the relation between caste and class in India as well as any changes over time, we do not study the mechanisms that may be driving any changes or influencing any persistence in patterns we may observe. This is an important area of analysis that we hope to approach in a future study. I now briefly discuss the existing literature.

CASTE, CLASS AND MOBILITY

The term *Caste* is derived from a Portuguese term 'Casta' meaning breed or race. According to B eteille (1965) a caste is 'a small and named group of persons characterised 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, based on concepts of purity and pollution.' This definition highlights some of the characteristics of caste: its hereditary nature, the pursuit of traditional occupations, hierarchical rank, endogamy, and the practice of pollution rites.

According to the Hindu scriptures four *Varnas* make up the Hindu system of caste; these are the Brahmins (primarily priests, doctors and so on); Kshatriyas (warriors); Vaishyas (businessmen) and Shudras (lowest caste, mainly artisans and manual labourers). The untouchables were those people who lay outside this caste system and in a sense formed a fifth category. They could not perform ritual activities, as they were considered ritually impure (polluted), and any interaction with a higher caste was believed to lead to the latter being 'polluted' by the former. This has been the formal theoretical division of caste, which also extends beyond Hinduism in India and leads to a hierarchy of 'pollution and ritual' status in other religions as well.

In everyday life, the division of caste is not so rigid or clear-cut nor is it restricted to these five categories; each *varna* is further divided into *jatis*. Literally thousands of *jatis* can exist for each *varna*, and these *jatis* too may be ranked by ritual purity at least theoretically. In practice however, many of these *jatis* may be effectively considered to be at the same level, for the purpose of social interaction and so on, depending on the particular function they perform, the particular setting and region. Srinivas discusses how the position in the 'rank order' of *jatis* was not rigid, and gives Parry's (1980) example of Brahmins who in Benaras are considered 'untouchable' for performing funeral rites. He goes on to state that 'the fact that the rank order of a *jati* in the local hierarchy is frequently a matter of doubt and ambiguity is,..., evidence of the dynamism of the caste system at the macro or all-India level' (2003: 456).

CASTE AND RESERVATIONS

The division of Indian society into various *jatis*, together with the practice of untouchability, and the geographic isolation of some tribal communities has meant that these communities have lagged behind others in terms of educational and occupational attainment, political participation and

with regard to opportunities for social mobility. In order to overcome these disadvantages the Indian Constitution in 1950 (see Dirks, 2001; Galanter, 1984; McMillan 2005 among others) specified various preferential policies involving reservation of places in government institutions of education, employment and the legislature for the most deprived of these groups: the *Scheduled Castes* (SCs, ex-untouchables) and *Scheduled Tribes* (STs, isolated tribal communities). In 1990, amid violent protest (see for more detail articles in Srinivas, 1996) these reservations were extended by a Constitutional Amendment to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), a more heterogeneous group believed to be relatively less 'socially and educationally' deprived compared to the SCs and the STs, but nonetheless disadvantaged when compared to the 'forward' or high castes.

In the present paper these three major caste/community groupings (SCs, STs and OBCs) as well as the higher caste group and other religious communities like the Muslims will be analysed to explore the relation between caste and class as well as to see whether these groups are indeed disadvantaged as compared to the higher castes with regard to mobility opportunities. Caste/community group information will be used in as much detail as is possible in the empirical analysis to study patterns of mobility. It may well be argued, as seen through the foregoing discussion, that the division into these broad categories might be too arbitrary given the complexity of the caste system. However, while a detailed examination of jatis is not possible at this stage, these major categories do capture the major constitutional divisions recognized by the Indian government for its affirmative action policies (see also Gist, 1954; Deshpande, 2001: 132) and this is a good starting point for our analysis.

CASTE AND OCCUPATIONS

As mentioned previously, castes have been historically associated with particular caste occupations (e.g. Gist, 1954), and any movement of a caste from its hereditary occupation to another is a form of social mobility within the caste structure (Silverberg, 1968). Some authors have concluded that the type of occupational mobility is quite restricted, for example for Weber (1958) despite there being a heterogeneity of people following varied occupations within all castes '[y]et as long as the caste has not lost its character, the kind of pursuits admissible without loss of caste are always, in some way, quite strictly limited. Even today 'caste' and 'way of living' are so firmly linked that often a change of occupation is correlated with a division of caste' (pp. 31).

Recent research argues that modernisation may bring about changes in the relation between caste and class. It has been argued that the creation of newer jobs as the economy modernises will lead not only to an increasing movement of people away from hereditary occupations to 'non-caste' occupations, but also to occupations that were originally the prerogative of the higher castes. Panini (1996: 60) summarises these changes when he states that:

'Economic liberalisation in the long run is likely to weaken the hold of caste over the economy. The free play of market forces implied in liberalisation is likely to dilute the importance of caste in economic calculations' 'Further as liberalisation entails free flow of information as well as resources, caste monopolies that operate in the various intricacies of the economy will become ineffective. Since enhanced competition is likely to encourage professional management of firms to ensure enhanced productivity and profit, criteria stressing efficiency and skill will prove to be more important in recruitment than the caste of the worker and his loyalty to the firm. As competition opens up and productivity increases all round, the economic growth rate is likely to get accelerated, which in turn would multiply job opportunities to such an extent that workers do not have to ply their caste background to get jobs'

This quote from Panini highlights a variant of the modernisation theory specific to India. That is, with modernisation it is expected that in addition to the decline in ascribed characteristics like father's class as is theorised in the West, in India there will also be a decline in caste as an important factor influencing recruitment to jobs. Srinivas (2003) seems to support Panini's view, but he extends the argument beyond economic liberalisation to include various changes that are occurring

simultaneously, and leading to the decline in the relation between jati and traditional occupations. According to him (pp. 457):

'... the improvement of communication, the spread of education, a host of governmental policies favouring the weaker sections, political mobilisation of the people, and the many technological changes... have all had the effect of greatly weakening the link between jati and traditional occupations. Even where it lingers in its attenuated form, monetisation, and market forces have combined to free economic relations from the baggage which they have traditionally carried.'

Panini and Srinivas' view of the changes that liberalisation and modernization will bring to the caste system do not find universal support at present. For example, Basile and Harriss-White (2000: 41), in their study of village *Arni* in Tamil Nadu do not see any 'sign yet of the erosion foreseen by Panini'. They go on to state that:

'On the contrary, caste is being selectively reworked to mean different things at different positions in the economic system of the town. Among Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes, caste remains a condition of hierarchy. Physical and ritual pollution still successfully repel higher ('backward') castes from low caste occupations. They also prevent all but a handful of those associated with this contamination from access to most 'clean' occupations, from private finance and from residence and worship in upper caste localities'.

It has been noted that the benefits of liberalisation are not enjoyed equally by all castes, as is evidenced by the existence of what has been termed the '*creamy layer*', i.e. the more advanced sections of the backward castes that are able to take advantage of preferential policies, which the more deprived sections are unable to do. The continued association of castes in particular occupations despite liberalisation has been much debated. According to Jayaram (1996: 82) the 'conjugation of caste and class is no longer a sociological axiom', and Kumar et al (2002a, b) show considerable occupational variation within castes. However, regarding the disassociation of castes from traditional occupations, Karanth (1996: 91) differentiates between the higher and lower castes. According to him the members of the lower (particularly former untouchable) castes find it tougher to move from their traditional occupations than do the higher castes. This may be for many reasons such as pressures (social, economic and political) exerted by the upper castes to continue the traditional 'patron-client' relations (ibid; see also footnote) due to which lower castes may remain economically dependent on the upper castes. Thus even if disassociation is taking place, it is more apparent for the higher rather than the lower castes, who might still be restricted by certain factors to perform their 'traditional defiling' jobs (this seems to support Basile and Harriss-White's (2000) conclusion).

Similarly Dube (1996) asserts that at the extremes of the caste system the overlap of caste and occupations persists. For example, a Brahmin still does a priest's job, and scavengers and sweepers are the lowest castes (pp. 3). This seems to indicate that it is in the middle where all the fluidity and mobility occurs.

Panini (1996) too reviews literature spanning a wide time spectrum that looks at clustering of castes and more recent de-clustering in different occupations. These studies show how caste 'no longer inhibits individuals from taking to new occupations' (ibid: 30), or what could be considered more caste 'non-traditional' occupations. But having laid down the changes that have occurred for different castes, Panini demonstrates with numerous examples that castes do still continue to 'cluster' in particular occupations. In addition to clustering in agriculture, Panini also shows the clustering of higher castes in higher levels of government services (pp. 32); managerial and professional occupations (pp. 33, 35); in the 'industrial milieu' (pp. 34); between the organised and unorganised sector (pp. 35) as well as by skill level. Summarising the literature in this field of caste and occupational mobility Panini concludes (ibid: 29) that 'evidence suggests accelerated occupational mobility which has broken down the caste based division of labour. Yet, such a change was not drastic enough to loosen the hold of caste over the economy. Caste continues to be a salient category in the social infrastructure of the economy'. For a discussion on the role played by women in caste and occupational continuity see Dube (1996). The above has been a summary of the various views put

forth regarding the relation between caste and class, but these have not been tested by any systematic research. In light of the literature, to analyse this relation in contemporary India, as well as any changes that might have occurred over birth-cohorts (our proxy for time), I pose the following two sets of questions.

QUESTIONS POSED

First, I begin by asking whether there is an association, if any, between caste and class in contemporary India. Here I will test whether there is more congruence of castes and classes at the extremes of the caste system as theorised by Dube (1996, see also Karanth, 1996). Second, I will pose four questions related to the modernisation argument put forth by Panini (1996) and Srinivas (2003). Firstly, has the congruence between caste and class origins declined over time? Secondly, has there been a decline over time in the relative importance of caste, and an increase in the importance of class origins, on class destinations? Thirdly, related to the previous question, do Scheduled Castes find it harder to move up than members from other communities/castes, from the

same lower class origins (Karanth, 1996; see also Kumar et al 2002a)? And finally, has the relation between caste/community and class destination weakened over time (Kumar et al, 2002b explored this question for their men-only sample of the NES 1996 data)? If these four questions are answered in the negative, we will be able to support Basile and Harris-White's (2000) conclusion from their ethnographic study that there has not been much change over time, or at least that the salience of caste has not declined appreciably.

DATA

The data for this paper comes from the May 2004 round of the National Election Study (NES) conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. The data, collected by a nationally representative, stratified random sample of over 27,000 respondents from the electoral rolls contains roughly the same number of men and women. This data is especially useful for the present study as it includes detailed background information on both the respondent and their parent's occupations and caste background. It is one of the only datasets of its sort with detailed information on 90 *Jatis* (sub-castes) which can be grouped into a more detailed caste/community categorisation than is found in the Census or other national datasets. *Appendix One* of this paper discusses the details of the NES dataset, including information on the individual caste/jati names, a comparison of the data with Census and National Sample Survey figures, and more significantly details of the community/caste categorisation (both of the 10-fold and a 6-fold classification) used in this paper. The class schema used in this paper is different in many ways from the Goldthorpe schema often used in the West; for example, it includes a more detailed breakdown of rural farming classes. For more information on the class schema used here and its validation see Vaid (2007). In this paper I use both an 11 class schema and a collapsed 5 class schema, both of which are included in *Appendix One*.

The Unidiff model provides a better fit than the CnSF according to the 2 *G* for both women and men. The Unidiff parameters are shown in Figure 3 (the parameters for the earliest birth-cohort are set to 1, anything greater than one shows increasing strength and anything less than 1 shows weakening association). In the figure one can see that the parameters for men are not following any consistent pattern. There is instead 'trendless fluctuation' in terms of the relation between class origins and community. But quite surprisingly the picture for women is different; it seems to show that the relationship between class origins and community is declining consistently. This is a puzzling result as it is not clear why patterns should be different for men and women since we are looking at their class origins and we are not restricted only to the economically active women. As there is no theoretical reason to expect that the results for women and men would be different, this weakening that we observe could be for many reasons, for example due to noise in the data, random fluctuation or small sample sizes.

One caveat regarding our results needs to be mentioned: these results are specific to a particular way of categorising caste and class. Thus, the comparison of the parameter estimates made here is specific to the particular measure and aggregation of caste and class used. If we used more detailed classifications, such as information on individual jatis like Brahmins for example, we might get a slightly stronger result for that particular jati, though perhaps not for the others. However, having noted this, given the broad categorisations used here, we can conclude that class is indeed an important influence on gaining access to professional destinations.

CONCLUSIONS

The 'traditional' association between caste and certain occupations has often been discussed theoretically. In recent times there has been an increase in the literature predicting a breaking down of this congruence (e.g. Panini, 1996). In addition, sociologists like Kolenda (1986) have questioned whether the 'traditional' caste system is now giving way to a more class based society. In this paper an attempt has been made to study the relation between caste and class systematically and in particular to highlight any changes that may have occurred over time. Firstly, while the relation between caste and class is not completely straightforward, a tentative picture of congruence between the two does indeed appear. High Castes are seen to be concentrated in the higher social classes like the professional classes, and large business and farming classes. But, significantly, we observe that they are also concentrated in the two routine non-manual classes. This seems to indicate that High Castes dominate in the more 'clean' white collar classes, and a strong manual-nonmanual barrier seems to exist where the High Castes seem to be avoiding 'unclean' manual work.

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