

Notes on Caste and Class – partly critical of Manor's arguments on the declining power of caste hierarchies

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1. The notion that 'caste' and 'class' constitute opposing or alternative ways of analysing Indian politics and society is misplaced. They are different kinds of categories. In a sense 'caste' is inherently *emic*; 'class' is an *etic* category ... an observer's category but one that may also be meaningful to actors' themselves (class-in-itself/for-itself). Both caste and class matter in Indian society; and it has often been noted that there is a broad overlap between them. This is unsurprising since caste constitutes a kind of cultural capital and may give rise to significant social capital, both of which play an important part in the reproduction of class differentiation. e.g (i) Fuller on Tamil Brahmins: realisation that his study of Tamil Brahmins in the C20 is actually a study of the formation of a middle class which is disproportionately but not exclusively Brahmin. TamBrams have cumulative advantages in making their way as middle class people by virtue of the cultural and social capital that they have at their disposal . (ii) Jeffrey on the significance of Jat identity in the reproduction of the class structure of western UP, partly having effect through education.
2. Note, historically, the overlap of caste and class in the phenomenon of 'landlordism'. Thought within the Congress before 1947, and in the Report of the Agrarian Reforms Committee that reported in 1949 to be at the core of India's 'agrarian question'; and still is by both CPI(M) and by CPI(Maoist). Control over land → control over people; and both are secured by caste dominance. Note (i) that anthropologists such, notably, as Dirks and Raheja, see the locally dominant castes – dominant by virtue of their control over land and people - as being, structurally, in the position of 'little kings', and at the centre of the caste system (rather than Brahmins). Note (ii) that locally dominant landholders/members of locally dominant castes became very influential in Congress especially (from the 1930s, and increasingly so after 1947), and in some other political parties (BKD etc). The 'landlords' of the colonial period were seriously weakened through zamindari abolition, but there is strong evidence that those who benefited most from this were the rich peasants (substantial former occupancy tenants in some cases). Based on their control of land they were key actors in what Thorner referred to as 'the depressor' (which was his insightful way of modelling landlordism and its effects). As the class of 'rich peasants'/landed proprietors seen as one of the competing dominant proprietary classes in e.g Bardhan's model of India's political economy. But what has happened to 'landlordism' now?

Though there certainly are instances – as in the village of Iruvelpattu in Tamil Nadu – of the survival of big landlords, reflecting the general failure of redistributivist land reform in India, there is surely good reason for questioning the extent to which ‘landlordISM’ remains significant. This is because of the development of capitalist agriculture (*contra* the model of semi-feudalism); the fragmentation of large landholdings through inheritance and in response to the threats of land reform legislation; and because of the impact of social and political change on caste dominance (the processes that Manor emphasises in his ‘Caste and Politics in Recent Times’; and Dipankar Gupta in his idea of the ‘disappearing village’). And yet we should not underestimate the extent to which the power of locally dominant castes, historically based substantially on control over land, continues to be reproduced. Local power holders have often been adroit at hanging onto their power, in spite of the declining significance of land, perhaps notably through their roles as ‘gatekeepers’ between people and the state (and perhaps still, in some cases, as controllers of vote blocs?). See Pattenden on dominant proprietors in Karnataka; Jeffrey again on the Jats of western UP. How far have those whom Krishna describes as ‘naya netas’ or Manor as small-time fixers, succeeded in displacing those who have historically been the local bosses? ‘Landlordism’, maybe, and historical caste dominance, have substantially passed, but isn’t it the case that, in many parts of rural India, those who were the ‘landlords’ still exercise local power, with important consequences still for state-level politics (even if the power of the class of landed elites in relation to that of the other two dominant proprietary classes in Bardhan’s model is no longer as great as it was)? These are significant empirical questions.

3. There is a further point here. Even if local ‘caste systems’ have substantially broken down, hierarchical ideology is surely alive and well. This seems to be shown, for example, in Corbridge et al’s observations of how people ‘see the state’. Pratap Mehta’s argument is that in the context of an historically hierarchical society (India’s ‘ancien regime’ as he puts it) the impact of electoral democracy is to see different social groups competing for position rather than pursuing agendas of societal transformation.
4. In earlier work I drew on the overlaps of caste and class to distinguish between the political regimes of the major states. I distinguished between (i) those states (UP and Bihar) in which upper caste dominance has been significantly challenged and in which the centrality of the Congress party has been displaced as party competition has become quite fragmented; (ii) states in which upper caste/class dominance has not yet been so significantly challenged, and where there is two-party competition between Congress and another major party (MP, Rajasthan, Orissa); (iii) states in which what have usually been described as ‘middle castes’

of (historically) big landholders are politically dominant (Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra, Karnataka), and where (in most cases) there is now two-party competition between Congress and another major party; (iv) states in which lower castes/classes have been mobilised politically and 'dominance' substantially weakened (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal). I have found that in regard to provision of social welfare the last group of states has generally done better than others, including wealthier and more rapidly growing states. Governments in these states have generally – not invariably – been more responsive to poorer working people (and where else is there comparable evidence of government responsiveness to lower class/caste people? MP and Rajasthan, latterly?). I think that this typology of state political regimes still has analytical traction. If this is so does it not suggest – as I have also argued in the preceding points – that for all the 'decline of dominance' (Frankel and Rao) not only do caste blocs, overlapping as they do with class differences, remain key parameters of Indian politics but hierarchy remains remarkably resilient over much of the country.

5. What may be an important field for future research is that of the relationships between caste differences, economically dominant classes and political elites. E.g. ? difference between Andhra and Tamil Nadu? In Andhra historically dominant castes, Kammas and Reddys, substantially constitute both the political elite, and also competing fractions of the capitalist class. In Tamil Nadu political elites and capital – historically dominated by Brahmins and Chettiars - have remained largely apart from each other (though latterly political power has increasingly become the base for powerful economic interests, as in the media industries).

A further note on Manor's reflections on de Swaan's concept of a 'Social Consciousness'

I wish that I felt as positive as James Manor evidently does about the extent to which the 'moral stance' that 'entails a sense of generalised responsibility' has come to be accepted in India. At least in this note Manor recognises the deepening inequalities in Indian society of the last decade or so in a way that he does not, I think, in his 'Caste and Politics in Recent Times. But I believe that he seriously underestimates the extent of resistance on the part of political elites to social reform and to programmes for the reduction/elimination of poverty. Sure, increasing tax revenues have made possible increased expenditure on social welfare, but: (i) the successive UPA governments have not met the targets to which a commitment was made in the Common Minimum Programme in 2004

in regard to expenditure on education and health, as a share of GDP, and in many of their policies have encouraged privatisation of these critically important services; (ii) it must be noted that the NREGA was only passed in its present form after a great deal of pressure from lobby groups in civil society, and more recently the unwillingness of government even to pay legislated minimum wages to workers employed under the Act is a testament to its continuing reluctance in regard to the programme; (iii) the government has very deliberately shelved the recommendations of the National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, and we know from those who were members of the Commission how unhappy senior ministers, including the Prime Minister, were about them; (iv) most recently the government has shown considerable reluctance to implement commitments that were made to ensuring food security for the people. In these, and in other ways, I believe that many leading members of India's political elites do not show a strong commitment to the moral stance that de Swaan refers to as 'social consciousness. There certainly are strong indications of the existence of such a consciousness amongst some members of the middle classes (those who have driven the Campaign for the Right to Food and other such campaigns for the realisation of economic and social rights). But the middle classes are 'not unalloyed carriers of virtue' (Mehta), and others from these classes, for example, use public interest litigation to criminalise slum dwellers and to tackle urban poverty by removing the poor from the cities (as in Mumbai's 'tsunami' of early 2005). I have noted above my view that even if the power of caste hierarchies has declined, hierarchical values and ideas that are antithetical to the sort of social consciousness that de Swaan describes, remain powerful.