DURGABAI DESHMUKH MEMORIAL LECTURE 2025

Cast(e)ing the State Policy Aspiration, Identities and Democratic Politics

By

Prof. Surinder S. Jodhka

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Cast(e)ing the State Policy
Ascription, Identities and Democratic Politics

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Durgabai Deshmukh

Freedom fighter, social reformer, an indefatigable institution builder, member of the Constituent Assembly, the first woman-member of the Planning Commission, Durgabai Deshmukh's life was one of leadership and true empowerment. Born on July 15, 1909, I Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh, she was initiated into a life of politics and social reform early. At 12, she left school to protest against the imposition of English language education and later started the Balika Hindi Paathshala in Rajahmundry to promote Hindi education for girls. This was to be the nucleus of the future Andhra Mahila Sabha, the large social service organisation which laid the foundation of numerous educational institutions at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. A follower of Mahatma Gandhi, she joined the khadi movement, and participated in the Salt Satyagraha as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement for which she was imprisoned. After her release, she went on to acquire law degree and practiced at the Madras Bar for a few years in 1952, she married C.D. Deshmukh, then the finance minister of India, who earlier served as the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India.

In 1958, she headed the National Committee on Women's Education, and formed the Andhra Women's Association. As member of the Planning Commission, she mustered support for a national policy on social welfare which resulted in the establishment of the Central Social Welfare Board. As the Board's first chairperson, she mobilised a large number of voluntary organisations to carry out its programmes aimed at the education, training and rehabilitation of needy women, children and the handicapped. Alongside, she compiled the Encyclopaedia of Social Work in India, still an indispensable reference tool for researchers.

Durgabai Deshmukh was instrumental in setting up the Council for Social Development, Durgabai Deshmukh Hospital, Sri Venkateshwara College, among the other institutions. In recognition of her outstanding efforts to spread literacy and social change she was awarded the Paul G. Hoffman Award, the Nehru Literacy Award and the UNESCO Peace Award. Along with her husband, she received the Padma Vibhushan in 1975 for contribution to public affairs and social work. But beyond the accolades, Durgabai Deshmukh's true legacy lies in her spirit of sacrifice and unwavering commitment to social change.

Re-cast(e)ing the State Policy
Ascription, Identities and Democratic Politics

Abstract

The post-Independence Indian state has had a rather ambivalent attitude towards caste. Even though caste was widely recognized as a structure of social disability and hierarchy, it could not enter the imaginations of India's development establishment and found no place in the vocabulary of economic growth spelt out in the planning models of the Nehruvian state.

The first generation of Indian elite, political and social, saw caste as a 'cultural hangover', which was mostly present among the 'uneducated' masses, particularly among those who lived in the countryside tied to a traditional way of life. Education, economic growth and exposure to urban culture were to enable them to come out of their conservative mind-set. Such a 'modernist' framing of caste also implied that the educated and urbanized Indians did not subscribe to caste.

Those who still carried the 'outdated' values of caste and the ways of life it prescribed, needed to be infused with scientific temper and progressive dispositions. Thus, the best way to deal with caste was to help people forget it. All modern societies, such as those of the Western world, were presumably free of ascription being marked instead by open systems of stratification and values of individual achievement and mobility. Their system of ranking and social identification depended on an individual's ability/merit and hard work.

The announcement to enumerate caste in the forthcoming national census marks an important turning in the attitude of the Indian state towards caste. Beyond mapping of the demographics of different caste communities, counting caste is bound to generate a large volume of data on caste-wise correlates of the economic status of different categories and communities, creating possibilities of a new politics of development and distribution. As such, enumeration of caste is not new to the Census. India has always been counting its Scheduled Castes and the Indian state has a wide range of policies targeted at their social and economic wellbeing as well as to enable their representation in the political and administrative system at various levels. However, the fact that those who did not belong to the Scheduled Castes were listed as belonging to the "general" category, suggested that their position in society was not shaped/determined by their caste identity. The decision to include all caste identities in the national census reflects the unfolding of a wide range of political and social processes. Through my presentation I will attempt to provide a political journey of caste and its changing relationship with the state policy.

Cast(e)ing the State Policy
Ascription, Identities and Democratic Politics

Surinder S. Jodhka

Contemporary invocations of caste have come to be increasingly associated with processes of the Indian state system. Much of the popular and media discussions on caste, for example, tend to happen around its interactions with electoral politics and state policies such as the 'reservations'. The two most contentious and ongoing discussions are around the Supreme Court's judgement on the question of sub-classification within the Scheduled Caste category and, more recently, the announcement of enumerating caste in the forthcoming national census. The state politics/policy processes appear to have also become significant in the lives of caste communities. The idioms around which they frame their self-identities and articulate their aspiration are increasingly oriented towards these processes. It is through these 'mobilised' identities that caste has come to acquire a kind of hyper-visibility in the contemporary Indian public sphere.

This may appear rather self-evident to us. However, it also presents an interesting conundrum, both for caste as well as for democratic politics. Social science scholars have produced a large volume of research on the subject. I begin with a brief revisit of the conceptual frames through which we have come to understand caste and its relationship with democratic political processes. I go on to show limitations of these frames and argue for the need for an active engagement with caste, including through state policy, with a clear purpose of its annihilation, and not a promotion or consolidation of caste-based identities.

Caste, as we conceptually understand it from the textbooks of social sciences, is mostly described as an ancient structure of hierarchy sanctified by Hindu religious dictums. It was about a traditional way of life and a domain of culture for those who identified with the Brahminic faith tradition. It also suggested a normative frame that structured the economy and ranked various occupations on a scale drawn from the religiously sanctified values of purity and impurity. It likewise shaped

settlement patterns and imposed strict restrictions on who could marry whom, popularly known as norms of endogamy and exogamy.

In contrast, the foundational logic of a democratic nation-state is embedded in modernity, where every individual ought to be treated equally, a citizen, irrespective of his or her identity of ascription. Those familiar with the social history of Indian democracy would be able to remember that this has for long been a contentious subject among the students of Indian democracy (I shall return to this a little later).

The early generations of India's political elite, those who built the organisational edifice of Indian democracy and the constitutional system, were acutely aware of this conundrum. Despite Gandhi's advocacy for grounding of the independent Indian nation-state within the 'native cultural tradition', the proposal did not find many takers and was decisively rejected by members of the Constituent Assembly. In his speech delivered to the members of the Assembly on 25th November 1949, B. R. Ambedkar, the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, emphatically foregrounded the challenges that the institutionalization of democratic polity was likely to confront given the hierarchical nature of India's past traditions and social institutions that bred hierarchy and inequality:

> On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In Politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions? How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy … (as in Moon 1979:1216)

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, concurred with Ambedkar. Making direct reference to caste in his *The Discovery of India* (1946), he avowed that:

> In the context of society today, the caste system and much that goes with it are wholly incompatible, reactionary, restrictive, and barriers to progress. There can be no equality in status and opportunity within its framework, nor can there be political democracy.... Between these two conceptions, conflict is inherent and only one of them can survive (Nehru 1946: 257).

The early generation of India's middle-class elite, too, held a similar view on the incompatibility of caste with democracy. The distinguished writer, academic and diplomat K. M. Panikkar summed up this mainstream modernist view on the incompatibility of caste and democracy:

> Democracy and caste are totally opposed, … the one is based on equality, and the other on inequality of birth. The one is actuated by the principle of social inclusion, the other by the principle of social exclusion. Democracy tries to break down the barriers of class, caste seeks to perpetuate them. (Panikkar 1933/2004: 24)

Pervasive Ambivalence: However, despite such unambiguous framings of their contradictory nature, and nearly unanimous denunciation of the prevailing structures of hierarchy and exclusion emanating from caste, these leaders did not propose any plan of action against it. Nor did the post-Independence Indian state actively pursue the agenda of annihilating caste. Its policies have had a rather ambivalent attitude towards the institution. Besides the reservation policy, there was not much that directly targeted caste. The same holds good for India's development establishment that the Nehruvian state put in place in the form of the Planning Commission or the Five-Year Plans. Despite the widely held view that caste functioned as a structure of social disability and economic deprivation, it could not find a place in the vocabulary of growth and planning models of the independent Indian state.

Perhaps the reason for this lies in the manner in which much of the critique of caste was framed. Except for Ambedkar and those closely associated with him, a large majority of India's modernist elite viewed caste merely as a traditional structure, comparable to what had existed in the past of the "developed" nations of the West. This view assumed that caste survived more as a 'cultural hangover' of the past, and mostly among the 'uneducated' masses, particularly among those who lived in the countryside and were still tied to a traditional way of life.

Such a view was also supported by the then popular modernisation theorists. Such traditional structures, they suggested, would disappear on their own as a society modernises. There was no need of directly confronting caste. The answer lay in following the path of evolutionary development, making India a modern nation-state. Education, economic growth and exposure to urban culture were to enable the "ignorant masses" to come out of their conservative mindset. As the popular textbooks of sociology and social anthropology of the time suggested, caste typically flourished in the social ecology of the Indian village.

Such a 'modernist' framing of caste also implied that those who had already been educated and lived in urban settlements did not subscribe to caste. Those who still carried the outdated values of caste and the ways of life it prescribed, needed to be infused with a scientific temper and progressive temperaments. Thus, the underlying and nearly unanimous assumption among the ruling elite and the influential urban middle classes was that the best way to deal with caste was to help people forget it. Like modern societies of the Western world, India too would soon be free of ascription, marked by an open system of stratification, governed by values of individual achievement and mobility. The system of ranking and social identification would undergo a structural change and would begin to be shaped by the ability/merit and hard work of individual citizens.

India's Modernity and the Persistence of Caste[1]: Over the past 75 years, India's economy has made significant strides. Not only has it grown in size, but it has also seen many qualitative shifts. The absolute size of India's urban population today is larger than the total population of any country in the world, other than China. Though nearly two-thirds of all Indians still live in rural settlements, they too have begun to depend more on incomes from the non-farm economy for their livelihoods, a significant proportion of which is earned by working outside their villages of residence. The older forms of relational structures of social and economic life (*jajmani*, semi-feudal) have changed quite radically, nearly everywhere in the Indian countryside (see Jodhka 2023).

Furthermore, a much larger proportion of Indians are mobile today and their mobilities involve crossing boundaries, not only of the villages of their residence or the linguistic regions of their birth but often also of caste and class, or even gender. These changes have been made possible by the larger processes of economic growth/ development and growing aspirations for a better life. With expanding educational infrastructure, nearly every child in India today goes to school, at least for a few years.

With growing mobilities and expanding markets, India is also well-integrated in the global markets and its cultural dynamics. The absolute size of India's middle class and its wealth is quite large and would compare well with countries of the Global North. Their presence on the world stage as leading professionals, entrepreneurs, and corporate leaders has also been growing. Besides the middle-class professionals and big capital, a large number of Indians are also part of what could broadly be described as the global working class.

The trajectory of India's democracy has been a compelling story. Even though it compares very poorly on many indicators of good governance with most countries of the Western world, and its institutional framework has been quite fragile, India's experiment with democracy is certainly not a failure. Besides being a functioning

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[1] Parts of the arguments presented in this and the following section draw from my published paper (Jodhka 2024).

electoral polity, the democratic political system has been steadily deepening and has been moving towards greater participation of diverse sections of its population. Most Indians, including those from its religious minorities, the "backwards" and the historically marginalized caste/social groups, and women, have developed stakes in the electoral processes. They tend to be among the most enthusiastic participants in the electoral process.

Caste too has seen many changes and churnings over the past 75 years. As I have argued elsewhere (Jodhka 2015a), the sources of these changes have been multiple, the most important being the political push from 'below', in the form of social movements by those who have been at the receiving end of the 'traditional hierarchies'. Some of these mobilisations had acquired considerable strength even before India's Independence. They came up in a variety of forms across different regions of the subcontinent. These movements also produced a wide range of leaders from within the marginalised caste communities. Some of these leaders, such as B.R. Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram, have also been critical actors on the national political scene. They institutionalised newer forms of political action and imagination among the Dalits. Their personas have become role models and critical political resources for newer generations of Dalit activists. Some of these movements have also become institutionalised in the form of political parties and organised pressure groups (see Teltumbde 2020; Pai 2002; Jodhka 2021).

Equally important, and somewhat related, have been the state-led initiatives from 'above'. As India became a constitutional democracy after Independence, it recognised every resident of the land as an equal citizen and made available a language of self-imagination which delegitimises cultures of hierarchy and humiliation. In addition, the institutionalisation of constitutional provisions in the form of 'reservations' and other state policies targeted at the Scheduled Castes and the OBCs have been crucial in changing the dynamics of caste. Besides enabling education and economic mobility of individuals from marginalised communities, the reservation policy has also helped in producing a 'new' middle class among them that articulates/ represents their anxieties, aspirations, and interests.

Being classified together as Scheduled Castes or the Other Backward Classes by the nation-state also gives them a new identity. Even more importantly perhaps, it produces a statistical effect because their proportions increased significantly when they are classified together as an official category for representation. Leaders like Kanshi Ram were successful in making their constituencies realise the value of voting together as a political bloc.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, caste has also been changing because of 'pressures' coming from the 'side', being exerted by the broader socio-economic shifts taking place, which too have implications for the working of the social order of caste. From the perspective of the present-day context, the beginnings of such processes[2] go back to the British colonial rule and their policies that integrated the subcontinent for the convenience of governance. As is well known, the initiation of the colonial census unleashed hitherto unknown processes that produced new imaginations of caste and other collective/communitarian identities.

Likewise, the rise of the nationalist movement and the project of nation-building had far-reaching intended and unintended consequences for the relational structures of caste. The policies of industrialisation, the processes of building new educational institutions, and the expansion of bureaucracy also opened up opportunities for urban employment, with jobs reserved for the Scheduled Castes along with the Scheduled Tribes.

Even when their visualisation was 'caste-blind', the programmes of rural development initiated during the early decades after Independence too had far-reaching implications for caste. For example, the introduction of Green Revolution technology during the 1970s, though intended as a purely economic programme for increasing the productivity of land, drastically transformed the rural social structures of caste. During my field studies of rural Haryana

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[2] Such processes would have always been present. As we know from historical literature on the pre-colonial period, social relations of caste changed with shifts in political power and changes in economic regimes. Trajectories of these processes would have obviously been region specific (see Ludden 1999; Cherian 2023).

between 1987-88, and then again in 2008, and in Punjab between 1999-2000 and again in 2006, I saw that the growing use of Green Revolution technology had formalised/marketised the local agrarian and caste economies (Jodhka 1994; 2014).

The traditional caste occupations had nearly disappeared, and even when they survived, their grammar had changed. For example, the local Dalits no longer dealt with dead cattle. The villagers had to invite "contractors" from a neighbouring town to get their dead cattle picked up. Similarly, no one made or repaired shoes in the villages anymore. The barbers had set up shops and worked purely as service providers for a fixed price. More importantly, not all of them were from the traditional caste of barbers. Even those who worked as scavengers now demanded payment in cash. Dalits also did not like working as regular farm servants with the local farmers. They preferred being casual labourers and many chose to work in the non-farm economy (Jodhka 2002; 2014).

Their growing distance from the local agrarian economy also meant their declining dependence on the dominant castes and a growing sense of autonomy. They began investing in building their autonomous institutions, such as Gurdwaras/ temples and community centres, to minimise interactions with those from the dominant castes and so escape prejudice/ humiliation. In due course, they also began to make claims over resources that commonly belonged to the village but had hitherto been under the exclusive control of the dominant/ upper castes. Such claim-making often produced inter-caste conflicts, but it also paved the way for a re-negotiation[3] of relational patterns at the local level.

What has happened in Haryana and Punjab is not exceptional. Scholars studying rural life had begun to report such processes, of the decline of social structures of dependency, sometime in the early 1970s (see Béteille 1996; Breman 1974; Thorner 1982). By the early 1980s, these processes began to reflect even in regional politics. Based on his fieldwork in villages of Rajasthan during the 1980s, Oliver Mendelsohn reported that the idea of the 'dominant caste', as

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[3] See Jodhka 2002; 2006; 2012; 2015a; 2023.

proposed by M. N. Srinivas during the 1950s, was no longer a useful conceptual frame for making sense of the local and regional politics. The 'low caste and even untouchable villagers were now less beholden to their economic and ritual superiors than was suggested in older accounts' (Mendelsohn 1993: 808). Even 'land and authority had been de-linked', which 'amounted to a historic if non-revolutionary transformation' (ibid.: 807). Scholars working in some other regions of the country, too, have observed similar patterns of change in their studies (Karanth 1996; Charsley and Karanth 1998; Kapoor et al. 2010; Krishna 2001; Manor 2012).

Accompanying these processes was the weakening of the ideological hold of caste over those who have been at the receiving end of the hierarchical system. Whatever might have been the case in the past, today, very few among those located at the lower end of the traditional structures of hierarchy would regard themselves as impure or attribute their marginalities to their *karma,* the deeds done in their past life. Today, they 'all aspire to more comfortable material circumstances; all demand more dignity' (Deliege 1999:1; also see Price 2006; Gorringe 2017).

Persistent Caste: Caste has indeed undergone many changes over the past century and more, some of which even appear quite radical. However, on the ground, there appears to be no sign of its disappearance, or even decline. On the contrary, its presence has only been growing. Most Indians continue to proudly identify themselves by their caste/ *jati/ up-jati* names. A large majority continues to marry within the caste-kinship networks. The tendency to organise civic life even in urban and metropolitan centres around caste-based organisations/ associations has also been steadily growing[4].

For the modernists, the introduction of a secular constitution, economic development and a vibrant political culture resulting from electoral democracy have been the most important forces that have

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[4] This trend seems to have become far more pronounced during the post-1990 period, with the India's economic liberalization. See Harriss 2003; Upadhya 1997; 2023; Naudet 2018; 2023; Jodhka and Naudet 2017; 2019; Ponniah 2017; Iyer et al 2013.

weakened the hold of caste. Some of them may also argue that caste would have already been forgotten had it not been institutionalised in the Indian constitution in the form of a 'reservation' system. They would also argue that such policies keep caste alive in the political domain, that wily entrepreneurs of the Indian democracy mobilise caste blocks as vote banks, which work towards keeping the caste sentiment alive. In other words, political parties have developed stakes in keeping it alive, they would contend.

A more popular view among the political sociologists of Indian democracy has been a bit nuanced. For most of them, India's experience has been that of a 'qualified modernisation'. Unlike what happened in the West, where pre-modern structures of hierarchy were presumably completely replaced by a society of mobile individuals or an open system of class-based stratification, caste does not get completely dissolved in the Indian context. The institution retains some elements of past identities even while transforming into associational groupings, ethnic formations, substantialized castes, or secularised collectives.

They contend that such a process began to manifest itself during the colonial period itself and has continued to gain momentum over time. Writing in 1932 on the rise of the 'non-Brahmin' political movements in South India, sociologist G.S. Ghurye argued that such mobilisations were generating a new kind of collective sentiment, 'the feeling of caste solidarity', which could be 'truly described as caste patriotism' (1932:192). The impact of colonial modernity was not confined to the political lives of caste communities. It also began to refashion their civic and economic lives. Writing in a similar vein, M.N. Srinivas argued that the introduction of 'modern' technology and representational politics by the British initiated a process of horizontal consolidation of caste (Srinivas 1962), and the locus of its reproduction began to shift to the city:

> The coming of printing press, of regular postal service, of vernacular newspapers and books, of the telegraph, railways, buses, and other means of public transportation, enabled the representatives of a caste living in different areas to meet and discuss their common problems and interests. Western education introduced new political values such as liberty and

equality. The educated leaders started caste journals and held caste conferences. Funds were collected to organise the caste, and to help the poorer members. Caste hostels, hospitals, co-operative societies etc., became a common feature of urban social life. In general, it may be confidently said that the last hundred years have seen a great increase in caste solidarity, and the concomitant decrease of a sense of interdependence between different castes living in a region (Srinivas 1962: 74-75).

Indeed, the British-initiated representational politics, with special provisions for groups listed as 'backwards', had set in motion a new process of alliance-building across caste communities that were spread across a region and occupied similar social status, impelling them to form bigger entities. In doing so, vertical formations of caste gave way to horizontal consolidations (*Ibid.*: 74; also see Bailey 1963).

Such a process has continued to unfold across regions of the subcontinent during the post-independence period. It manifests itself in the form of individual *jatis* or *jati*-clusters coming together as associational collectives. They then tend to reframe their identity using the category of *samaj*, a process described by Natrajan as 'culturalization of caste', through which they reimagine themselves simply as 'communities of identity seeking recognition for their cultural differences in a multicultural society' (Natrajan 2012: xiii).

These identities are often mobilised by ethnic entrepreneurs from within the caste communities and tend to have formalised organisational structures. In terms of their self-imaginations and formation processes, they are not very different from the caste associations that emerged during the late 19th and early decades of the 20th century, but in the more recent contexts, they tend to also actively engage with the state processes and often also with electoral politics (Deshpande 2023). Summarising the broader nature of such a process and the differences between the older order of caste and newer formations of *jati-samajs,* D. L. Sheth writes:

> Changes in caste … could be observed along … two dimensions of secularisation: de-ritualisation and politicisation. These changes have (a) pushed caste out of the traditional

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'stratificatory' system, (b) linked it to the new structure of representational power, and (c) in their cumulative impact they have made it possible for individual members of different castes to acquire new economic interest and social-political identification and own class-like as well as ethnic-type identities (Sheth 1999: 2504).

Extending such a thesis to the interaction of caste with Indian democracy, several political scientists have also similarly argued that in the process of collective mobilization of *jatis* or *jati*-clusters, the institution of caste metamorphoses from being a 'tradition' to acquiring features of 'modernity'. Lloyd and Susanne Rudolf (1967) were perhaps among the first to put forward such an argument. Contesting the classical liberal view of democratic politics, they argued that collectives of such caste formations also need to be seen as legitimate political actors if they were mobilising themselves for participation in a competitive electoral process. Democratic politics thus functions as a modernising agent in a society organised around caste, as has been the case with India.

Arguing on similar lines, Rajni Kothari too claims that through their participation in electoral politics, caste-based collectives were emerging as civic associations (with an Indian character). It is not only politics that gets 'caste-ridden', but in this process, caste also gets 'politicised', which eventually weakens/erodes the caste system, as we know it (Kothari 1970: 20-22). Likewise, Sudipta Kaviraj affirms that 'caste groups, instead of crumbling with historical embarrassment, adapted themselves surprisingly well to the demands of the parliamentary politics.' Their participation in electoral politics changed 'the structural properties of caste in one fundamental respect: it created a democracy of castes in place of a hierarchy', and 'equality between caste groups, not among caste-less individuals' (Kaviraj 2000:103-109).

Beyond the Tradition-Modernity Binary: A close examination of these writings on caste would show that 'modernists' and 'qualified-modernists' tend to approach caste from an essentialist perspective, and view it as a singular system of hierarchy produced by the Hindu religious system/ tradition. Despite their apparent differences, they both evoke the binary of tradition-modernity, which de-historicizes the

process of change. For example, they both tend to suggest that caste remained a stationary structure until the 19th century, and it began to change only when a foreign (Western) power arrived on the scene and questioned its legitimacy. For 'qualified modernist', caste begins to acquire a kind of 'plasticity' only when it is confronted with the challenges of Western-style modernity. Thus, for both, caste was indeed a signifier of a traditional way of life and a closed mindset to begin with. Observing certain caste groups enthusiastically mobilising their members for participation in the electoral process was seen as evidence of a 'tradition' readily adapting itself to 'modernity', and in the process transforming itself.

Caste as/and Inequality: Such a framing of caste tends to completely overlook its most obvious aspect, of it being a relational process, a social structure of inequality, violence, and humiliation[5]. Even those who tend to see the emergence of *jati-samaj* as autonomous cultural communities or horizontal ethnic formations as 'built upon and extend the colonial construction of a de-politicised view of caste, by emptying culture of power (Natrajan 2019: xiii). More importantly, the contentions around the recent Supreme Court judgement, or the growing demand for a caste census, are not about the conservation or elimination of the traditional order of caste endogamy and ethnic differentiation. It is primarily about the unfair distribution of resources across caste categories. Or, in the case of the Supreme Court judgement on sub-classification, it is about how the benefits of the reservation system are distributed across jatis and segments of SCs, STs ot OBCs.

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[5] Also, the empirical context of much this literature produced during 1960s and 1970s was the experience of the locally dominant castes, some of whom also came to be listed as OBCs, with democratic/electoral politics.
While in parts of South India, the middle-level caste groups had begun to make their presence felt with the rise of 'non-Brahmin' movements during the colonial period; they emerged as significant political actors in the rest of the country only during the 1960s. In many cases, their rise was also a result of the economic mobility/ prosperity brought to them by development programmes initiated by the Indian state after Independence.

If the core question is about the emerging structures of inequality and how they intersect with caste identities, we will need to approach caste differently. The alternative view that I propose is to approach caste as a material process. As I have also argued elsewhere, though caste indeed as an ideational and cultural dimension, it also works as an ascriptive process of hierarchies that structures power relations and institutionalises social relations of domination and humiliation (see Jodhka 2015b; 2024). Since caste is a relational process, it is inevitably also a material process. In other words, caste continues to matter not merely because it persists as an abstract cultural value, but because it also shapes social relations on the ground.

A large volume of empirical literature has been produced on rural social change over the past 70 years or so, and the growing evidence of its presence in the everyday life of Indian cities, provides us with rich accounts of how the processes of its reproduction are closely tied to the mechanisms of power and economy. They blatantly expose the fallacious nature of the Orientalist claims about caste being a static and harmonious system, shaped and sustained solely by an imagined view of Hindu religious belief and the social structure of the traditional Indian village.

As a structure of power and domination, caste has always been a site of conflict, contention and mobilisations. It has been so particularly for those located at its lower end and those occupying middling positions across regions of the subcontinent (see Jaffrelot 2003; Omvedt 1976; O'Hanlon 1985; Pandian 2006). The nature of relational hierarchies broadly known or described as caste has thus been shaped by such contentions and material processes, including state politics. As historians of caste tell us, it was during the British colonial rule that a standardised, pan-Indian notion of caste hierarchy began to take shape (Dirks 2001).

Its regional diversities and contentions around status often made it difficult to enumerate caste with a pan-Indian schedule. Colonial bureaucrats often encountered difficulties while enumerating it across different regions of the subcontinent:

> … the Census Commission for India complained from Bengal that "the ignorant classes have very little idea of what caste

means and are prone to return either their occupation, or their sub-caste, or their clan, or else some title by which they are known to their fellow villagers" … but in the twentieth century with census after census and more and more inquiries from strangers requiring people to identify caste, many became schooled in the proper answer (Charsley 1996: 3).

This is not to suggest that caste did not exist on the ground or that it was a British colonial invention or imposition. Hierarchies that could broadly be described as "caste" have been a part of social life across regions of the subcontinent, but their frames and formats varied significantly across regions. The local/native linguistic lexicon used to describe them differed across regions. The textual view of caste and the ideas of *varna* and *jati* were occasionally invoked, mostly by the Brahminic urban elite. However, even their position or presence varied significantly across regions. For example, the middling categories of Kshatriya and Vaishya were region specific, mostly present in pockets of the western, central, and northern regions of the subcontinent.

The more recent processes of rural development and the agrarian transformations experienced in different regions of India since the 1960s have also been caste-mediated. Even though the introduction of new technologies nearly completely changed the older systems, such as the *jajmani* relations, it did not end caste hierarchy, or even weaken it. New social classes emerged within the pre-existing social groupings. As is widely known, the introduction of Green Revolution technology significantly enhanced the power of specific caste communities, especially those who owned and cultivated agricultural land, the regionally 'dominant castes' (see Frankel and Rao 1989; Jodhka 2010a).

Even when the labouring poor are freed from older structures of bondage and traditional dependencies, their caste identities remain intact, and so do the limits they encounter in their pathways to mobility. Caste actively shapes their opportunity structures. For example, the out-migration of the labouring poor also has a caste mediation built into it. Most of the rural-to-urban migration happens through community networks and the destination of an out-migrating person is often channelled through kin-based networks. Rural Dalits and those from the rural dominant/upper caste are likely to follow very

different paths of mobility, even when they both may be equally poor and landless and are pushed out of the village by very similar kinds of livelihood desperation (see Jodhka and Kumar 2018; Vaid 2018).

Their entry into the urban informal economy is also shaped by the social resources they possess and bring with them to the cities. As I found in my study of mobile Dalits in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, the growing redundancy of old caste-based occupations and their growing dislike for agrarian employment push members of the ex-untouchable castes out of the village for alternative sources of livelihood. In the absence of any viable salaried employment, some of them try to set up businesses. However, they find it very hard to make much headway beyond the 'informal' margins of the urban economy. Urban markets have never been as open as they are made out to be in the textbooks of economics and sociology. The new entrants have to often compete with those who are already entrenched in the urban economy; caste and kinship-based communities actively try to preserve their 'monopolies' even in the urban markets (see Jodhka, 2010b).

Apart from working as gatekeepers, kinship networks matter in mobilising capital, through banks and otherwise, the most critical requirement for businesses anywhere in the world. Given their past economic deprivations, those from historically deprived communities rarely own collateral, such as agricultural lands or urban property. The lack of such 'social capital' and economic resources is further compounded by the active 'prejudice' they encounter in their everyday business life. Such processes aid in the reproduction of both social/economic inequalities and caste identity among the Dalits, producing a persistent sense of being different and unequal (Jodhka, 2010b; Prakash 2020; also see Iyer et al. 2013; Hoff and Pandey 2004). 'Caste also provides networks necessary for contracts, for subcontracting and for labour recruitment within the informal economy' (Harriss-White 2003, pp. 178–179).

The neoliberal reforms have also changed popular aspirations. With the relative decline of agriculture, children of landowning castes aspire to move to cities and seek jobs in the high-value corporate sector. However, those who control corporate capital prefer hiring their own, those from the urban upper castes and urban educated with the

required cultural skills over the college-educated individuals from the agrarian castes. Thus, caste in the urban context does not work merely as identity; it also reproduces itself as an exclusionary structure. The innocuous-seeming moves of *samaj* making among *jatis* and *jati-clusters* do not function merely as spaces for cultural comfort but also as exclusionary processes.

This is also evident from a closer look at some of the prominent mobilisations of the upwardly mobile rural communities. For example, political mobilizations of the educated youth from rural "dominant castes", such as the Marathas of Maharashtra, the Pattidar Patels of Gujarat, or the Jats of Haryana, asking for their inclusion in the official category of the OBC during the second decade of this present century is a direct reflection of this newly experienced exclusion and a realization of their steady marginalization in the contemporary politico-economic scenario (see Jaffrelot and Kalaiyarasan 2019; Tilche 2016).

Envisioning caste only as a religious phenomenon or traditional structure of social organization working through the notions of purity and impurity blinds us to such emergent exclusionary processes directly linked to caste, as also the newer, and "secular", forms of humiliation and exploitation that appear alongside the processes of change (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014; Bairy 2009; Subramaniam 2015). Exclusion and exploitation are also not new to caste. A large volume of empirical studies carried out between the 1950s to 1970s had similarly pointed to the fact that hierarchies of the ritual domain did not sufficiently capture the ground realities of caste in rural India (Beidelman 1959; Bailey 1960; Fuller 1977; Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1975; Mencher 1978). Joan Mencher, who extensively studied rural South India writes:

> …from the point of view of people at the lowest end of the scale, caste had functioned and continued to function as a very effective system of economic exploitation (Mencher 1978 p. 469)

Likewise, G.D. Berreman, who studied the hill villages of north India writes criticising the popular Orientalist/textual view of caste that

> …caste did not exist except empirically, in the lives of people as they interacted with each other. The human meaning of caste for those who lived it was power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety. (Berreman 1991, pp. 87–88)

Furthermore, without undermining the critical significance of caste in Indian history, it may also be useful to remember that it could have never been a singular fact of Indian life, shaping nearly everything in quite the same way everywhere. Ecological diversities, political regimes, and economic possibilities varied significantly over space and time.

Caste and/in State Policy: Caste has been and remains to be among the most contentious questions in contemporary India. How far does it still matter in India's public sphere as a persistent reality that continues to shape or condition opportunity structures of the neo-liberal economy? How deep is its ideological hold over modes of socialisation and everyday interactions across strata and genders? What has been the outcome or achievements of caste-centric state policies such as the 'reservation policy'?

While they are indeed important academic questions and a good number of social science scholars have published research on these topics, they have also been contentious political questions. As I have tried to show above, mobilisation of caste/jati identity has not simply been a cultural process of ethnicization of caste; they have also been political processes of aspirational mobilisations for rights and representation. While the middle-level agrarian castes were the first to use the platform of electoral democracy and successfully emerge as viable vote banks in India's regional politics, those from the margins too came together in due course as visible/autonomous political blocks.

The rise of Dalit politics during the 1990s was an important moment in the contemporary political history of India. It was also around this time that the Government of India decided to implement the Mandal Commission Report. The neo-liberal economic reforms, that were simultaneously introduced, changed the orientation of the state

towards the process of development. India's expanding middle classes and growing influence of big wealth also produced exclusionary processes. The processes of privatisation unleashed by the 'reforms' also implied fewer jobs being available in the state sector, where 'reservations' applied. As discussed above, the post-1990s growth process not only increased economic disparities but also reinforced pre-existing hierarchies across caste groupings.

It is in this context that we need to engage with the realities of caste in contemporary times. The growing demand for the enumeration of caste groupings and their comparative socio-economic status ought to be seen in this historical context. A (dominant) section of the Indian public opinion continues to be apprehensive of such a move. Such an enumeration process, they argue, would invigorate caste identities and further intensify casteism. This may indeed happen if the underlying assumptions about the realities of caste remain embedded in the orientalist frames, of it being a singular structure of hierarchy emanating from a religious faith tradition. Or, if it continues to be viewed as a cultural hangover of the past. It needs to be viewed as a pan-Indian, across-religions, structure of hierarchy and exclusion; denial and discrimination; power and privilege. As a symbolic system that institutionalises humiliation.

Beyond mapping the demographics of different caste communities, counting caste is bound to generate a large volume of data on caste-wise correlates of the economic status of different categories and communities, creating possibilities of a new politics of development and distribution. A more comprehensive dataset collected through a national-level census would also help in making the reservations policy more meaningful and effective, provided there is political will.

Thus, the purpose of the enumeration of caste ought to be its annihilation through state policy, and not an opportunity for the consolidation of caste identities.

How could this be done? The answer lies in actively engaging with the realities of caste and the exclusionary effects that it generates at various levels and then confronting them through state policy with the perspective of enhancing citizenship cultures. This would also require the state system to recognise the diverse patterns of hierarchy that

exist across regions of India. For policy purposes, caste is best engaged with at the regional or state levels. As such, the enumeration of caste is not new to the Census. India has always counted its Scheduled Castes/ Tribes, and the Indian state has a wide range of policies targeted at their social and economic well-being as well as to enable their representation in the political and administrative system at various levels.

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2025

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Surinder S Jodhka is a Professor of Sociology at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He researches on different dimensions of social inequalities, contemporary dynamics of caste, agrarian change, rural India, and the political sociology of community identities. His recent publications include *The Indian Village: Rural Lives in the 21st Centur*y. Aleph 2023; *The Oxford Handbook of Caste*. OUP 2023 (ed with Jules Naudet); *India's Villages in the 21st Century: Revisits and Revisions* OUP 2019 (edited with Edward Simpson); *Mapping the Elite: Power, Privilege and Inequality*. OUP 2019 (edited with Jules Naudet). *A Handbook of Rural India*, 2018 Orient Blackswan (ed.). *Caste in Contemporary India* Routledge 2015; *Caste:* Oxford India Short Introductions, OUP, 2012. He is editor of the Routledge India book series on 'Religion and Citizenship' and co-editor of the OUP book series on 'Exploring India's Elite'. He has been a recipient of the ICSSR-Amartya Sen Award for Distinguished Social Scientists.