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Renaming Caste, Retaining Privilege

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Attempts to 'invisibilise' caste through definitional alterations – whether in terms of an organic community or of a cultural community – are enmeshed in long-range socioeconomic transformations.

"There is no such thing as caste. If you read Vedanta, everyone is equal. None of the scriptures asks for such divisions. Only you leftists keep on bringing it up to ensure that Indian society remains divided," said a close family member who is on the board of multiple Hindu religious organisations.

This caustic remark embodies in a microcosm multiple layers of protracted debate over the very meaning of the word 'caste' across Indian socio-cultural spaces. One reason why this debate tends to generate more heat than light is that it is shaped by a binary opposition between two types of commentators.

Taking the high ground of scriptural revelation, 'textualists' proclaim that they do not entertain any sense of discrimination – they may even quote a verse such as *Ka?ha Upani?ad* 2.1.11 (c.500 BCE) which declares that "there is no difference here at all" (*neha n?n?sti ki?cana*). In contrast, 'contextualists', rooted in material realities, painstakingly delineate quotidian forms of systemic oppression that have been legitimized, directly or indirectly, by hierarchies outlined in Sanskrit literary genres such as the *Dharmas?tras* (500–200 BCE) and the *Dharma-??stras* (200–700 CE), of which the *Manusmriti* is possibly the most well-known text.

> How may we reconcile texts such as the Upani?ads that proclaim an equality based on the spiritual self with texts such as the Manusmriti that prescribe societally differentiated eligibilities and duties based on hierarchies of gender and caste?

Thus, textualists may invoke a civilizational narrative of glorious Hindu pasts where caste, by definition, was non-existent and castigate contextualists as anti-nationalists, neo-imperialists, leftists, or worse. In turn, contextualists may be unaware that Hindu symbolic narratives and scriptural commentaries are, in fact, multi-stranded and embody various types of internal stress and strain. As a result, they may regard any appeal to religious worldviews as an ominous sign of revivalism, obscurantism, parochialism, or worse.

Thus, debates on caste often degenerate into a dialogue of the deaf. Against this contested backdrop, we ask: what would be the shape of a conversation where textualists and contextualists work collaboratively to both study the scriptural idealisations of social order and explore how these idealizations remain enmeshed in real-world institutions of asymmetrical power?" More precisely, how may we reconcile texts such as the *Upani?ads* that proclaim an equality based on the spiritual self (*?tman*) with texts such as the *Manusmriti* that prescribe societally differentiated eligibilities (*adhik?ra*) and duties (*j?ti-dharma, str?-dharma*) based on hierarchies of gender and caste (*var?a, j?ti*)? Such a conversation, undertaken in a dialogical spirit, will require several months, if not several years.

On this occasion, by way of invitation, we highlight an internal tension within Hindu religious cosmologies, and indicate how this tension operates across the longue durée in two groups: the Arya Samaj (founded in 1875) and contemporary Tamil Brahmins. As we will see, varying definitions of caste have been offered from within distinct sociocultural contexts which reflect specific socioeconomic structures.

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At the heart of many Hindu socio-religious visions is the concept of *dharma* – this is a polyvalent term with meanings such as order, coherence, custom, duty, ethics, and so on. The macrocosmic *dharma* – expressed, for instance, in seasonal regularities such as the arrival of spring after winter – and the microcosmic dharma – enacted, for instance, in the distinctive lifestyle of individuals – are said to be mutually interrelated. So, in this type of socio-cosmic mapping, it is by fulfilling the mundane dharma that an individual maintains the primordial *dharma* that, in turn, sustains their everyday existence marked by gender and caste.

The regimented formulations of *dharma* in the *Dharmas?tras* and the *Dharma??stras* often reflect the socially elitist and androcentric presuppositions of their male Brahmin composers. Presenting themselves as the authoritative custodians of Vedic dharma, they articulate

an idealized order of *var?a-??rama* with themselves at its socio-ritual summit. This order is expressed through the four hierarchically layered social groupings (*var?a*) and the four life stages (*??rama*) – celibate student, householder, forest?dweller, and ascetic – that are applicable only to the three higher *var?as*.

> Ambedkar argued that even though the Arya Samaj speaks of var?a in terms not of birth and ritual pollution but of worth, the Samajists continued to use labels such as "Brahmin" which had become rigidly associated with the mentalité of socio-ritual hierarchy.

The *Manusmriti* prescribes differentially structured activities for these *var?as*: for instance, the duties of *Br?hma?as* (Brahmins) involve safeguarding Vedic knowledge and performing sacrificial rituals, while *??dras* would gain virtue (*dharma*) by serving the three progressively higher *var?as*, namely, *Vai?ya*, *K?atriya*, and *Br?hma?a*. Again, the *?pastamba Dharmas?tra* states that each preceding *var?a* is superior by birth to each subsequent *var?a*; and by following their distinctive *dharma*, individuals from a lower *var?a* would ascend to the next higher *var?a* in a subsequent birth (2.11.10–11). Certain types of normative exclusions are laid down clearly: the *?pastamba Dharmas?tra* (2.2.8) states that it is a sin (*do?a*) to touch, speak, or look at a socio-ritual outcaste (*C??d?la*), and the *Vasi??ha Dharmas?tra* (18.11–12) declares that ??dras are a cremation ground and one should not recite the Vedas in their presence (Olivelle 2020).

If these premodern Hindu scriptural narratives and symbolic worlds express a vision of sociological austerity, others express a vision of spiritual abundance. Thus, in traditions centered around the ideal of world-renunciation, the renunciant (*sanny?s?*) is said to transcend all hierarchical structures of dharmic roles, obligations, and duties – thus, the *sanny?s?* who, strictly speaking, has no *var?a* is said to look all beings with the eye of equality.

The multiple universes of *Ved?nta* too have operated with a conceptual contrast between an individual's spiritual identity rooted in the imperishable self (*?tman*) beyond all inscriptions of *var?a* and gender, on the one hand, and an individual's sociological role, on the other hand. The volatile tension generated by this co-presence of the language of equality and the language of hierarchy is reflected in the commentaries of Shankara (c.800 CE), whose Ved?ntic vision is known as advaita (non-duality). According to his influential reading of the *Upani?ads*, while the empirical "I" (*j?va*) is stamped with various worldly designations of *var?a*, liberation from the cycle of reincarnations (*sa?s?ra*) involves the intuitive realization that the true self (*?tman*) is non?dual with brahman which transcends all these designations (*nirgu?a*).

Crucially, however, while the sage, established in *?tman*, has surpassed all social distinctions, Shankara states that *??dras* do not have the ritual eligibility (*adhik?ra*) to undertake the type of Vedic inquiry that would lead to liberation. It is almost as if Shankara is claiming that although the same white light pervades all reality, when it shines through certain types of social prisms it loses the requisite luminosity.

> The attempt to "dissolve" and not "annihilate" entrenched caste hierarchy is simply a definitional subterfuge which would not alter the structures of graded inequality at the grassroots.

These two contrasting types of envisioning the sociocultural other – of austerity and of abundance – are inherited by a galaxy of Hindu thinkers and political activists who were operating within the milieus of British colonial modernity. Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and others sought to disassociate Hindu lifeworlds from their moorings in the hierarchical dharma of *var???rama* and instead present Hinduism as the universal dharma that transcends the boundaries of caste, gender, ethnicity, and nation. They recalibrated a premodern distinction between *var???ramadharma* and the principles of *s?dh?ra?adharma* (such as nonviolence, truthfulness, not-stealing, purification, and control over the senses) – which are said to be applicable to all individuals – and highlighted the latter as the quintessence of a Hindu way of life.

How does this complex set of affirmations and negations, namely, of spiritual equality and sociological hierarchy, work out in the micro-negotiations of everyday life? In an address with the title 'Vedanta and Privilege' delivered in London, Swami Vivekananda highlights this unstable conjunction.

If I ask one of our priests in India, "Do you believe in Vedanta?" – he says, "That is my religion; I certainly do; that is my life." "Very well, do you admit the equality of all life, the sameness of everything?" "Certainly, I do." The next moment, when a low-caste man approaches this priest, he jumps to one side of the street to avoid that man. "Why do you

jump?" "Because his very touch would have polluted me." "But you were just saying we are all the same, and you admit there is no difference in souls." He says, "Oh, that is in theory only for householders; when I go into a forest, then I will look upon everyone as the same." (1972: 1,427)

This seemingly inconsistent – even blatantly contradictory – combination of assertions emerges from a worldview animated by the temporal arrow of *karmic* causation. The claim is that not everyone is qualified in the here and now to see the world with a vision of sameness; however, if one patiently cultivates a way of living as prescribed by one's guru and tradition, then one will ascend across multiple lifetimes to the summit of this vision. Thus, as Swami Vivekananda's priest implies, when (in a future lifetime) he will become a hermit, then the declaration of spiritual equality will not remain a "theory only" but will become practically realized.[1]

This backdrop of sociological gradualism illuminates B.R. Ambedkar's critique of the Arya Samaj which sought to disconnect the term *var?a* (which appears as early as the ?g Veda in the Puru?asuktam, the 'hymn to the person') from contemporary notions and practices of caste. According to Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883), the founder of the Arya Samaj, the numerous castes (*j?ti*) with hereditary occupations should be replaced by a non-competitive fourfold system – in this "organic" whole of interdependence, an individual's social location in a *var?a* would be determined by an examination of their qualities, actions, and nature (*gu?a, karma, svabh?va*).

However, Ambedkar argued that even though the Arya Samaj speaks of *var?a* in terms not of birth and ritual pollution but of worth (*gu?a*), the Samajists continued to use labels such as "Brahmin" which had become rigidly associated with the mentalité of socio-ritual hierarchy. Further, this idealised system that Ambedkar characterised as *caturvar?ya* ("the state of four var?as") cannot be implemented in real-world contexts because the qualities of human beings are highly variable and cannot be pigeonholed into four natural classes.

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In short, the attempt to "dissolve" and not "annihilate" entrenched caste hierarchy is simply a definitional subterfuge which would not alter the structures of graded inequality at the grassroots (Ambedkar 2014 [1936]). With a poignant prescience, Ambedkar (2009 [1945]) laments that the hierarchical subjectivities which are expressed in concrete forms of social discrimination would not vanish "within a measurable distance of time" in the villages where most Hindus live: "You cannot untwist a two-thousand-year-twist of the human mind and turn it in the opposite direction". This ideational rewiring is vital because caste is a state of mind: "The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change" (Ambedkar 2014, 188).

Ambedkar's critique would have resonated somewhat with the Jat Pat Todak Mandal (Forum to Destroy Caste) – established in 1922 under the aegis of the Arya Samaj, it promoted intercaste dining and marriage, and even denied the idealized system of *caturvar?ya*. They distributed pamphlets in Hindi and Urdu against caste, and their militant stance brought them into conflict with the Arya Samaj from which they eventually broke away. Ambedkar's *The Annihilation of Caste* is based on an address he would have given to the Mandal in 1936: he later declined their invitation because he refused to remove from this address his criticism of the Vedas. Nevertheless, Ambedkar offered an intriguing suggestion:

I am no authority on the subject. But I am told that for such religious principles as will be in consonance with liberty, equality and fraternity, it may not be necessary for you to borrow from foreign sources, and that you could draw for such principles on the *Upanishads*. Whether you could do so without a complete remoulding, a considerable scraping and chipping off from the ore they contain, is more than I can say (2014, 311).

As is well known, Ambedkar, the architect of the provisions of affirmative action in the Constitution of India (1950), turned to Buddhism shortly before his death. He felt that certain traditional forms of Buddhism too were shaped by modes of social indifference and asceticism – his *Navay?na* ("New Vehicle") reconstruction of Buddhism would vigorously seek to establish non-hierarchical spaces free from exploitation, oppression, and inequality.

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Let us now turn from Ambedkar's incisive critiques to certain recent micro-negotiations in the postcolonial landscapes of Tamil Nadu. How do the scriptural tensions we have outlined manifest in an evolving market-based society?

As India liberalised its economy after 1991, there were widespread predictions that caste would cease to exist in the face of rapid market expansion. However, as electoral, sociological, and economic data suggest, at a time when the socio-religious significance of caste seems to be declining, caste is yet emerging in newer and subtler ways.

M.S.S. Pandian (2002) draws our attention to the silence of the upper castes (particularly Tamil Brahmins) on the question of caste, and how this silence stands in contrast to the assertive politics of difference amongst the lower castes. He notes instances of Brahmins defending casteist practices simply as "personal matters", thereby "pushing caste back into the inner domain of culture". In this definitional reformulation of caste in terms of cultural preference, an individual's upper-caste identity can be translated into a professional identity (for instance, software engineer or IT consultant) that they freely choose. In contrast, an individual's lower-caste identity is said to be so indelibly engraved that it overwrites all their other identities, along with the choices that these identities may express (Deshpande 2013).

> For some contemporary Tamil Brahmins, location on a caste spectrum cannot be readily harmonised with the post-independent nation-state's projects aimed at socioeconomic equality .

In this way, the category of caste emerges as an administrative tool for a paternalistic type of social policy, which would 'uplift' the 'marginalised' castes and bring them on par with the rest of the population which, by definition, has been rendered "casteless". This language of intervention seriously runs the risk of continuing to project historically marginalised groups as passive objects that require emancipation, thereby stripping them of their sociohistorical agency to push themselves out of a deeply entrenched socio-political matrix.

Some of these processes of culturalisation of caste can be observed in the everyday milieus of Tamil Brahmins. Christopher Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan (2014) show that Tamil Brahmins, despite occupying the highest level in the caste hierarchy, have recalibrated themselves as a "middle-class caste" in the twenty-first century. Critical in this development is their systematic tendency to equate traditional Brahmin norms with modern middle-class values. Indeed, by claiming these values as paradigmatically their own, they even state that caste no longer plays a role in a Tamil Brahmin's life.

However, such proclamations of 'beyond caste' are themselves contemporary expressions of an ideology of caste-based inequalities. This is because dominant caste groups are now seeking to ensure their durability by re-presenting caste in terms of cultural difference or ethnicity instead of ascriptive identities that confer material advantages (Natarajan 2011). Thus, the structural inequality of caste is slowly stripped away and is "camouflaged" and rearticulated in the form of "cultural community." This definitional strategy advances a view of caste groups as simply communities of identity seeking recognition for their cultural differences in a multicultural society that should indeed celebrate them.

> Caste is a hydra-headed phenomenon which is as much 'out there' as 'in here'

Clearly, then, even if some older notions of caste are receding, caste still persists in alternate avatars. The role of socio-ritual hierarchy is declining in some urban settings, yet there is inequality, which only goes to show that caste operates both at varying structural levels of invisibility and in newer insidious ways in interpersonal engagements.

What does our overview of remodulations of the language of caste – from around 1880 to the present – indicate? Attempts to 'invisibilise' caste through definitional alterations – whether in terms of an organic community (Arya Samaj) or of a cultural community (Tamil Brahmins) – are enmeshed in long-range socioeconomic transformations.

For the Arya Samaj, the consolidation (*sa?gathan*) of a vitally organised Hindu community that would respond to colonial critiques required the dissolution of all fault lines of caste – even if this removal is possible only in the conceptual space of *caturvar?ya* and not in material settings. For some contemporary Tamil Brahmins, location on a caste spectrum cannot be readily harmonised with the post-independent nation-state's projects aimed at socioeconomic equality – thus, the inequalities of caste have to be translated as cultural differences.

Thus, caste is a hydra-headed phenomenon which is as much 'out there' as 'in here' – with wide-ranging material transformations in social systems inequalities often become relocated or redistributed, and this reorganisation of socioeconomic power may call for newer definitions of caste in the changed context.

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Footnotes:

1 Swami Vivekananda's own views on caste reflect some of the complexities discussed here. A compilation of these views is Caste, Culture and Socialism (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1947). https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.28261/page/n1/mode/2up

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